

TOLLBOOTH

written by

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An original feature
Based on the novel TOLLBOOTH

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FADE IN:

BLACK.

Rain. We hear it before we see anything – a downpour so total it has texture, a wall of white noise. Then, under it, a WOMAN'S VOICE. Dry. Precise. Choosing every word against the dark.

SOL (V.O.)

You asked me to begin with what
the Darién is.

SOL (V.O.) (CONT'D)

I'll try. Though in three years I
never found the sentence that
holds it.

FADE UP – not on jungle. On a MAP. Antique, hand-inked, Spanish, the throat of Panama, and across it in faded Latin a warning no one heeded. The image is drained of color, windowboxed 4:3, like something lifted from an archive.

SOL (V.O.)

Sixty-six miles of forest with no
road through it. From Alaska to
the bottom of Argentina, one
highway runs the length of two
continents. It stops here.

The map dissolves to a MODERN SATELLITE IMAGE – the same isthmus from space, the Pan-American Highway a bright thread running north and south, and dead in its center, a gap of unbroken green exactly the shape of the jungle. No road. No seam.

SOL (V.O.)

It has always stopped here.

A SERIES OF IMAGES, each held a cold beat, desaturated, archival:

A rusted Spanish morion helmet, half-swallowed by black silt.

Rotting timber pilings in a mangrove – the bones of a colony.

A tarnished silver coin, dated 1698, alone in a museum drawer.

SOL (V.O.)

The Spanish came in 1510. Their town was ash and fever inside a decade. The Scots came in 1698 – thousands, with the whole liquid wealth of their nation in the holds. They buried most of themselves before the second rainy season. A country went bankrupt here.

The archival grade holds one beat longer – then COLOR floods in, saturated, alive, and the frame opens to full:

EXT. DARIÉN RAINFOREST - AERIAL - DAY

We RISE over an ocean of green so total it reads as weather, not land. Cloud sits in the valleys. The canopy breathes. It is beautiful in a way that has nothing to do with us.

SOL (V.O.)

The forest didn't notice. For five hundred years, the jungle won. It won so completely we stopped calling it winning. We called it geography.

The CAMERA begins to descend – down toward a break in the canopy, toward the brown thread of a river far below. And as we near the trees, we start to see them: snagged in the high branches, bleaching, a child's blue foam SLEEPING MAT. Then another. Then a single shoe. Then the trash, everywhere, the tidemark of a human flood.

SOL (V.O.)

And then, in a handful of years – in our years, the ones we're here to account for – half a million people walked through it. Three thousand in a single day. The forest that turned back empires opened under their feet like a door.

The descent finds the riverbank. And on it, small in the vastness: a WOMAN in a field vest, kneeling in the shallows, alone, unhurried, bent over a shape wrapped in blue tarp with the tenderness you'd give a sleeping child.

SOL (V.O.)

Because it turns out there's one force this place was never built to stop. It isn't an army.

SOL (V.O.) (CONT'D)

It's a mother who has decided her child will not die where they were born.

SMASH CUT TO:

INT. TRIBUNAL - HEARING ROOM - DAY

Fluorescent. Institutional. A long table where a PANEL sits half in shadow. And at the WITNESS TABLE, a single red RECORD light glowing beside her – DR. MARISOL "SOL" FERRÁN, 41. Compact. Still. Grey coming into a braid she's never bothered to hide. A field scientist in a room built for lawyers.

She has been speaking into the record. She stops. Lets a silence sit that most people would rush to fill. She doesn't.

PANEL VOICE (O.S.)

Take your time, Doctor.

She looks up. Not at them. At something past them.

SOL

You asked me to begin with what the Darién is.

A beat.

SOL (CONT'D)

It's the place where I learned the opposite of a number isn't another number.

SOL (CONT'D)

It's a name.

CUT TO:

EXT. THE FUNNEL ("PUENTE") - MUDDY MAIN STREET - DAWN

A town that appears on no map. Tarps and planks and blue poly sheeting, a single mud street running down to black water. It has the look of something grown rather than built – a scab, formed at the exact point where the last drivable track dies and the forest takes over the business of the world. Steam rises off everything in the new sun.

And it is BUSY. This is a machine at capacity: vendors, boat crews, money changers, families in their hundreds waiting their turn at the water. A whole economy of departure.

CAMILO ARBOLEDA, 34, walks the street the way a man walks his own house in the dark – without looking. Lean, water-worn, easy in his body. A mechanic's hands, grease under the nails no matter how much money passes through them. He wears no gun anywhere you can see.

He passes a WOMAN frying arepas. Without a word she flips one onto a scrap of paper and holds it up. He takes it, drops a folded bill in her tin, never breaks stride. She nods. It's the whole of their friendship, and it's real.

A MONEY CHANGER at a folding table clocks him and gives a small nod. A BOAT CREW loading a panga straightens as he passes, like men who've remembered their posture. Camilo sees all of it and acknowledges none of it. He doesn't need to. That's the point of him.

At a stall hung with cheap gear, a VENDOR counts a coffee can of cash – the morning's float. He sees Camilo coming. He keeps counting. Camilo stops, watches him count. Neither says a word about the ten percent that is Camilo's to collect, which means the Engineer's, which means the Clan's. There's no unpleasantness in it. Only the counting. Camilo takes his cut, pockets it, moves on.

At the head of the street, where the mud slopes to the water and the PANGAS nose the bank, the morning's crossing assembles. A hundred people. Camilo reads them the way you read weather. Venezuelans, mostly – you can tell by the shoes, good sneakers gone to ruin, pride still in how they've tried to keep them clean. A knot of Ecuadorians keeping to themselves. Three Haitian men using their

careful Spanish like money. Children everywhere. Too many children. It's the children he makes himself not look at directly.

A MURMUR moves through the crowd as he comes down the slope.

MIGRANT (O.S.)
(low, passing it along)
El peaje...

THE TOLLBOOTH. It's what they call the fee. Somewhere along the way it became what they call him. He's never corrected it. A man could do worse than be named for the thing he does honestly.

He works the line. A word to a BOATMAN about the load – a flat gesture, not too many, and the boatman pulls three people back off an overloaded panga without argument. A hand on the shoulder of a BOY about to step where the bank gives way, steering him to solid ground.

He crouches beside a YOUNG MOTHER, an infant slung to her chest, her face gone past fear into a flat animal patience. He checks the zippered KIT in her lap – pokes through it. No foil blanket.

He rises, crosses to the gear stall, takes a foil blanket without asking, comes back, tucks it into her kit, zips it shut. Doesn't take her money. The vendor watches and says nothing; Camilo's look told him everything.

The young mother catches his wrist as he starts to rise. Her grip is stronger than it should be.

YOUNG MOTHER
Dios lo bendiga.

God bless you. The thing he can't allow – arriving anyway, the way it always finds a crack. He holds her eyes. One second. Less. Then looks at the river, which asks nothing of him.

CAMILO
Keep the baby's head out of the
sun on the second day. Not the
rain – the sun. Sleep at midday.
Walk in the cool.

CAMILO (CONT'D)

The men up the trail will tell you
to keep moving. Don't. Walk the
cool. You hear me?

She nods, crying now, quietly. He puts his hand, once,
lightly, on the crown of the infant's damp head. A thing he
won't remember deciding to do.

CAMILO (CONT'D)

Go with God yourself, señora.

He stands. Signals the boatman. The panga pushes off, low
in the water, and takes them out onto the black river, two
dozen at a time, toward the green wall that ate five
centuries of better-armed men.

Camilo watches until the boat is a smudge. Until it's gone.
His face gives away nothing. He tells himself, the way he
tells himself every morning, that everyone he's ever put on
that water is still alive – and that this is more than can
be said for anyone else who might stand where he stands.

A BOY – one of the camp's uncountable runners, eleven,
barefoot – sprints up the slope and stops dead in front of
him, chest heaving, eyes too bright.

RUNNER BOY

The Engineer. He wants you. Today.
He sent the good truck.

Camilo looks past the boy – up the street, to the tree
line. A clean white HILUX idles there, out of place,
immaculate in all that mud. The truck that only comes down
the mountain when there's something to be said that can't
be said on a phone.

Camilo digs a coin from his pocket, presses it into the
boy's palm. He always gives the boy his coin. But his hand,
he notices, has gone cold – cold on a morning already hot
enough to steam the mud.

He looks at the clean white truck a moment longer than he
needs to. And does not yet know why he's afraid.

CUT TO:

EXT. THE FUNNEL - THE CROSSING ASSEMBLES - DAY (MONTAGE)

And while he stands there – the tide. A MONTAGE of the crossing, the half-million rendered for one moment as what they are: not a number. People.

A man in the ruined remains of an office shirt, a laminated DIPLOMA in a plastic sleeve tucked in his waistband, going to a country that will never honor it. A grandmother with a rosary and a photograph of grandchildren she's crossing a continent to reach. A pregnant woman, a hand on the swell, whispering a name to it. Two teenage brothers sharing one pair of good shoes, taking turns. A little boy showing another little boy a toy car, both of them laughing, here, at the mouth of the green.

Venezuelans, Haitians, Ecuadorians, Colombians, and further – faces from across an ocean, Africa, Asia, funneled by the whole broken logic of the world to this one muddy street. Every one of them carrying a phone with a pin dropped on a city they've never seen, a person on the other end who's promised there's work, there's a room, there's a school, there's a life.

They are afraid. And they are hopeful, which is worse, because the green does not care about hope. And they file down to the water, and pay their toll, and step into the pangas, and go – into the fortress that ate five centuries of better-armed men – carrying nothing but each other and the names their mothers gave them.

SOL (V.O.)

People ask me why they'd risk it.
As if risk were the point. It was
never a calculation about risk. It
was a mother, looking at the
country she was born in, and
deciding it was more dangerous to
stay.

CUT TO:

INT. CAMILO'S TARP - THE FUNNEL - NIGHT

Later. A single strung bulb. Camilo sits on a cot, field-stripping and cleaning a pistol he never wears where anyone can see it – the ritual of a careful man. His phone lies face-up beside him, silent.

We take him in: the neatness of the small space, the way everything has a place, a man imposing order on one square of a disordered world because it's the only square he controls.

The phone LIGHTS UP. Buzzes. He looks at it. Doesn't answer. It goes dark. Then lights again. He reassembles the pistol in three practiced motions, sets it down, and answers.

CAMILO

It's late.

BRAULIO (V.O.)

(filtered, already
laughing at something)

You're going to want to see this
yourself, hermano. Somebody's
freelancing on the Miel trail. Got
a whole group. It's ugly.

Camilo is already reaching for his boots.

CUT TO:

EXT. MIEL TRAIL - DEEP JUNGLE - NIGHT

RAIN. The kind that turns a forest into one continuous roar, so loud it's almost silence. FLASHLIGHTS carve small brown rooms out of the black and lose them the instant they move. Four figures push up a trail that is a river of shin-deep mud grabbing at every boot: CAMILO, BRAULIO (30s, grinning even here), and TWO YOUNGER MEN.

They move fast and low, weapons up. This is a language Camilo speaks fluently and hates.

Under the rain – a SOUND. A woman's voice. Not screaming. Past screaming – low and continuous, like a hinge that won't stop.

Camilo raises a fist. They stop. Listen. He points. They move.

EXT. MIEL TRAIL - CLEARING - CONTINUOUS

They come to the edge of a CLEARING and Camilo takes it in all at once – the gift, the curse, the thing his body does that he never asked for.

Camp lanterns hung in the branches swing greenish, throwing shadows that lurch. TWENTY-FIVE MIGRANTS kneel in the mud, roped wrist-to-wrist in a single line, like strung fish. Their belongings dumped in a heap at the center and pawed through – phones, a child's single shoe, split-open kits, foil blankets catching the lantern light like something obscenely festive.

FOUR FREELANCERS work the clearing. Off the ledger. No rules. No tax paid, nothing bought, nothing owed. ONE stands over a fallen MAN, explaining something to him with the toe of his boot. ANOTHER walks a GIRL – sixteen, maybe – toward the tree line, unhurried, a hand around her upper arm. It's her MOTHER, roped to the line, unable to rise, who is making the hinge sound.

Camilo does not remember giving an order. There is no order in it. There is only that he is moving, and that the world has gone slow and very clear.

The FREELANCER with the girl hears them, turns, gets a hand halfway to his waistband –

– Camilo SHOOTs him. Through the hand. Then, as the man folds, the rest. Two rounds, close. The pistol he doesn't wear where anyone can see it, the only true thing in the clearing now.

The GIRL drops flat where she stands.

The FREELANCER with the boot spins – BRAULIO takes him, muzzle-flash strobing the rain into hanging beads of light.

The THIRD RUNS – into the black wall of forest. A YOUNGER MAN goes after him. A sound in the dark. The younger man comes back alone, wiping a machete on his own soaked thigh, uselessly, in the rain.

The FOURTH puts his weapons down in the mud and his hands on his head and begins, very fast and very quietly, to pray.

Silence, under the roar. Camilo stands in the sudden after with the pistol hot in his hand and his own heart – he notices, with distant interest – beating perfectly slow.

Then the clarity drains out of him all at once, the way it always does, and he becomes again a man with things to do.

He crosses to the roped line. Draws a folding knife. And CUTS THE ROPES himself – moving down the line, freeing wrist after wrist – so the first thing these people feel after the worst night of their lives is rope falling away, and not a stranger looming over them.

Then he crouches at the dumped heap of belongings. And does the thing no man above him would understand.

He gives it back. A phone, to the hand that reaches for it. The child's single shoe, to a mother who takes it and presses it to her mouth. And the hidden cash – the wads sewn into hems and folded into shoes, the entire liquidated weight of ordinary lives – he gathers every note he can find and presses it back into the hands it was stolen from, and closes those hands around it with his own. No tax. Not tonight.

The GIRL'S MOTHER crawls to him across the mud and takes his wrist in both her hands – the same grip, the exact grip as the young mother at the water – saying something he can't make out and doesn't try to. He lets her hold on until she's ready to stop.

BRAULIO, across the clearing, tips his head at the PRAYING MAN. A simple question. A simple answer. Everyone here knows the answer.

Camilo looks at the praying man a long moment. Rain streams off both of them.

CAMILO

Take his boots. And his light.

A beat.

CAMILO (CONT'D)

Leave him the trail.

Braulio's grin flickers – not what he wanted. Camilo is already turning away.

CAMILO (CONT'D)

The forest can have him or it can't. That's not our business tonight.

It is not mercy. Camilo knows even as he says it that it is not mercy – that a man barefoot and unlit in the Darién has been handed a sentence, not a pardon. But it is the SHAPE of mercy. And he has learned that in a place like this, the shape of a thing is sometimes all you can afford.

EXT. MIEL TRAIL - RIVERBANK - PRE-DAWN

The rain has thinned to a drizzle. The freed migrants huddle by the pangas, wrapped in their returned blankets. Camilo kneels alone at the black water's edge and washes the blood and the mud from his hands. The current takes it, north. He stays on his heels a while after they're clean, watching the water carry it away.

FAR UPRIVER – unseen – a man begins to SCREAM. Barefoot. Unlit. In the dark. The sound carries a long way over the water.

Camilo does not turn around. He watches the river. And the forest folds over the sound, and it's gone.

CUT TO:

EXT. RIDGE ABOVE THE FUNNEL - DEAD CEIBA - DAY

A shelf of rock above the camp. A single dead CEIBA stands white against the green, stripped, like a bone. Best signal in the region. Camilo props his phone against a rock, sits, and waits for it to connect. This is the one hour of the day he keeps for himself.

The call rings twice. And ISA, 10, fills the little bright rectangle – too close, all forehead and one enormous serious eye.

CAMILO

Move it back, mija. I can only see your brain.

The eye retreats and becomes his daughter – gap where a tooth was last time, hair his mother's hair. Something turns over in his chest that no arithmetic can touch. His whole face changes. This is a different man. The man he might have been.

ISA

I lost the tooth. The wobbly one.
It came out in an arepa, and Mamá
said don't swallow it, and I
didn't – I have it. Look.

The picture swings wildly – a blur of small hand, a smaller
white thing – then her face again.

ISA (CONT'D)

Do you think it's worth anything?

CAMILO

Everything you have is worth
something. How much did the mouse
bring?

ISA

I'm ten. I don't believe in the
mouse.

(beat)

He brought two thousand pesos.

CAMILO

The mouse is generous this year.
The economy must be strong. For
mice.

She laughs – a real one. He shuts his eyes against the
ridge wind, to keep the sound somewhere he can find it
later.

ISA

When are you coming? You said
after the long route. Is this the
long route?

The question she always slips in, casually, as if it costs
her nothing.

CAMILO

Soon, mija. After this one.
There's a long haul coming, and
then—

The picture MOVES. A hand takes the phone. LUCÍA, 33,
replaces the child in frame. Off-screen, Isa is sent from
the room. Lucía looks at him out of the little rectangle

with an expression he's spent years learning and still can't always read.

LUCÍA

(no preamble)

She keeps a calendar. Did you know that? A little one you gave her, from some tire company. She marks off the days until you're coming. After every call she marks a new day.

He says nothing.

LUCÍA (CONT'D)

She's been marking days for two years, Camilo. It's last year's calendar. She just keeps using it. She writes the new numbers over the old ones.

Still nothing. There's nothing in the arithmetic for this.

LUCÍA (CONT'D)

I'm not telling you to hurt you. I've decided something, and you deserve to hear it from me and not from an empty house. We're going. North. Where everyone goes.

LUCÍA (CONT'D)

Where all your — where all your customers go. My cousin's in Houston. There's work. There's a school for her that isn't this. I am not raising our daughter in a town that exists so people can leave it, waiting for a father who drives trucks.

The word "trucks" comes out of her like something she's spitting. She knows. She's always known. The not-saying was her mercy, and she's withdrawing it now, gently, the way you'd pull a splinter.

CAMILO

(very quiet — the clearing voice, though

there's no one here to
command)

Lucía. Not the route. You don't
know what the route is. I know
what the route is. I am what the
route is. Please.

LUCÍA

Then you know we'll be all right.
Since you run it so well.

Not cruel. Almost tender. Holding his own life up in front
of him like a mirror.

LUCÍA (CONT'D)

We go in three weeks. I called so
she could see your face. She's
coming back now.

A beat. Softer, and worse for it:

LUCÍA (CONT'D)

Fix your face.

She hands the phone back. Isa's enormous eye fills the
frame again. And Camilo FIXES HIS FACE – builds, in a
single breath, a father who is not afraid, who is only
glad. Because he is good at building things and holding
them steady.

CAMILO

Hey. Listen. For your birthday.
This year – this year for certain
– I'm going to find a way to be
there.

Off-screen scramble. Isa leans out of frame, comes back
with a pen.

And we watch her WRITE THE NUMBER DOWN – over an older,
fainter one. Marking the day.

Camilo watches his daughter mark the day. And he knows,
with the cold clear gift this place gave him, that he has
just told her the first lie that isn't almost-true. Because
in three weeks she will not be in a house with a leaking
roof and a green bucket. She'll be on his river.

ISA

I love you to the moon.

CAMILO

And back. And back, and back, and back.

The screen goes dark. Camilo sits with the dead white tree until the light begins to go. Then he stands, pockets the phone, and goes down to run the thing he is – so that when it opens its mouth in three weeks, his daughter will already be inside it.

CUT TO:

EXT. TURQUESA RIVER - SHALLOWS - DAWN

Fifty miles north and a border away. Grey light before the heat. Mist on the water.

SOL stands knee-deep in the Turquesa, motionless, waiting for the river to give up what it's carrying. She reads the water the way Camilo reads a line of migrants – all at once, no single sign trusted alone. Two of her RECOVERY MEN wait on the bank with a folded tarp.

The river brings a foam MAT first, turning in the eddy. She lets it pass. A child's rubber SANDAL. Then, low in the water, moving with the patient inevitability of everything the river decides to move – the shape she came for.

SOL

(quiet)

Aquí. Slowly. Take the feet.

They bring the drowned YOUNG WOMAN in the way Sol has taught them – without hurry, without the flinching that makes men clumsy, because clumsiness is a further indignity. She's young. Sol lets that land, and does not look away from it.

Sol kneels beside her in the shallows and begins – hands moving over the body with a gentleness the living rarely get from anyone. This is the part no one understands. They think her work is the science. The science is real. But the work is this: that someone kneels.

She finds the details and speaks them, low, into a small recorder clipped to her vest.

SOL (CONT'D)
Female. Twenties. Caesarean scar,
healed, years old.

She registers it – a scar that old means a child, five or six or seven, waiting somewhere, or not waiting.

SOL (CONT'D)
Tattoo, inner left wrist. A date.
Two initials.

She photographs it with a small waterproof camera. A cheap RING on one finger. She does not take it off. She never takes the rings off.

Her phone BUZZES in the vest. A foreign country code. She sits back on her heels in the mud, closes her eyes, finds the face she'll need – and answers.

MARA (V.O.)
(filtered, warm, worn
thin)
Doctora. Soy Amara. From Chicago.
I'm sorry – is it early there? I
never know.

SOL
It's early, Mara. It's all right.
I'm working. Tell me.

MARA (V.O.)
He turned twenty-six on Tuesday.
My Danilo. I made the cake anyway.
Is that crazy?

A breath, not quite steady.

MARA (V.O.) (CONT'D)
Did the river – this week – did
anything–

Sol looks down at the young woman on the tarp at her knees. Who is not Danilo. Who is some other mother's unanswered call.

SOL

Nothing this week that could be him, Mara. I promise you I would tell you. I have his picture here. I have his teeth from the dentist you found. If your son comes to this river, I will know him – and I will call you before I call anyone else. Do you believe me?

MARA (V.O.)

I believe you. You're the only one who still says his name. Everyone else has a case number for him now. Like he's a package that got lost.

SOL

Danilo. Danilo Ríos. Tell me one thing about him I don't know yet. So I'll know him better than his number.

Sol closes her eyes in the gold, merciless light – and lets a stranger's mother hand her a boy who couldn't carry a tune and sang anyway, always the wrong words, a laugh you could hear across a soccer field. She files him next to all the others she's carrying.

The call ends. Sol stands a while with the phone against her chest. The young woman lies at her feet – cheap ring, caesarean scar, a wrist that says a date and two initials. Still nameless. Still someone's. The river goes on bringing what it's decided to bring.

Sol crouches back down in the mud, and gets to work.

EXT. TURQUESA RIVER - WIDER - CONTINUOUS

PULL BACK – and keep pulling – the kneeling woman, the tarp, the recovery men, small against the ruined green and the vast indifferent canopy.

SOL (V.O.)

There is no one else. And the alternative is a world where the water carries them all north, unnamed, forever.

The river runs on beneath her, patient, endless.

SOL (V.O.) (CONT'D)

And I decided, on a specific night
three years ago that I don't
revisit – that whatever it costs
me, that is a world I will not
allow to be the only one.

FIFTY MILES SOUTH, we know, a man stands on a ridge by a dead white tree, having just lied to his daughter for the first time truly. He doesn't know his river and her river are the same river. Neither does she. She only knows, the way she knows weather, that the water is rising. And that it will bring her more.

SMASH CUT TO:

BLACK.

MAIN TITLE: TOLLBOOTH

CUT TO:

EXT. EMBERÁ VILLAGE (PIJIBÁ) - TURQUESA RIVER - DAY

A ministry boat noses a muddy bank. Stilt houses of palm and plank stand back from the water – the same as they've stood for generations, except for what's been added to them.

Under the nearest house, where there should be fishing gear and a half-carved canoe, a pallet stacked shoulder-high with plastic-wrapped cases of BOTTLED WATER. And bolted to the stilt, angled carefully at the southern sky, a small grey STARLINK dish – immaculate, humming, the only clean object for a hundred miles.

A GRANDMOTHER pours store-bought water from a jug over a laughing naked TODDLER in a plastic basin – twenty steps from a river her own grandmother bathed in. The whole cosmology of the place, inverted in one basin.

SOL steps ashore. TÍO EFRAÍN, 60s – small, dense, unhurried, the village noco – is waiting for her on the bank, so that she has to meet his eyes before she meets anyone else's. He puts a dry, warm hand to the side of her face. Briefly.

EFRAÍN

Marisol. You've come to take more
of them away in bags.

SOL

I've come to see you, tío.

EFRAÍN

You've come to see me while you
take them away in bags.

But the hand on her face was the forgiveness – the only
kind he gives, the kind that names the thing before it
pardons it.

They walk up into the village. Sol lets it hurt her, on
purpose, the way she lets the bodies hurt her.

EFRAÍN (CONT'D)

There's no fish anymore. That's
what nobody from outside
understands. The river's poison
from up top – you measure it, you
write the numbers. My son fished
that river forty years. Now they
come up with the fuel already in
them. You cook one, the whole
house smells like a gas station.

He nudges the pallet of bottled water with his foot.

EFRAÍN (CONT'D)

So the money buys that. Because we
can't drink the river our
grandfathers drank. We are the
richest poor people in Panama,
Marisol. The whole world on a wire
– and we can't wash a child in our
own water without the child
breaking out in sores.

They come to his house, sit. A WOMAN brings two cups – from
a bottle, the seal broken in front of Sol, a courtesy and a
wound. For a while they don't talk about the dead.

And in the empty third chair, though no one says it, Sol's
mother sits. Three years now.

EFRAÍN (CONT'D)

(not unkindly)

You were where, when your mother took the fever? In the city. Giving your lecture on how to name the dead. There was no boat that would have got you here in time. I know. I've told you. It doesn't matter that I've told you.

Sol says nothing. She has built her whole life exactly far enough from this water that she couldn't reach it. Now she kneels in it for strangers. Efraín watches her not answer, and lets her not answer, because they are her mother's people, and directness is not how her mother's people carry love.

Then the light goes orange, and the true business of the visit comes – the way it always comes, last.

EFRAÍN (CONT'D)

Something is wrong upriver. The river has always taken some – the careless, the unlucky, the sick. A few, here and there, the way a river takes. This is not that.

He sets down his cup.

EFRAÍN (CONT'D)

In the last month it gives them back to us in gathers. Nine one morning. Eleven another. All from the high water, all torn the same, all from up past the fork where the good trail used to run before the men closed it. My grandsons find them against the sandbar in the morning, stacked, like the river is counting them out for us.

His old eyes find hers and hold.

EFRAÍN (CONT'D)

The river does not stack them, Marisol. The river scatters. Something up there is stacking them, and letting the water carry

the stack to my door. And I am too old and too far from the world on its wire to know what. But you take them away in bags. You know the number of things. So I'm telling you.

OFF Sol – the cold small opening in her chest. The look of a woman watching a case show its true shape for the first time.

SOL
Keep the next ones for me. Don't let your grandsons put them back in the water – however they come. Tell them to come here and wait. I'll bring the cold boxes.

Efraín nods slowly, and looks out at the darkening river that gave his family everything and now, patiently, in gathers, gives back the world's dead against his sandbar. He says something in the old language. He does not translate it. Sol carries it out onto the black water with her.

CUT TO:

EXT. PIJIBÁ - RIVERBANK GRAVE - DUSK

Before she leaves, Sol walks to a place by the water – a simple marker, a stone, her MOTHER'S name cut into it by a hand that loved her. Three years. Sol crouches. Doesn't pray; she's not sure her family believed in God, and there was no one left to settle it. She just stays a while, the way she stays with the ones she pulls from the river.

The water is high and brown at the marker's foot – the poisoned water her mother drank, the water that took her while Sol stood at a whiteboard two hundred kilometers away, explaining to a committee how to name the dead.

SOL
(quiet, to the stone)
I'm still doing it. The naming. I know you'd tell me to come home and stop kneeling in the river for strangers. But I can't reach you, mamá. There was never any reaching

you in time. So I reach the ones I
can. It's the closest I get. It's
not close.

She lays her hand flat on the stone – the way she lays it
on the cover of the ledger, the way she lays it on the
dead. And rises. And goes back down to the boat, and out
onto the water – a woman who built her whole life exactly
far enough from this river that she couldn't save the one
person she'd have given anything to save, and has spent
every day since trying to make the arithmetic come out
different, one stranger at a time, knowing it never will,
and getting up anyway.

CUT TO:

EXT. MOUNTAIN TRACK - THE HILLS - DAY

The clean white HILUX climbs a track that no migrant ever
sees – dry, flatter, methodical. This is the other Darién.
The one the funnel exists to hide.

CUT TO:

INT. THE HILLS - THE ENGINEER'S PLANK HOUSE - DAY

High enough that the air is almost cool. An open-sided
plank house. A table, a LEDGER open on it, reading glasses
folded on the ledger, a pot of good coffee. No guns
anywhere.

THE ENGINEER, 50s – reading glasses, a clean pressed shirt
in a filthy trade, a man you'd take for the manager of a
provincial bank and be right to, in every way that matters.
BRAULIO leans in the doorway, loose, amused by the mountain
view.

A RADIO plays, low. A flat official voice, reading a
translated statement: "...has today formally designated...
a Foreign Terrorist Organization... material support...
sanction... kinetic action..."

Camilo stands. The Engineer gestures him to the chair,
pours coffee, slides it across. Doesn't look up from the
ledger.

THE ENGINEER
You heard.

CAMILO

I heard.

THE ENGINEER

Tell me what you heard. Not the words. What you heard.

A test. Everything with him is a test. Camilo has been passing them since he was twenty-two.

CAMILO

That they can hit us now. With the planes. The way they hit the ones in the desert, on the other side of the world. That it's legal for them now.

CAMILO (CONT'D)

That a man standing in the wrong clearing at the wrong hour isn't a defendant anymore. He's a target.

THE ENGINEER

(pleased, the way you
praise a bright child)

Good. That's what's true. Most of them heard only that a big word was said far away. You heard the airplane. That's why you sit in this chair and they don't.

He takes off the glasses. Leans back.

THE ENGINEER (CONT'D)

So. If the airplane is coming – tell me. Where must it not look?

Camilo understands the shape of the answer before he has the words, and doesn't like where it's going. He says it anyway.

CAMILO

The product. The roads for the product. The flat trails, west. Those have to stay invisible. No cameras. No churches.

CAMILO (CONT'D)

The airplane follows the cameras.
The cameras follow the misery. So
the misery has to be somewhere
else. Loud. Bright. In one place.
Where everyone's already looking.

THE ENGINEER

(gently)

Here. The misery has to be here.
At the funnel. So the whole
world's eye stays on you – on the
poor and the mud and the babies,
God love them – and never once
drifts west to the roads where the
money actually walks.

THE ENGINEER (CONT'D)

You've built me the most beautiful
choke point on this coast, hijo.
Do you know how much product moved
clean last quarter, because every
camera in two hemispheres was
pointed at your funnel? And you
did it by being kind. That's not
an insult. It's the highest thing
I've ever said to a man.

Camilo drinks the coffee because his hands want something
to do.

And in the room between them, unspoken, sits the whole
architecture of the debt. Twenty-two years old. A mechanic
with no work because there was no work. His mother in a
back room, drowning slowly in her own chest – the kind of
dying a little money could slow and no money could only
watch. And a courteous man with reading glasses who came
and offered not a gun, never a gun, but a salary. And his
mother's medicine. And eleven good months of her being able
to breathe.

THE ENGINEER (CONT'D)

There's more.

It is not a question. There is always more. The coffee is
its herald.

THE ENGINEER (CONT'D)

There's a group staging for the old Miel fork. Ninety, a hundred. Guides paid, routed. I need them off Miel – the product needs it for a season, the other roads are hot, the marines are playing their games on the coast. I need Miel empty of everything that isn't mine.

CAMILO

So we hold them. Reroute them the long way, through–

THE ENGINEER

There is no long way that's ready. You know the map – you drew half of it.

He puts the glasses back on. Looks at the ledger. This is a mercy of a kind – that he won't make Camilo watch his face while he says it.

THE ENGINEER (CONT'D)

Put them on the Tigre trail.

The room goes very quiet in Camilo's ears. The way the clearing went quiet before he started shooting.

CAMILO

The Tigre floods. At the confluence. This season, with this rain upriver, it comes to the chest by midday. There's no high ground for a kilometer. If a hundred people are strung out along it when the water comes up–

He stops. He makes himself stop. He looks at the top of the Engineer's bent grey head and understands: the Engineer knows the Tigre floods. The flooding is not a risk of the plan.

CAMILO (CONT'D)

(barely audible)

You're asking me to drown them. So the airplane keeps looking at me.

The Engineer takes off the glasses. And for the first time, looks at Camilo directly. His face is not cruel. That's the thing Camilo will carry. It is patient, and almost sad – the face of a man explaining weather to someone who had hoped, for him, the weather might be different.

THE ENGINEER

I am asking you to move a group
from one trail to another, hijo.
Trails flood. They have flooded
here for five hundred years.
Whatever the river does after you
have moved them is between the
river and God – and neither of
them has ever once asked my
permission for a single thing
they've done to this place.

He folds the glasses. Sets them down like a closed door.

THE ENGINEER (CONT'D)

You've been allowed your kindness
because your kindness was useful.
It's still useful. It's simply
going to cost you something now –
the way it was always eventually
going to. Move them Thursday.
Braulio will help you.

Braulio, in the doorway, smiles at the mountains. Camilo stands. His legs do what legs do. At the very bottom of him – in the place where he keeps the one thing he never takes out and looks at – something turns over, and goes still.

CAMILO

Thursday.

THE ENGINEER

Go with God.

The Engineer – who does not believe in Him – picks the glasses back up. And turns the page.

CUT TO:

INT. RENTED HOUSE - CHOCÓ - BACK ROOM - NIGHT (FLASHBACK)

SUPER: TWELVE YEARS EARLIER.

A poor back room. A WOMAN in a bed, drowning slowly in her own chest – the kind of dying a little money could slow and no money at all can only watch. Beside her, holding her hand, a YOUNGER CAMILO, 22. Softer. Not yet the man who doesn't look. He wipes her forehead. She can barely breathe.

Through the doorway, at the front of the house, a KNOCK. Younger Camilo goes.

INT. RENTED HOUSE - CHOCÓ - FRONT ROOM - CONTINUOUS
(FLASHBACK)

And there, on the step, in the last of the light, courteous, unremarkable – a man with reading glasses. THE ENGINEER, twelve years younger, but exactly the same. He does not carry a gun. He never carries a gun. He carries a small leather folder.

THE ENGINEER (YOUNGER)
They tell me you can find a fault
in an outboard by the sound of it.
That your hands are the best on
this river. And that there's no
work for them, because the war
took the work.

Younger Camilo says nothing. Behind him, from the back room, the terrible sound of his mother's breathing.

THE ENGINEER (YOUNGER) (CONT'D)
I'm not here to offer you a gun,
hijo. I want to be very clear
about that, because I think it
matters to you, and it should. I'm
here to offer you a salary. Honest
work, moving things along bad
roads, for a man who pays on time
and looks after his people.

He glances toward the sound in the back room. Not unkindly.

THE ENGINEER (YOUNGER) (CONT'D)
And I'm told there's a medicine.
For that. That could give her – a
little time. Months, maybe. Time
to breathe. The pharmacy has it.

It simply costs more than a
mechanic with no work can pay.

He sets the leather folder on the table. Doesn't open it.
Doesn't need to.

THE ENGINEER (YOUNGER) (CONT'D)
I'll leave this here. You don't
have to decide tonight. But she
does not have many tonights.

And Younger Camilo looks at the folder. And at the doorway
to the back room, where the only person in the world he
loves is drowning for want of money the legitimate world
has looked at him and refused. And the Engineer watches him
look – and does not push – because the years will do the
rest. The years always do the rest.

INT. RENTED HOUSE - CHOCÓ - BACK ROOM - LATER (FLASHBACK)

The mother, propped up, breathing easier now – medicine on
the nightstand. Younger Camilo feeds her soup, and she
smiles at him, and for these eleven good months she can
breathe. You do not recruit a man like Camilo with a
threat. You recruit him with the only mercy on offer. And
then you wait.

MATCH CUT TO:

INT. THE HILLS - THE ENGINEER'S PLANK HOUSE - DAY (PRESENT)

The present. The same courteous face across the same ledger
– older now, and Camilo older, and the debt between them
grown into the whole architecture of his life. The Engineer
doesn't look up.

THE ENGINEER
Move them Thursday, hijo.

CUT TO:

EXT. STAGING CAMP - COOKING FIRES - EVENING

The night before Thursday. And Camilo does the thing he
swore to the cold watching part of himself he'd never do.
He learns their names.

He tells himself it's operational – a calm crossing is a
good crossing, and calm comes from a man who knows you. But

some animal in him already knows what's scheduled, and has decided: if he's going to lead these people down the Tigre, he is by God going to know who they were first.

He crouches beside HERNÁN, 50s, soft-spoken, who unwraps a plastic FOLDER to show him – water-stained LESSON PLANS. Actual lesson plans. As if there'll be a classroom on the far side of the green for a man who knows how to explain fractions to the hungry.

HERNÁN

Twenty-six years I taught
mathematics. To children whose
parents couldn't pay me in
anything but plantains. A teacher
who can't buy shoes can't teach in
them either. So.

Camilo helps him wrap the folder in a second bag against the rivers. He does not say the thing he's thinking – that lesson plans do not float.

DOÑA ROSA, 68, going north to a daughter in Maryland she hasn't touched in nine years, presses a foil-wrapped square of CAKE into his hands – the last cake she made in her own kitchen.

DOÑA ROSA

For the road, mijo. You're too
thin.

You do not refuse Doña Rosa. He takes it.

By a fire, WILMER and KATY – 19 and 18, so newly and completely in love they've made even this a honeymoon, holding hands in the mud. Katy is four months pregnant, just showing. They have a name picked out and won't say it – bad luck. And Wilmer has a GUITAR, absurdly, lashed across his back the whole way from Venezuela.

He plays it low. And half the crossing gathers in the firelight to listen, and to cry a little. A nineteen-year-old singing about a home that no longer exists, to a hundred people about to lose theirs.

Camilo stands at the edge of the light. His face: not these. Anyone but these. I'll do anything. And the cold

clear part of him, which has never once lied, answers: on Thursday, it will be exactly these.

Across the fire – a MAN traveling alone. The age Camilo's brother would be now. The same way of standing slightly apart. The same private jokes told to no one. Camilo has to look away, and stand a moment in the dark, until the thing in his chest lies back down.

HERNÁN finds him at the dark edge of the camp.

HERNÁN

They say you're the reason people
get across here alive. That the
man at the funnel is hard, but
he's fair. That he keeps the bad
ones off us.

HERNÁN (CONT'D)

I taught children their whole
lives that the world was fair if
you were good in it. Then the
world spent twenty-six years
proving me a liar. And here – at
the worst edge of everything –
there's you. A fair man. It
matters more than you know, profe,
that there was one fair man at the
end of the road.

He puts out his hand. Camilo shakes it. His own does not shake. His hands never shake.

CAMILO

Get some sleep, profe. We move at
dawn. It's a good trail I'm
putting you on. High ground most
of the way. You'll be across
before you know it.

The lie comes out smooth and fair and terrible – the last small mercy, the shape of the thing without the thing.

And Hernán, who has his lesson plans double-bagged against rivers that will take them, smiles at the fair man at the end of the road, and goes to sleep. So he'll be rested. For the Tigre.

CUT TO:

EXT. TIGRE TRAIL - STAGING POINT - DAWN

Thursday. A clear, high, washed-blue sky – the obscenity of it. No sign in it of the wall of water already gathering forty kilometers upriver, where it has rained on the cordillera for three days without stopping, loading the gun this trail points down.

Camilo stands at the head of the assembled group as the light comes up. And he COUNTS them. Moving his eyes down the line. Ninety-six. He will have this number for the rest of whatever his life turns out to be.

He sees them all now, because he made himself learn them: Hernán, the folder double-bagged. Doña Rosa. Wilmer and Katy, hands joined. The man who stands like Mateo. The children.

BRAULIO and TWO GUIDES fall in at the rear, near a low hummock of higher ground. Braulio catches Camilo's eye and gives a small nod. Everyone in position.

Camilo lifts his hand. And leads ninety-six people up the Tigre trail into the beautiful morning.

EXT. TIGRE TRAIL - CLIMBING - DAY

They trust him. That's the thing. Word has gone up and down this whole coast for two years that the man at the funnel puts you across alive, and so they fall in behind him gratefully.

A WOMAN near the front, a child on her back, works her way up beside him.

WOMAN

Thank you for this trail. We heard the other one was worse.

CAMILO

Walk in the cool, señora. Keep the children up front, where I can see them.

She smiles, drops back. Camilo keeps his eyes on the trail. The cold clear part of him watches him do it, and says nothing, because it stopped arguing years ago. It only

watches now. And its watching is the loudest sound in his head.

The trail descends toward the confluence – where two rivers meet, and the ground goes low, and there is, as he told the Engineer, as the Engineer knew, no high ground for a kilometer.

EXT. TIGRE TRAIL - THE CONFLUENCE - MIDDAY

The sun stands straight overhead. The group is strung out along a kilometer of low trail, single file, threading the flats where the rivers marry.

Camilo stops. Lifts his head. Listens.

A SOUND. Under the ordinary river-noise. Low. Building. A freight-train roar coming from upstream.

His face changes.

CAMILO
(turning, already moving
back down the line)
Off the trail – UP – get to the
trees – MOVE–

And the water COMES.

It does not come as a wave. It comes as a decision. It simply RISES – everywhere at once – brown and ropery and full of the mountain's torn debris. Ankle to knee to thigh in the time it takes him to scream it.

CAMILO (CONT'D)
CLIMB – CLIMB WHAT – GO–

There is nothing to climb. The trail dissolves and becomes the river. And the river has ninety-six people strung along a kilometer of itself like beads on a broken string.

CHAOS. We are IN it – chest-deep, handheld, the roar drowning every other sound to nothing. Camilo grabs and hauls. Shoves a MAN into the crook of a tree. Loses his own footing – the current slams him into a submerged root – he claws back up, spitting brown water, and keeps grabbing.

HERNÁN goes past him in the current, reaching, the double-bagged folder torn from his hands and gone. WILMER has KATY

by the wrist against a trunk, both screaming, the guitar ripped away downstream.

On the one hummock of HIGH GROUND, BRAULIO and the guides stand and WATCH. They do not move. They watch the trail do what it was chosen to do.

And in the roaring brown middle of it – Camilo SEES her.

A SMALL GIRL. Five, six. Alone. Fetched up on a floating blue foam MAT – the one useless mercy in the whole cheap catalog, suddenly the only thing between a child and the bottom. The mat turns slowly in the current, sliding toward the deep fast channel where the two rivers marry, where nothing that goes in comes out upright.

She is not screaming. She's gone past it – into that flat animal patience – looking at Camilo across ten meters of killing water with a terrible calm. As if she's already done the arithmetic. And is only waiting for him to confirm it.

He goes in after her. Without deciding to.

Into the fast channel that he KNOWS takes grown men down and does not give them back. The cold clear part of him screams that this is how he dies – here, now, for a child who was going to die anyway, whose death he personally scheduled for a Thursday –

He catches the mat. Catches HER. One arm around the small ribs. And he does not swim – he AIMS – hurling them both WITH the current, not against it, toward the far bank where a stand of pijibay palm has rooted high enough to make, for thirty meters, the only high ground on the whole drowned trail.

His shoulder HITS the bank. His free hand finds root. And he SHOVES her – up, out, onto the mud above the waterline. The small body scrambles on hands and knees into the palms.

And Camilo hangs there in the current, one hand on the root, his heart doing its slow terrible clockwork, the water trying to take his legs, the trail behind him full of the sounds of people ending.

EXT. TIGRE TRAIL - THE CONFLUENCE - CONTINUOUS

And hanging on the root, Camilo sees them go – the ones he made himself learn.

DOÑA ROSA, sixty-eight, swept past in the brown water, her face almost serene, the way the very old sometimes meet it. Then under. Gone. Her last cake somewhere in the flood.

WILMER lunges from his trunk to catch KATY as the current tears her loose – their hands miss by an arm's length – and he lets go of the tree, and chooses the water, and goes after her. And the river takes them both. And the name they never told anyone goes with them. The guitar rides a standing wave for a moment, upright, absurd, playing nothing. And is gone.

HERNÁN – the schoolteacher, the fair man's grateful believer – fetches up against Camilo's own root, an arm's reach away, their eyes meeting. And even now, even here, Hernán does not look betrayed. He looks apologetic. As if he's sorry to be a burden. And then the current takes him too – the lesson plans long gone – twenty-six years of teaching children the world was fair, ending in a flood one fair man walked him into.

Camilo holds the root and does not look away. He made himself learn them so he could carry them. Now he carries them. All the way down.

EXT. TIGRE TRAIL - THE CONFLUENCE - LATE AFTERNOON

The water is down. Ankle-deep and innocent. Gold light slants through the trees. The confluence is quiet.

Camilo walks the trail back. He makes himself walk all of it. Counting what the river left. Subtracting it from ninety-six. Not letting himself look away from the difference – because looking away is a door, and he has one door left, and he will not lose it. Not this. Not on top of everything.

A double-bagged plastic folder of LESSON PLANS turns slowly in a shallow eddy against the bank. He looks at it. He does not pick it up.

The SAVED GIRL sits in the palms above the waterline where he put her. Alive. Mute. Watching him count her dead. He cannot cross the thirty meters to her. There is no shape of

mercy left in the whole world that fits what he has done, and he knows it.

BRAULIO comes down off the high ground, picking his way along the drying trail, and stops beside Camilo. Surveys the aftermath with something close to satisfaction.

BRAULIO

Clean. The old man'll be happy.
Product moves tonight – not a
camera within eight kilometers of
it.

Camilo doesn't answer. He's looking at the girl in the palms. Braulio follows his gaze to the child. Shrugs.

BRAULIO (CONT'D)

You want me to–

CAMILO

(quiet, absolute, the
clearing voice)
You touch her, I put you in the
river.

Braulio raises his hands – easy, joking, but he takes a step back. He's known Camilo a long time. He knows which sentences are jokes.

OFF Camilo, standing in the shallow gold water among the beads of the broken string – the fair man at the end of the road, drowned on the Tigre at midday along with all the rest. Whatever walks out of this confluence tonight wearing his face is going to have to be someone new.

MATCH CUT TO:

EXT. TURQUESA RIVER - SANDBAR AT PIJIBÁ - DAWN

The same brown water – downstream, days later, at first light. Efraín's grandsons stand on the sandbar. And against it, delivered by the current, torn the same, from the one trail: the DEAD. Not scattered. Stacked. The river counting them out.

CUT TO:

INT. FIELD STATION - YAVIZA - BACK ROOM - NIGHT

A cinderblock wall, covered edge to edge in a MAP of the whole watershed and a rash of colored pins. BLUE for the ones Sol has named. WHITE – most of them – for the ones still waiting. And, with a paint pen, on some of the white heads, a small RED DOT.

Sol stands in the bad fluorescent light, reading the wall the way Efraín reads the sky. She adds a red dot to another pin. Steps back.

The red dots do not scatter. They climb the map in a line – up the Turquesa, up the fork, up to the confluence of the Tigre – and there they STOP, and cluster, in a fist-sized bloom of red over one trail junction. Thirty of them. Out of a dozen trails that feed the river.

SOL
 (to the empty room – a
 habit she's started)
 Rivers don't have favorites. You
 scatter. You've always scattered.

She lays a hand flat on the cluster of red.

SOL (CONT'D)
 Somebody's feeding you.

She pulls the recovery logs. Does the arithmetic she's been avoiding because she already knows the shape of the answer. The red ones don't correlate with rainfall the way honest drownings do. They correlate with something else – the Tigre rising faster and higher than the sky above it can account for. As if the water were let go all at once. Or as if the people were put into the low ground at precisely the hour the mountain's own water was due to arrive.

Someone is reading this river the way she reads it – the way five centuries of people learned to read this water to SURVIVE it – and using the reading in reverse.

She sits down on the concrete floor, her back against the wall of pins, and understands: she is no longer doing forensics on a natural disaster. She is reading, off the bodies of the dead, the signature of a living, careful, patient man.

She picks up her phone. Scrolls past the choir of the searching – past Mara, past all of them – to a name she almost never calls. It rings. A sleep-thick voice answers.

SOL (CONT'D)

It's Ferrán. You told me once you wanted a case the dead could testify to.

She reaches out and touches the cluster of red with two fingers. Gently. The way she touches the bodies. The way she touches nothing living anymore.

SOL (CONT'D)

Wake up. I have thirty witnesses. And I can prove somebody's still adding to them.

CUT TO:

EXT. THE FUNNEL - CAMILO'S TARP - DAY

Days after the Tigre. Camilo counts a coffee-can float. And three meters behind him – always exactly three meters – sits the SAVED GIRL. Five, six. Mute. She hasn't spoken since the water. She sleeps on a mat in the corner of his tarp now, eats what he puts in front of her, and follows him through the camp at that fixed distance, watching, the way she watched him from the mat.

He, who unmakes names for a living, has acquired a small living person he cannot name.

A VENDOR, nearby, nods at the girl.

VENDOR

La muda still following you around? You want me to–

Camilo looks at him. Just looks. The vendor finds something else to do.

BRAULIO drops down beside Camilo, watching him work.

BRAULIO

You're quiet, hermano. Since the Tigre. You did good on the Tigre – old man's happy. Product moved

clean all week. Not a camera west
of the funnel.

He grins.

BRAULIO (CONT'D)

You should be happy. You're the
reason. You and your babies and
your foil blankets. Best cover the
coast ever had. Nobody looks at
the man handing out blankets.

Camilo counts the money. His hands do not shake. That is
the horror of him.

CAMILO

Get the blankets restocked. The
vendor's short. Group of ninety
tomorrow.

Braulio laughs, goes. The girl watches from three meters.
And Camilo, who told himself for two years that his
kindness was a wall between these people and the thing that
eats this place, understands now, all the way down, that he
is not the wall. He is the part of the thing that eats this
place that smiles while it does it. And the smiling is not
a flaw in the machine. It's load-bearing.

He crouches in the mud in front of the girl, level with her
great dark patient eyes. Tries to find something to say.
Doesn't have anything fit to say to a child he fished from
a flood he made. Instead he just, gently, puts his hand
once on the crown of her head. The gesture. And she takes
his other hand in both of hers – the grip, the mothers'
grip, though she's a child – and holds on. And does not let
go.

CUT TO:

INT. CAMILO'S TARP - THE FUNNEL - NIGHT

The girl asleep on the mat in the corner. Camilo sits,
cleaning the pistol again – the ritual – but his eyes keep
going to her. He sets the gun down. Crouches beside her
sleeping form. And, quietly, tries.

CAMILO

(low, not really
expecting an answer)
You've got a name in there
somewhere. I know you do.
Everybody's got one. Somebody gave
you one, before the water. Your
mamá, probably. Whispered it to
you the first night, the way they
do.

The girl sleeps. Or pretends to. She has no beads to count,
no toy, nothing – only her silence, and the three meters,
and him.

CAMILO (CONT'D)
I used to be good at finding
people. Best on the river. I could
find anybody. My – I had a
brother. I could always find him,
when we were kids. Hiding places,
all of them, I knew every one.

He stops. He doesn't say the rest – that the one time it
mattered, the river hid Mateo somewhere Camilo could never
find. He looks at this small silent person the flood gave
him, and understands, dimly, that he is talking to her the
way you talk to the dead. Confessing. Because she can't
tell anyone. Because her silence is the only place in the
whole camp a man like him can set something down.

CAMILO (CONT'D)
I can't keep you. You know that,
right? Where I'm headed, I can't –
a man like me doesn't get to keep
anything. But I'm going to find
you somewhere better than me.
That's a promise. And I keep my
promises to you, because you're
the only one I never lied to.

He pulls the thin blanket up over her shoulder. And sits
with her a while, in the strung-bulb light, the unmaker of
names guarding the sleep of the one child he could not name
– and, for the length of one night, did not have to.

CUT TO:

EXT. THE FUNNEL - MAIN STREET - DAY

A COMMOTION. A crowd, ugly, closing on a young MIGRANT MAN backed against a stall – someone's phone went missing, and the crowd has decided it was him, and the crowd is one more shout from becoming a mob. A vendor already has a length of pipe.

Camilo doesn't hurry. He never hurries. He walks into the center of it, and the shouting drops a register just because he's there.

CAMILO

Whose phone.

A WOMAN – hers. Camilo turns to the accused man. Reads him the way he reads everything – all at once, no single sign trusted alone.

CAMILO (CONT'D)

Empty your bag. On the ground.
Slow.

The man does. No phone. Camilo crouches, unhurried, and goes through it anyway – and then, quietly, nods at a BOY at the edge of the crowd, one of the runners, who has been a little too interested in the whole show. The boy bolts. Camilo doesn't chase. He just looks at the woman.

CAMILO (CONT'D)

Check the boat you came down on.
Under the third seat. He'll have
stashed it to sell upriver.

The crowd's fever breaks – redirected, deflated. The pipe lowers. The accused man breathes. Camilo helps him gather his spilled things back into the bag, closes it, hands it to him. Fair. Always fair.

CAMILO (CONT'D)

(to the crowd, flat)

Nobody puts hands on anybody in my
camp. You have a problem, you
bring it to me. That's the rule.
It's the only rule that keeps this
place from eating itself.

They disperse. The fair man at the end of the road, keeping the peace. And BRAULIO, watching from a doorway, grins – because Braulio understands what Camilo won't let himself

understand: that a calm camp is a profitable camp, that Camilo's fairness isn't mercy at all, it's maintenance, keeping the machine's most valuable asset – its cover of ordinary human decency – well-oiled and running. Camilo feels the grin on his back. And does not turn around. Because turning around would mean admitting he felt it.

CUT TO:

INT. FIELD STATION - YAVIZA - DAY

Sol tacks a new red dot to the wall. On the phone with ADELA SANJUR (V.O.), a fiscal in the capital, careful, one of the serious ones.

ADELA (V.O.)

You understand what you're describing. Not neglect. Not the crossing being the crossing. A person, deciding, and using the river to do it and hide it. That's homicide, Marisol. But a wall of pins isn't a courtroom. I need a body I can stand up, one I can prove was routed, with a chain of custody a lawyer can't tear. The river's the perfect defendant – it can't be deposed, and everyone already believes it's guilty.

A beat. Lower.

ADELA (V.O.) (CONT'D)

And before you send me anything – know that since the gringos put the Clan on their terror list, I've got an American liaison. Task-force man. He's been asking me for exactly the geolocation you're building. He smells a target where I smell a case. Other eyes want what you're making, Marisol. And they don't want it for a courtroom. Keep that somewhere in your head.

OFF Sol – filing the warning. Not yet knowing what it means.

CUT TO:

INT. FIELD STATION - YAVIZA - COLD STORE - DAY

The cold store. Sol works a body on a steel table – and we recognize her: the YOUNG WOMAN from the cold open. Caesarean scar, healed years old. The wrist tattoo – a date, two initials. The cheap ring, still on her finger. Sol has been carrying her, nameless, for six weeks.

This is the part no one understands. They think the work is the science. The science is real – the swab, the odontogram, the database in the capital that matches almost no one. But the database will not save this one. Sol knew that from the start. So she does the other thing. The slow thing. The thing that is not science.

She lifts the tattooed wrist under the light. Speaks it, low, working it out.

SOL

A date, and two initials, on the inside of the wrist. Where only you can see it, if you turn your own hand to look. People don't carry other people's names where only they can see them. Only their children's.

She has a birthdate, probably. A child's initials, probably. A caesarean scar that says the child is five, six, seven. And a corridor of the world she came up through – because they come up in currents, in nationalities, in seasons, and Sol has learned to read those too.

She photographs the tattoo, and puts it to the net.

CUT TO:

INT. FIELD STATION - YAVIZA - NIGHT (LATER)

A different night. Sol on the phone, a note in her hand, her face changed. The answer has come back – through four women, in three countries, hand to hand, trust to trust, the way these things come. A sister. In Peru. Whose sister crossed eight months ago with a photograph of a five-year-old she'd left with their mother. A five-year-old named

Kevin, born on a day in a month, initials that match a wrist.

Sol has confirmed it now – the tattoo, the scar, the ring, and a dental match against a clinic in Lima that the sister found in a single frantic afternoon, because now there was a reason to find it. On the line, a WOMAN weeps.

SOL

I want you to say her name to me.
In your family's own words. So I
can write it down the way you say
it.

SISTER (V.O.)

(through the weeping)

Yuliana. Yuliana Quispe. She has a
son. Kevin. He's five.

SOL

Yuliana Quispe. Twenty-nine.
Mother of Kevin. She came to a
river in Panama, and she did not
go on from it. And a stranger
knelt for her in the mud, and kept
her whole, and kept her ring on
her finger, and has been carrying
her – waiting for exactly this
call – so she could stop being a
number, and go home a person.

A silence, four thousand miles wide. And then the thing
they always ask.

SISTER (V.O.)

Was she alone? At the end. Was
there anyone.

Sol looks down at the young woman on the table. The truest
thing she ever says on these calls.

SOL

I was there. I was there at the
end of it. She wasn't alone. I
promise you she wasn't alone.

CUT TO:

INT. FIELD STATION - YAVIZA - COLD STORE - NIGHT

Sol stands a moment with Yuliana Quispe, who is not a case anymore. She says the name out loud in the cold, once – the way you'd introduce a person into a room. And then she opens the LEDGER, and writes it, in her own hand, in the section for the found.

And she lets herself feel, for exactly as long as she can afford to, the thing she almost never lets herself feel: not the grief – the grief is easy, it's always there – but the other thing. That this is a good day. That giving a dead woman her name back is the best day her work ever offers. That she would do it ten thousand more times, if the river kept them coming. And that she has never been able to decide whether a life spent this way is the most meaningful thing a person can do, or the most futile – and has stopped needing to decide, because either way she will get up tomorrow, and do it again.

She closes the book on Yuliana's name. Outside, the wall of red pins waits. Thirty more who will need what Yuliana just got. But for one hour, in the cold store, Sol has won. One name. Against the whole green machine that makes them nameless – she has won exactly one. And she holds it. And it is enough to go on with. Because it has to be.

CUT TO:

INT. FIELD STATION - YAVIZA - NIGHT

Sol at her wall, the phone against her ear, and we finally see the NET whole – not as an idea, but as a thing that is happening, all over the hemisphere, at once. As she talks, we INTERCUT, in quick filtered fragments, the women at the far ends of the line:

A KITCHEN IN CHICAGO – Mara, frosting a cake, a phone wedged to her shoulder.

A LAUNDRY IN LIMA – a woman folding sheets, scrolling a phone full of faces.

A NIGHT BUS IN BOGOTÁ – a woman showing another woman a photograph of a young man, the way you'd pass a sacrament.

A PORCH IN MARACAIBO – a grandmother, a candle, a saint, a list of names.

They pass each other photographs, dates, manifests – hand to hand, trust to trust, faster and truer than any consulate, because a mother will answer her phone at three in the morning for another mother's son when no official on earth will.

SOL

(into the phone, to one of them)

Send me the photograph. And the guide's name, if she got it. I'll put it on the wall. If he comes to this river, I'll know him.

She hangs up. Looks at the wall – the blue pins, the white pins, the bloom of red. Hundreds of faces. A whole choir of the searching, living in her phone, calling at all hours, because the searching does not keep hours.

EFRAÍN, in the doorway, watches her. He distrusts the phone in her hand and everything it represents. But he sees what it is, too.

EFRAÍN

Your mother's people kept the dead in songs. You keep them in a wall and a wire. It's the same work, Marisol. It was always the same work.

OFF Sol – a woman who has turned herself into a place where names are kept, for the ones who can't keep them anymore, and for the ones who can't stop screaming them into the dark.

CUT TO:

INT. NATIONAL FORENSICS OFFICE - THE CAPITAL - DAY

A world away from the mud – clean, fluorescent, ordinary. Sol, out of place in her field vest, sets a rack of labeled sample VIALS on a counter. A tired ADMINISTRATOR barely looks up from a screen.

ADMINISTRATOR

Reference numbers?

SOL

They don't have reference numbers yet. They have names. I've written them here – the ones I've matched.

ADMINISTRATOR

The system needs a reference number, Doctora. It doesn't have a field for names until there's a confirmed match on file. Until then they're – cases. It's just how it's built.

Sol looks at the rack of vials. Each one a person she knelt for. Being fed into a machine that has no field for who they were.

SOL

How much is the budget this year?
For the identification program.
The one that's embarrassed to be seen funding me at all.

The administrator names a figure. It is humiliatingly small. Sol takes it without flinching – she knew it would be.

SOL (CONT'D)

You know what that number means?
It means the country has decided, on a spreadsheet, exactly how many of the dead it can afford to give names back to. And it's not many. So the rest stay cases. Stay numbers. Because a name costs money, and grief doesn't lobby.

The administrator, not unkind, just worn down by the same machine:

ADMINISTRATOR

I don't make the number, Doctora.

SOL

I know. Nobody makes the number.
That's the whole trick of it.

She signs the form. And leaves the vials – her named dead – to be processed by a system that will call them cases for

fourteen months, if it calls them anything at all. And walks back out toward the river, where at least the arithmetic is honest, because at least there she does the naming with her own two hands.

CUT TO:

INT. MARA'S APARTMENT - CHICAGO - NIGHT

Four thousand miles north. A third-floor walk-up that smells of the offices she cleans all night and the vanilla she bakes in the few hours she's home. MARA – AMARA RÍOS, 40s – frosts a CAKE. On the counter, a photograph of a laughing young man. DANILO.

She makes it every year on his birthday. This year he'd be twenty-six. She makes it anyway – because to not make it would be to decide something, and Mara decided a long time ago that she is not going to be the one who decides. Other people can decide. The consulate decided; they gave her a case number and a tone of voice. Her church gently decided; they started praying for her comfort instead of for his return, so she stopped going, because comfort is for the bereaved, and she is not bereaved – she is a mother whose son has not been found, which is a different country entirely.

She wraps a slice in foil and puts it in the FREEZER – beside last year's slice, and the one before. Someday, she tells herself, there'll be a reason to take them all out.

Then she does the thing she does every night, after the cake and before the offices. She takes out the phone. And she works the net. It's the only church she has left – mothers, only mothers, passing names in the dark, faster and truer than any consulate. And at the far end of it, on the actual river, there's the doctora. The one who kneels in the water. The only one who, when you say your son's name, says it back to you like it's still the name of a person.

We hear, faint, filtered, Sol's voice on the line – the ritual:

SOL (V.O.)

Danilo Ríos. Tell me one thing
about him I don't know yet.

And Mara, alone in her kitchen with a cake for a son who may already be in a river she'll never see, tells her – that he couldn't carry a tune and sang anyway, that he promised to buy her a house with a yard so she could plant tomatoes. And she does not cry. She's long past the crying that empties you, and into the other kind – a tenant, quiet, permanent – that just lives in you now.

She hangs up. And goes to catch the long bus to the offices. Keeping her son a person in the dark. Not knowing that when the doctor's call finally comes – months from now, in the deepest part of a night – it won't be about Danilo at all. That she'll be asked to pick up a phone and help save someone else's child. And that she'll do it without hesitating. Because that's what the net is. That's the whole terrible, beautiful point of it.

CUT TO:

EXT. HEADWATERS - ILLEGAL GOLD MINE - DAY

A raw red wound chewed out of the green. Sluices, hoses, a diesel pump hammering. Men waist-deep in grey slurry, working gravel. This is the part of the enterprise the funnel exists to hide.

Camilo, up on Clan business, watches a MINER tip a jug of QUICKSILVER into a sluice with his bare hand – to bind the gold out of the grit, the way you'd salt a stew. The tailings run off grey and shining, down a creek.

Nearby, fresh-felled COCOBOLLO – rosewood a lifetime of rain grows a finger's width of in a decade – is squared and rolled toward the coast. A FOREMAN, proud, tells Camilo where it goes: containers, foreign markets, furniture for people who will never hear the word Darién.

Camilo stands at the edge of the red wound, the mercury creek running past his boots, and for once follows the thought all the way to the bottom. This creek feeds the Tigre. The Tigre feeds the Turquesa. The Turquesa feeds the villages. It's all one water. Top to bottom. There is no decent corner downstream, and there never was. There was only a corner far enough down that a man could tell himself the water arrived at his boots already dirty, and none of it was his.

CUT TO:

EXT. RIOSUCIO ROAD - THE DRY CORRIDOR - NIGHT

And here is what the funnel is for. A different trail entirely – flat, dry, unwatched. No cameras. No churches. No migrants. A line of TRUCKS moves through the dark, unhurried, headlights off, laden with what actually pays: the powder, sealed and stacked, and the fine squared wood. Men with rifles ride the running boards, relaxed, almost bored. This is a highway. This is a business functioning perfectly.

INTERCUT – the FUNNEL, the same night: floodlit misery, the mud, the babies, the vests, the cameras, half a million points of suffering all pooled in one bright place. And the trucks roll clean and dark eight kilometers west, and not one lens in two hemispheres is pointed at them.

A CONVOY BOSS lights a cigarette, watches the trucks pass, and says to no one, the truest description of the whole machine anyone gives in the film:

CONVOY BOSS

Let them film the babies. Every camera on the babies is a camera not on us. Cheapest security money ever bought.

The trucks roll on into the dark, toward the coast, toward the containers, toward the appetite up north that wants all of it and will blame the jungle. And the misery at the funnel burns bright behind them – doing its job. Which was always, only, to be seen.

CUT TO:

INT. TRIBUNAL - HEARING ROOM - DAY

The witness table. The red light.

PANEL VOICE (O.S.)

For the record, Doctor – help us understand. The migration, and the drug trade. How were they related.

SOL

Everyone asks it that way. As if they were two things. They were never two things. It was one

business. The forest, the powder,
the wood, the gold, and the people
– one business, taking all of them
the same way. And the genius of it
– the thing I want in the record,
because no one who wasn't there
believes it – the genius was that
the suffering was the disguise.
They funneled half a million
people into one bright terrible
place, so that every camera and
every conscience in the world
would point there. And point
nowhere else.

A beat.

SOL (CONT'D)

The babies weren't a tragedy the
traffickers tolerated. The babies
were the product's security
detail. The most successful piece
of misdirection on that coast, and
it was built out of mothers.
That's the part I still can't –
that's the part you don't get
over. That the misery wasn't a
side effect. It was the point. It
was working.

CUT TO:

EXT. THE FUNNEL - VARIOUS - DAY (MONTAGE)

The tollbooth. Not a booth – a system. A MONTAGE of the
tax, moving through the whole economy of departure, node by
node, hand to hand:

A woman selling empanadas counts coins into a tin; a
COLLECTOR takes his cut.

A man selling SIM cards and phone charges pays his ten
percent without being asked.

A boat crew hands up a fold of bills before a panga pushes
off.

The blue-tent vendor selling the kits – the ponchos, the foil blankets, the red rosaries – sets aside the Clan's share.

A hotel of tarps and cots; a money changer; a water seller; a woman renting a phone by the minute so migrants can call home – each one paying, each one taxed, the whole misery monetized at every step.

And moving through all of it, unhurried, collecting, nodding, keeping the peace – CAMILO. El peaje. The human toll-gate that everything passes through. A migrant thanks him for keeping the bandits off the trail. He accepts it. Because it's even true.

This is what the Engineer meant. This is the beautiful choke point. Half a million people, funneled through one place, taxed at every breath – and grateful, because the alternative is worse, and el peaje makes sure the alternative stays worse, so that his mercy stays necessary, so that the tax keeps flowing, so that the cameras stay pointed here, so that eight kilometers west the trucks roll clean in the dark.

Camilo pockets the day's collection and looks out at the river, at the pangas carrying the morning's hundred into the green. And tells himself, the way he tells himself every morning, that everyone he's ever put on that water is still alive. It is getting harder to believe. It is going to get much harder.

CUT TO:

INT. THE HILLS - THE ENGINEER'S PLANK HOUSE - DUSK

The Engineer alone with his ledger, a hand-drawn MAP of the whole region pinned to the wall behind him – not a cartel's map, a logistics manager's: the funnel, the nodes, the tax points, the drug corridors, the logging roads, the mine, all of it annotated in a neat hand, with numbers. He is doing accounts. He looks, for all the world, like a man reconciling a quarter.

A LIEUTENANT waits, nervous about the terror designation.

LIEUTENANT

The gringos. The list. People are frightened. They say it changes everything.

THE ENGINEER

(not looking up)

It changes one variable. The airplane. Everything else – the water, the trees, the hunger that walks half a million people into my funnel, the appetite up north that buys everything I sell – none of that changed. Those are constants. You don't panic over a new variable. You solve for it.

He sets down his pen. Regards the map – his whole enterprise, rendered as arithmetic.

THE ENGINEER (CONT'D)

People think men like me are cruel. I'm not cruel. Cruelty is waste – it draws attention, it costs money, it makes the workers unreliable. I am the opposite of cruel. I am efficient. The migrants are throughput. The powder is product. The wood is inventory. And the suffering – the suffering is marketing. It keeps the world's eye where I want it. I would stop all of it tomorrow if the numbers said stop. They don't. That's not cruelty. That's just true.

The lieutenant doesn't understand – not really. That's why he's a lieutenant.

THE ENGINEER (CONT'D)

There's only one man who understands it, and he doesn't like that he does. Which is exactly why he's worth ten of you. Now go. And tell them to stop being frightened. Frightened men make mistakes, and mistakes are

the only thing on this whole river
that can actually hurt me.

The lieutenant goes. The Engineer picks his pen back up.
And returns to his accounts – the most dangerous man on the
coast, doing sums, in a clean shirt, in the last of the
light.

CUT TO:

EXT. TURQUESA RIVER - RIVER-SMOKE - DAY

Grey morning, thick with river-smoke. Two boats, on
opposite errands, about to pass and never know it.

SOL'S BOAT runs the middle of the channel, fast, a body-
tarp at her feet, EFRAÍN in the bow with an old rifle
across his knees. She keeps her eyes down. Becomes, by an
act of will she's learned over three years, a churchwoman.
A nothing. No threat to anyone.

CAMILO'S PANGA comes down from the headwaters. He SEES the
ministry boat – the woman at the tiller, the old man, the
unmistakable blue of a body-tarp between them: the shape he
has made ninety-six of and sent down this exact current. He
knows what she is. He knows, with the cold clear part of
him, what's almost certainly in that tarp, and where it
came from.

And he does the thing that is his whole religion. He looks
away.

BRAULIO, in the panga, starts to take an interest. Camilo,
quiet:

CAMILO
It's nothing. A churchwoman. We
don't touch the churches. Touching
the churches brings the cameras.

The boats draw apart in the smoke. But Sol FEELS it – among
all the eyes that crossed her boat, one set knew exactly
what she was carrying, and chose, with something like
courtesy and something like shame, not to see it. You learn
the difference, in three years on this water, between eyes
that don't notice you and eyes that decide not to. The
second kind leaves a mark.

She glances back once, upriver, into the smoke, at two low pangas dwindling toward the headwaters. Wondering which man chose not to see her. And why.

CUT TO:

EXT. EDGE OF THE GREEN - STAGING TOWN - DAY

Waiting is its own country. The town tightens each afternoon as the guides come through with their lists, deciding who goes and who keeps waiting.

ISA sits with DULCE, 3, on her lap – not hers – clicking a red rosary through the little one's fingers. Nearby, YOSELI, 20s, holds a baby and stares at nothing, gone to the flat faraway place, worn past the end of herself by the road she's already walked. When Dulce toddles off toward the terrible edges of the camp, it's Isa who goes after her. Again. And again. Until it's simply true: where Isa is, Dulce is.

LUCÍA counts the cash in a cloth belt under her shirt – her hand goes to it a hundred times. That night she buys a single plate of rice and gives most of it to Isa.

LUCÍA
I'm not hungry.

Isa lets her say it. Letting Mamá keep the things she folds up is the only gift Isa has left to give her.

Later – Lucía braids Isa's hair, slow, the way she used to when Isa was small. Then holds Isa's face in both hands, in the light of the one bulb.

LUCÍA (CONT'D)
Whatever happens in there – you
stay where you can see me. You
don't let go of my hand for
anything. Your heart's going to
want to help everyone in that
jungle. In there, your heart's job
is one thing. Staying alive next
to me. Say it.

ISA
Stay alive next to you.

LUCÍA
That's the whole job.

Isa says it back. And means it. And will break it within two days.

CUT TO:

EXT. DEEP JUNGLE - CROSSING TRAIL - DAY

The mouth closes behind them at dawn. For a day and a half it's only tiring – and then it becomes the worst thing that has ever happened to her, and it never once stops being beautiful.

MONKEYS pour through the treetops overhead, going SOUTH – the way she came – as if they know something. BUTTERFLIES the size of two hands open and close on the wet leaves. And the trash, everywhere: foam mats hung in the branches like something the trees are digesting; so many single shoes; and once, off the side of the trail, where the smell is, something the grown-ups make the children look away from. Isa holds Dulce's face against her shoulder so she won't see.

Dulce rides Isa's hip more and more; Yoseli is failing, the baby coughing. Isa carries the little one up the worst climbs, feeds her from her own share, makes the game of the beads – because crying makes the guides turn around. And you do not want the guides to turn around.

EXT. CROSSING TRAIL - A STEEP CLIMB - DAY

The trail goes near vertical – mud and roots, a frayed rope some earlier group left knotted to a tree. The line hauls itself up hand over hand. Ahead of Isa, an OLD MAN's legs simply stop working. He sits in the mud. His grown DAUGHTER pulls at him, pleads – with him, then with the guides.

DAUGHTER
Please. Five minutes. He just
needs – please, we'll catch up,
please–

The guides do not stop. The guides never stop. The line flows on around the two of them like water around a stone. And Isa watches the daughter make the calculation everyone on this trail eventually makes – and choose to stay,

sinking down beside her father, as the line climbs away and leaves them, the two of them getting smaller below, and then gone around the bend.

Isa does not know if they lived. You never know. You only know the line kept moving, and that the guides counted, and that being counted is not the same as being watched over.

At the top, the group collapses for a moment's rest. A WOMAN shares out the last of a bag of crackers – a few to each child, gravely, fairly. Dulce gets hers. Isa gets hers, and gives half of it back to Dulce, and no one comments, because this is who Isa is now. And for one moment, in the green cathedral light, exhausted and filthy and afraid, these strangers are almost a village. And then a guide's voice cracks down the line – up, move, the water won't wait – and the almost-village dissolves back into a line of the counted, and climbs on.

EXT. CROSSING TRAIL - NIGHT CAMP - NIGHT

Night falls in the green like a lid closing. The group makes a miserable camp under dripping tarps – no fire, the guides won't allow one. Rain ticks on plastic. Under the forest sounds, the sounds of people: a cough, a prayer, a woman weeping so quietly she thinks no one can hear.

Isa sits against a tree, Dulce asleep across her lap, and keeps watch – because Yoseli is somewhere past the end of herself, and someone has to. A BOY, maybe eight, alone, his people lost on the trail behind him, creeps over and, without a word, leans against her other side. She lets him. Her tribe grows by one, in the dark, the way it does.

A MAN nearby, staring at nothing.

MAN

How much further. Somebody said
two days. Somebody said five.
Nobody knows anything. We just
walk.

ISA

(not looking at him,
watching the dark)
Walk in the cool. Sleep in the
heat. Keep the little ones up
front where you can see them.

The man looks at her – a ten-year-old, handing him the only real advice he's had since the mouth of the green. He doesn't know where she got it. Neither does she – a fair man at the funnel said it to a hundred mothers, and it traveled up the trail ahead of her, the way the useful things do. He nods. Takes it. It helps.

And Isa sits in the dripping dark with two sleeping children she didn't have this morning, and understands, without the words for it, that she has become the thing her mother made her swear not to be – the one whose heart is everyone's. And that there was never any choice in it. The green makes you what it needs. And it needed her to keep them up.

EXT. CROSSING TRAIL - THE LAST RIVER - DAY

Wide. Brown. Faster than any they've crossed. Swollen – though Isa can't know that far up in the mountains it's been raining for days, loading it like a held breath. The GUIDES look at it, look at the sky, have a conversation Isa can't hear – and wave them across anyway. Hurry. Before it rises.

A chain, hand to hand. Water at the waist. Then the chest. Lucía ahead of Isa; Dulce locked around Isa's neck; Mamá's hand IRON in Isa's free hand. The whole job.

And the river RISES. Not like water. Like a decision. A sound upriver like a train – and the brown water STANDS UP, all of it, everywhere at once, a wall come down from the mountains full of torn trees. The chain breaks like a necklace. Beads everywhere.

Isa's feet leave the bottom. Dulce SCREAMS against her neck. She still has Mamá's hand – she still has it –

– and then she doesn't.

There is no letting go. She will swear it forever. The river reaches into her fist and takes her mother's fingers out of it, the way you'd take something from a baby. Easily. Completely.

And the last Isa sees of her mother in the whole world is not her face – only the pale shape of that HAND, above the brown water, open, reaching back toward where Isa's hand had been.

Then the green folds over it. And it's gone.

Isa does not drown – because of Dulce. An arm over a moving log, the little one's face up out of the water – keep her face up, keep her face up – the whole job made small enough to hold. The river carries them down its long brown throat and spits them, bruised and gasping and alive, into the shallows of a bend a kilometer down.

EXT. RIVER BEND - SHALLOWS - CONTINUOUS

Counting hands – guide hands, not gentle – haul them out and stand them in the mud among the other survivors the river decided to keep. Isa looks at every face. None is her mother's. She stands shaking, Dulce clamped to her, ringing like the green bucket at the very top of its song.

A GUIDE comes down the line, counting. Stops at the ten-year-old and the three-year-old, dripping, orphaned. Does the sum – worth half, worth keeping. Doesn't ask where her mother is. Writes something down.

GUIDE

You walk. Both of you count. New trail – change of plan up top. Keep the little one quiet. You fall behind–

He doesn't finish it. He doesn't have to. The green has already shown her how that sentence ends.

Isa hitches Dulce higher on her hip, presses the red beads into her fist to keep her quiet, and takes her place in the broken line the river kept. Walking north. Deeper in. Counting her steps to make the world small enough to hold. One, two. One, two.

CUT TO:

EXT. RIDGE ABOVE THE FUNNEL - DEAD CEIBA - DAY

Camilo, phone against the rock. An unknown number. LUCÍA'S COUSIN (V.O.) – frightened, careful, delivering news he doesn't want to be blamed for.

COUSIN (V.O.)

They said you'd want to know.
Lucía didn't want me to call – she

said it would only make it worse.
 But they've gone, Camilo. Four
 days ago. She couldn't wait for
 the money to be perfect. They're
 already up, at the coast, on your
 side. They cross this week.

A pause. And then, worse:

COUSIN (V.O.) (CONT'D)
 She said – tell him we'll call
 from the other side.

The world goes slow and clear. The gift. The curse. The
 thing that never once fails to arrive when he least wants
 it.

CAMILO
 (the clearing voice)
 Which crossing. Which coast. Which
 guide. Give me the staging town.

A beat while the cousin dredges it up. A town name. Camilo
 is already moving – down off the ridge – already spending
 the currency he's spent two years building: the boatmen,
 the vendors, the whole nervous system of the crossing that
 answers to el peaje. Burning all of it at once. To find one
 guide, and one manifest, and two names on it.

CUT TO:

INT. CAMILO'S TARP / EXT. CAMP - NIGHT - LATER

Camilo works a phone and a stolen laptop through the night,
 pulling the manifest the way he's pulled a hundred
 manifests. And he learns the first unbearable thing: his
 life's work functions perfectly, flawlessly, even aimed at
 his own child. He finds the staging town. The guide. The
 manifest number. And then – pulling the routing – he finds
 the second unbearable thing.

On the screen: their group. Flagged for a corridor move.
 Off the main line. Onto a cleaner one. INSERT – the
 routing, one word beside his daughter's manifest: TIGRE.

Camilo goes very still.

CUT TO:

INT. THE HILLS - THE ENGINEER'S PLANK HOUSE - DAWN

Camilo has come up the mountain without being summoned. The Engineer receives him in the grey light, the ledger already open, as if he knew. As if he always knows.

CAMILO

Take her off the routing. Off the Tigre, off the whole flag. Move the group back to the main line. You can do it with one call. I have never asked you for anything, tío. In twelve years. I'm asking you for this.

He does not beg. He will not remember whether he begged.

THE ENGINEER

I know you never have. That is exactly why I can't.

Gentle. The gentleness is the cruelty. It has always been the cruelty.

THE ENGINEER (CONT'D)

This does not run on cruelty, hijo. Cruelty is expensive. It runs on there being no exceptions. The moment it's known that a man in the right position can pull one child off the water because he loves her — then every man wants his exception. And every exception is a thread. Pull one, and you haven't saved a child. You've shown all of them how to unwind me.

THE ENGINEER (CONT'D)

I am fonder of you than of anyone left alive. Which is its own kind of joke. But I did not survive this long by loving anything more than the rule. Your daughter is on the routing. That is the whole of my mercy — and it is more than I've ever shown another living soul: I'm telling you plainly,

instead of letting you find out at
the sandbar.

He puts the glasses back on. Turns the page. Camilo walks out into the dawn – the god of the tollbooth, powerless for the first time inside the machine that answers to him in everything except the one thing.

And standing at the top of the mountain, looking down at the vast green country that is all one river, he understands: there is exactly one person in the whole of it who can find one specific child inside the anonymous flood. One person who has built her life into a net fine enough to catch a single name out of the water.

The churchwoman. The boat he looked away from.

CUT TO:

EXT. PIJIBÁ - RIVERBANK - PRE-DAWN

Sol loads cold boxes into two boats in the grey before dawn. EFRAÍN watches, then climbs into the bow with his old rifle across his knees. She starts to tell him to stay. He looks at her. She doesn't finish.

EFRAÍN

The first time you went up their water, you were a churchwoman. A nothing. Going up costs them nothing – going up, everyone's a fool or a churchwoman. It's the coming down they'll want to discuss.

He checks the rifle. Doesn't look at her.

EFRAÍN (CONT'D)

This is the second time. The second time, Marisol, you are not a churchwoman to them anymore. You go up for this one clean body, and you come down – and after today, you're a witness. You understand what I'm telling you. Get your clean one. And then stay out of the men's water. Because there

won't be a third time they let you
leave it.

Sol pushes the boat off the bank.

SOL

There's a man who came to my door,
tío. His daughter's in the water.
I get this body, I get the case. I
get the case, I have something to
trade for a living child. So
there's going to be a third time.
And a fourth. However many it
takes.

Efraín says nothing. Just faces upriver, into the men's
water, an old man with a rifle he knows won't be enough –
because she is her mother's daughter, and there was never
any telling her mother anything either.

CUT TO:

EXT. TURQUESA - THE MEN'S WATER - DAY

Sol goes back up for the keystone – the one clean body
Adela needs. Two boats, EFRAÍN in the bow. Past the fork,
into contested water.

On the one hummock of HIGH GROUND above the confluence
stands a SCOUT – rifle on a sling, phone in hand. As Sol's
boat drifts up, he lifts the phone and PHOTOGRAPHS her.
Lowers it. Does nothing else. The doing-nothing-else is the
most frightening thing that has happened to her in three
years – because it means she's expected. It means there's a
ledger somewhere in the hills with her name in it.

They find the blue tarp-shape snagged on the sandbar. Work
fast – the body into the cold box in under four minutes,
chain of custody spoken aloud into a recorder.

SOL

(into the recorder,
hands working)

Recovered eleven-forty. North
sandbar below the Tigre
confluence. Tarp intact. No
interfer–

And the interference arrives. TWO PANGAS drop out of a feeder creek downstream, cutting the channel below her – men standing, no one pretending to photograph now.

Sol doesn't think. Three years of the river think for her. She GUNS the boat – not down the middle where they've blocked it, but hard for the near bank, into the flooded timber where the big boats can't follow the small one.

A warning shot cracks HIGH. A second does NOT go high. EFRAÍN, in the bow, doesn't fire back – he calls the water.

EFRAÍN

Left – the root – LEFT–

– steering her by voice through the drowned forest, branches whipping past, the recovery men hunched over the cold box like men shielding a child.

The channel narrows to RAPIDS – a landslide-choked throat of white water she'd portage around on any other day. She takes it. The boat bucks, slews – a submerged log RIPS the outboard away with a sound like the end of the world – and they're OVER.

The river takes her the way she has watched it take so many – from the inside now, cold and total and full of torn wood. One thought, and it's not for herself: the cold box. She gets a hand on the strap as the water rolls her and does NOT let go – dragged down and along.

UNDERWATER – brown, roaring, strobed with debris. Sol, tumbling, the strap cutting her palm, the box dragging her down like an anchor she will not release. A submerged BRANCH rakes her side. Her lungs burn. And for one instant, in the churn, she sees – or thinks she sees – the faces. All of them. Every body she ever pulled from this water, watching her from inside it, waiting to see if she'll finally join them. She chooses the box. She chooses the case. She chooses the living child it can buy. And KICKS – for a surface she can't see – until the current spits her into a slack eddy against a gravel bar.

She comes up retching, the strap still in her fist, the box still sealed. EFRAÍN – chest-deep, swearing in two languages – hauls her onto the gravel. The recovery men surface, one, then the other. Everyone, by a mercy she does not believe in and thanks anyway, alive.

The pangas sit at the head of the white water. They do NOT follow. They watch her drag herself and her dead and her old uncle onto the bar. And then, unhurried, they turn and go back up into the men's water – because they've learned what they came to learn. How far she'll go.

OFF Sol, on the gravel, the cold box against her chest, her heart slamming – knowing she has just told the courteous man in the hills exactly how far she'll go. And that he isn't curious anymore.

CUT TO:

EXT. FIELD STATION - YAVIZA - NIGHT (RAIN)

Rain. Sol, soaked and bruised, the keystone finally on ice. And a MAN waiting in the throw of the one security light. Alone. No vehicle. His hands open and away from his sides, in the oldest gesture there is: I am not armed. I am not here for that.

He is ordinary – a lean, water-worn man with a mechanic's hands. She has never seen his face in her life. And she knows him – the way you know a word you've only ever read, the instant you finally hear it spoken. She has been reading him off the dead for three weeks.

CAMILO

You're the one who reads them. The one who gives them their names back. Up and down the river they say there's a woman in Yaviza who – who knows them. However they come.

Every correct thing rises in her at once: the fiscal's number. The panic button by the door. Run. Three years of the animal part of her that's kept her alive stands up and shouts. And under all of it, the door in her chest she never keeps shut swings open on its own.

SOL

I know who you are. I've had thirty of your people on that table. I recovered one today – nearly died bringing it down, to prove a man like you exists. You're the one feeding the Tigre.

You're the reason there's a case
at all.

Something crosses his face. Not surprise – he came here
knowing she'd know. Something worse. Relief. The relief of
a man who has finally walked up to the one person who sees
him true.

CAMILO

Yes. I'm the one. I've done
everything you think, and worse
than you've proven yet, and I
won't insult you by pretending I
came to explain myself.

The rain runs off both of them.

CAMILO (CONT'D)

My daughter is on the routing.
She's ten years old, and she's
somewhere in the crossing right
now, and they've flagged her group
for the Tigre. For what I do. For
what you're proving. And you are
the only person on this whole
river who can find one child
inside all of them before the
water comes up.

He puts his open hands out a fraction further. The
architect at the prosecutor's door.

CAMILO (CONT'D)

I'll give you everything. The
routes. The method. The man who
orders it. Every trail I ever
cleaned, every name I ever helped
make into one of the ones on your
table. I'll hand you the case you
nearly drowned for today, gift-
wrapped – enough to hang me and
the men above me both. I'll
testify, myself, in front of
anyone you name.

His voice finally breaks, on the last of it.

CAMILO (CONT'D)

Just help me find my daughter
first. Name her out of the water
while she's still in it. Please.

OFF Sol, in the rain – the ground of everything she
believes she is, sliding out from under her like a bank in
fast water.

INT. FIELD STATION - YAVIZA - NIGHT

She lets him in out of the rain. A steel table. A recorder
between them – he doesn't object; a man who lets the
recorder run has already decided to drown. He gives her the
girl's data in order, without flinching: the staging town,
the guide's name, the manifest, the date the Tigre flag
goes active – the rain forty hours out. He describes the
method flatly, in the voice of a mechanic describing an
engine – the murder of thirty of her people. She takes the
deepest testimony she will ever take. Then she turns the
recorder OFF.

SOL

Now here's mine – and you'll want
it off the record too, because it
damns me as much as the tape damns
you. I have a net. Not police, not
the ministry – mothers. Three
years of them. Every woman from
Caracas to Port-au-Prince who lost
someone in this crossing. They see
the manifests before the ministry
does, because a guide will tell a
frightened mother in Spanish what
he'll never tell a badge. If your
daughter's group moves, one of my
mothers knows the shape of it
before your Engineer's own men
finish the paperwork.

She holds his eyes.

SOL (CONT'D)

I can find her. Maybe. And in
exchange, I take everything you
offered, and I give it to a
fiscal, and I do not warn you when
the hammer comes down – and when
it comes, it comes on you too. All

the way. Because you earned it,
and the mothers deserve it. You
save your daughter. And then you
answer for mine. For all of mine.
There is no version where you
walk.

CAMILO

I know there's no version where I
walk. I stopped wanting it
somewhere on the Tigre trail. Hang
me high. Just do it after.

They look at each other across the steel – the architect
and the namer, the man who unmakes names and the woman who
restores them. She puts out her hand. He takes it. It is
rough and cold and does not shake. They shake over the
exact thing each most hates in the world: the other one.

CUT TO:

INT. FIELD STATION - YAVIZA - BACK ROOM - NIGHT

While they wait for the mothers, Sol goes to make coffee.
And Camilo, alone, finds himself in front of the WALL. The
map. The rash of pins. And, tacked beside them, the
PHOTOGRAPHS – the recovered dead, the ones she's named and
the ones she hasn't. Face after face after face.

He goes very still. And then he does the thing he has spent
two years, spent his whole life, making certain he would
never do. He looks. Really looks. Down the whole wall. At
the accounting of what he is, made visible, in a way no
ledger of the Engineer's ever made it.

And the bloom of red pins – over the Tigre confluence – he
understands what that cluster is. His Thursday. His ninety-
six, minus the ones the river gave back to her table. He
reaches out and, with one finger, does not quite touch a
photograph. A young man. About Mateo's age. And his hand
starts, very slightly, to shake.

His hands never shake.

Sol stands in the doorway with two cups, and watches the
man who made half of that wall stand in front of it and
finally, at the very end of everything, look at his own
work. She does not comfort him. She would not know how, and

he has not earned it, and they both know it. She just lets him look. Because looking is the beginning of the only thing left that he can do – which is answer for it.

SOL

I don't take the pins down. When I name one. I move it from white to blue, but I don't take it down. So the wall only ever gets fuller. That's the job. It never empties. You just keep making room.

Camilo lowers his hand. Turns from the wall. And something in his face has changed – the built man, the one who doesn't look, gone for good now.

CAMILO

How many. That you know are mine.

SOL

Thirty. So far. That I can prove.

He nods, slowly. Takes the coffee. And carries the number with him to the steel table, where it will sit between them all night, and long after – thirty names, on a wall that never empties, that he will spend what's left of his life trying, and failing, and trying, to be worth even one of.

CUT TO:

INT. FIELD STATION - YAVIZA - STEEL TABLE - NIGHT

Deeper in the night. The link still searching. Two enemies, out of things to negotiate, drinking coffee across a steel table, waiting for a phone to ring. Sol studies him.

SOL

The men who do what you do. They don't come to people like me. Ever. They disappear the evidence, they don't sit down across from it and drink my coffee. Why are you really here.

CAMILO

I told you. My daughter.

SOL

That's why you came. It's not why
you're still sitting there,
letting a recorder run, handing me
the rope. There's something else.

A long silence. The rain.

CAMILO

There's a girl. Not mine. I pulled
her out of the water – one I put
in it. She doesn't talk. I
couldn't keep her, so I sent her
downriver, to an old man your
people trust. Pinned a note to her
shirt. Said she's owed a name,
please.

He looks at his hands. The mechanic's hands. The killer's
hands.

CAMILO (CONT'D)

I've made more people into nobody
than I could count. And the one
thing I couldn't do – the one –
was give that little girl a name.
I don't have the right to. A man
like me. So I carried her to the
one place on the river where names
get given back. And left her at
the door. Same as I'm doing now, I
suppose. With everything else.

Sol looks at him a long moment. And something in her – the
door she never keeps shut – opens another degree.

SOL

If she comes to me. The girl. I'll
name her. Whatever it takes.
That's a promise, and I don't make
them.

Camilo nods. It's the closest thing to absolution he will
ever get, or ask for, or deserve. And it's not for him.
It's for the girl. Which is the only kind he could accept.

The PHONE lights up.

CUT TO:

INT. TRIBUNAL - HEARING ROOM - DAY

The witness table. The red light. Sol does not soften it.

PANEL VOICE (O.S.)

Doctor Ferrán — did you at any point make contact with the individuals whose crimes you were documenting?

SOL

I did more than make contact. I made a bargain with him. Knowing exactly what he was — knowing it better than anyone alive. He knocked on my door, and behind him the river was full of the dead he'd made, and in front of me he put a living child I could still save. And I found out what I actually was.

CUT TO:

INT. FIELD STATION - YAVIZA - LATER - NIGHT (RAIN)

The mothers don't answer quickly. Nothing to do but wait, and boil coffee, and let the satellite link die and come back and die. Past two a.m. She hadn't meant to tell him about her mother. But the night wears the leverage smooth, the way rivers wear everything smooth.

SOL

I was two hundred kilometers away, giving a lecture on how to name bodies. While my mother turned into one. Four days of fever, on this river, with water she couldn't drink. There was no boat that would've got me there in time — I've checked, the way you check a thing you need to keep hating yourself for. I built my whole life exactly far enough from this water that I couldn't reach her. And now I kneel in it for other people's mothers. So that someone would have knelt for her. That's

what the names are. It's not science. It never was.

A long quiet. The link light searches, and finds nothing.

CAMILO

I had a brother. Mateo.

He hadn't known he was going to say it. He's spent eleven years making certain he never would. It comes out of him like a stone from a wound that's finally softened enough to give it up.

CAMILO (CONT'D)

Younger. He crossed — before it was this, before me. He was nineteen. Going to send for me and our mother once he had work. He never came up on the other side. No call. Eleven years. Our mother died still setting a place for him.

CAMILO (CONT'D)

And you know why I was so good at this work? Why the Engineer could never replace me? Because I already knew, in my body, what the crossing does to a person. I didn't learn the river's cruelty on the job. Mateo taught it to me by disappearing into it. And every anonymous man about his age that came through my funnel — I made myself not look. Because if I ever looked, really looked, I'd have to wonder if one of them was mine. If I'd done to some other mother's Mateo what the river did to mine.

SOL

You strip the names off, so you don't have to find your brother in the pile. And I give them back, so I can find my mother in it. The same pile.

CAMILO

The same river.

Neither of them says anything for a while. There's nothing to say that the silence isn't saying better. Two enemies, in the wreckage of the lives they built against this water – for the length of one held breath, simply two people the same river robbed.

The PHONE on the table LIGHTS UP. Buzzes. Skitters a half-inch across the steel. One of Sol's mothers, calling in the dead of night. Camilo's clockwork heart stops, and starts. Sol reaches for it. And the night's true business begins: a living child, still in the water, still findable. The rain – thirty-nine hours out.

CUT TO:

INT. TASK FORCE OPERATIONS CENTER - WINDOWLESS - NIGHT

A room that could be in any city because it's designed to be in none. Banks of SCREENS show the Darién as heat and pattern – monochrome, six miles up, no weather, no smell, no sound.

SPECIAL AGENT DALE REYES, 40s. On one small screen in the corner, muted, a child's DANCE RECITAL plays – his daughter, a time zone away. He watches it for a second. Then back to the Gap.

He is not a cruel man. That's the hardest thing to hold. He coaches by video call from time zones that make no sense, and believes, with the uncomplicated faith of a man who's given his life to a flag, that he's one of the good ones. And is, by the arithmetic he's been handed, not even wrong.

He reads the Gap the way Sol reads a river – all at once, no single sign trusted alone. But from six miles up, in the cool grammar of pattern-of-life. And there's a hole in the center of his picture, exactly the shape of the man who runs the routing – the courteous ghost in the hills whose whole genius is to stand at the blurry center while every camera points at the misery at the edge.

REYES

(quiet, to an ANALYST)
Fifteen years I've chased these
guys. Every one of them gets
richer and more untouchable while

I watch – protected by borders and lawyers and the patience of institutions. And now, finally, the borders and the lawyers and the patience are off the table.

He taps the blur at the center of the network.

REYES (CONT'D)

I just need the center of that hole.

CUT TO:

INT. FIELD STATION - YAVIZA - DAY

The mother's call gave the shape but not the pin – Isa's group held somewhere past the fork, the rain now thirty-six hours out. Sol needs eyes she doesn't have. On the phone with Adela, and she can hear the fiscal seeing the next three moves and hating all of them.

ADELA (V.O.)

Only one outfit has that over the Gap right now. Since the designation – the American task force. My liaison can find ninety people held in one place in an afternoon. And he'll trade you that. For your node data. The routing. The coordinates. He's wanted it for weeks.

Sol calls him. And Reyes is – God help her – reasonable. Warm. Genuinely moved by the idea of ninety people held in a jungle by a cartel.

REYES (V.O.)

Let's find these folks. I've got a platform that can loiter over the fork and find a static group that size – by their heat, their trash, their trodden ground – in a matter of hours. Give me the node. The hub the routing decisions come out of. And I'll give you your ninety people by dark.

Sol stands in front of the wall of red pins. The rain, thirty-five hours out. A ten-year-old somewhere in the green. Camilo grey-faced across her steel table, having handed her his whole life to save his child.

She reads the coordinates off her own wall into the phone. And even as she does – even as she reads out the numbers – she feels the pattern of what she's doing shift under her, like a bank in fast water. She makes herself finish.

INT. FIELD STATION - YAVIZA - LATER - DAY

Reyes calls back. His voice has the lift of a man who's done a good thing.

REYES (V.O.)

We found them. Your ninety. Held at a river hub up the fork. And Marisol – it's the same coordinates. The node you gave me. Your data was dead on. We've got them fixed. We're watching them right now.

SOL

Then get them out. You have people. Get them out.

A pause. A different kind of pause. The pause of a man deciding how much to say to a civilian who's been useful.

REYES (V.O.)

This isn't – it's not a rescue platform, Marisol. What you've helped me do – what your data confirmed – is fix a high-value node of a designated terrorist organization. The individual who runs your cleanings is there. We've got a pattern-of-life on him now, thanks partly to you. This is a target. A clean one. The cleanest we've had since the designation.

The room tilts around her.

SOL

There are ninety civilians at that node. There are children. There is a ten-year-old girl at that node that I gave you those coordinates to SAVE—

REYES (V.O.)

I know. I know there are. We assess for that — believe me, we assess for that. But you have to understand the math here—

Sol — who has spent three years refusing the math, who built her whole ruined life on the conviction that there is no math — HANGS UP on the sound of a reasonable man explaining it. She turns to the killer at her table, who has gone the color of the dead.

SOL

I aimed it at her. Trying to find her — I aimed it right at her. We have to move. Now. The rain isn't the clock anymore.

SOL (CONT'D)

They are.

CUT TO:

INT. THE NODE - HOLDING SHED - NIGHT

A long, open shed by black water. Docks. MEN WITH GUNS who don't walk like guides — they walk like people who own the hurry. The broken remains of Isa's group sit in rows on the ground.

MEN move down the rows, COUNTING — not the guide way, the writing-you-down way; the way you count things you own. One says a number to another — ninety-something. The other writes it in a book.

Isa watches, and understands, cold all the way through: she is not a person who has been counted. She is a number that is being kept. And a number is only worth keeping as long as it is worth something.

Against the far wall, YOSELI sits with the baby, gone all the way to the flat faraway place. Isa brings Dulce to her.

Yoseli looks at her own daughter as if from the bottom of a well, and touches her hair.

YOSELI

You keep her, mi amor. I can't – I
can't keep anyone up anymore. You
keep her up. You're the one who
keeps them up.

And Isa understands she has just been handed a child. Formally. The way her own mother handed her nothing, because her own mother is gone in the first river.

So Isa keeps them up. Not just Dulce. FOUR TODDLERS and Dulce – a small tribe of the youngest, drifting toward the one person still giving off the signal of someone in charge. Isa is their whole government.

She makes it work by making it small: the game of the beads, passed hand to hand. The quiet-mouse game – who can be the quietest – because crying makes the men turn around. The fair division of the little food. And the wrong-words song, low into their hair, until the whole small tribe sleeps in a heap against her.

And in the deep of the night, when even she can't hold it off any longer, she takes the red beads from Dulce's sleeping fist, and moves them one by one in the dark – not praying, just counting – and lets herself think the one thing, the hand above the brown water, open, reaching back – and then puts it away again, one bead at a time. And stays awake. Keeping them up.

INT. THE NODE - HOLDING SHED - DEEPER NIGHT

A GUARD walks the rows with a flashlight, bored, restless. The beam sweeps the sleeping shapes. And one of the TODDLERS – the smallest, sick with a cold – stirs, and hitches, and starts to build toward a cry. The kind of sound that makes men turn around.

The guard stops. Turns. The beam swings back toward the sound.

And Isa is already there. Awake, of course – she is always awake now. She scoops the little one against her chest, gets the red beads into the small fist, and puts her own mouth right against the tiny ear, and does the only thing

she knows: the wrong-words song, breathed so low it's barely air. The building cry catches – hitches – and subsides into the beads and the breath and the warmth.

The beam holds on them a long moment. The GUARD – a young man, not much more than a boy himself – looks at the ten-year-old holding a sick baby quiet in the dark. Something moves behind his face. And is put away, the way Isa puts things away. He lowers the light.

GUARD

(low, almost to himself)
Keep them quiet, and you all stay
counted. Understand? Counted is
good. You want to stay counted.

He moves on. Isa breathes. And when he's gone, the other small ones – awake now, frightened – press in around her. And she does the thing that keeps them all up. She gives them a story. Whispered. Wrong, probably, like her songs.

ISA

(barely audible, to the
little ones)
There's a river. And everybody
thinks the river only takes
things. But my mamá's people –
they say the river keeps a list.
Everything it ever took, it writes
down. And one day it reads the
list back. And gives some of them
back. The ones it wrote down
careful.

Dulce, half asleep, clicks a single red bead.

ISA (CONT'D)

So we just have to be the kind it
writes down careful. We stay
quiet, and we stay counted, and we
get written down careful. And then
the river reads us back.

The little ones settle, one by one – believing her, because she said it in the voice that keeps them up. And Isa sits in the dark, holding a story she made up to keep four toddlers from crying. Not knowing that fifty miles down the same water, it is almost exactly true. That there is a

woman who keeps the river's list. Who reads them back. Who is, at this very moment, writing names down careful.

INT. THE NODE - HOLDING SHED - THE SICK CHILD - NIGHT

The smallest one – the toddler with the cough – is worse tonight. Hot. Fretful. And the cough is turning into the thing Isa fears most: a wail, building, the kind that carries, the kind that makes men turn around. Across the shed, a GUARD shifts, annoyed, half-awake.

Isa gathers the sick child against her chest, and does everything she has – the beads, the breath, the wrong-words song, rocking, rocking. And for one long moment it isn't working. The child arches and gulps air to scream, and the guard's head comes up, and Isa understands, in a flash of pure ice, the arithmetic the shed has been teaching her all along: that one crying child can doom ninety. That there are places in this world where a mother has had to choose between one small life and all the rest. That the green has walked her right up to the edge of that choice.

And she refuses it. Absolutely. She will not stand where that choice is. She presses her lips to the burning little forehead and pours everything she has left into keeping this one child both quiet and alive, because she has decided – a ten-year-old, in a cartel shed, has decided – that she is not going to be the kind of person that place is trying to make her. The whole job is keeping them up. All of them. She will die before she makes it fewer.

And the cough breaks. The fever crests and turns. The child sags into sleep against her, breathing, quiet, alive. The guard lies back down. And Isa sits in the dark, shaking, having held a line no one will ever know she held – the last decent thing in a place designed to burn decency out of children – and keeps them up. All of them. Till the grey.

INT. THE NODE - HOLDING SHED - LATER - NIGHT

TWO MEN talk low by the dock. Isa is a mouse now. Mice hear everything. Fragments: "...the gringos..." "...birds in the sky now..." "...keep the count fat, the old man wants the count fat..." A laugh. "...a fat count's a good roof. Nobody drops a roof on the babies."

Isa lies still, and understands two things at once. First: they are the roof. She and Dulce and the whole tribe are being kept fat and counted and alive because as long as there are enough of them, something in the sky will not fall on this place. They are sandbags. Put between someone valuable and something falling.

And second – worse, and better – that means there IS a sky. There's an outside. An outside with birds in it that can fall, an outside where someone knows this place is here, an outside that is, in its enormous indifferent way, COMING.

She has stopped believing in rescue. What the man by the dock hands her, without meaning to, isn't rescue. It's colder and truer: the world has not forgotten this shed. And whatever it's coming to do, she has to be ready.

She plays a new game, silently, only in her own head. WHEN IT HAPPENS. Dulce on the left hip – she's the climber, she'll hold on. When it happens, the two biggest can run if I hold their hands, one each. When it happens – and here is the hardest arithmetic anyone has ever made her do – who I can carry, and who I have to leave.

She looks across the dark at Yoseli, at the bottom of the well with a baby she can no longer lift. And makes herself learn it: the whole job is four. I can't make it five. And how to live with the leaving. (A fair man far downriver is doing the same terrible sum at the same hour, and neither of them will ever know they are the same kind of person.)

Then, one at a time, so gently none of them wake, she MOVES her small sleeping tribe – to the end of the shed nearest the docks. Nearest the black river. The one road she trusts, because it took her mother, and she's been to the bottom of it and come back up, and she knows what it does. So that if the sky falls, they'll already be pointed the right way.

Toward the water. Toward the only thing in the whole green world that has ever, even once, given anyone back.

CUT TO:

INT. THE NODE - HOLDING SHED - DAWN

The grey comes up. And something in the air of the shed has changed. The GUARDS are tense this morning – more of them,

and they keep looking UP, at the sky, at the thinning cloud, the way men look at weather they've been told to fear. One of them argues, low and fast, into a phone.

Isa watches all of it. She has spent four nights learning to read this place the way her father, whom she thinks drives trucks, reads a line of migrants – all at once, no single sign trusted alone. And every sign says the same thing: today. Whatever the sky is coming to do, it's coming today.

She gathers her small tribe close, at the end of the shed nearest the docks – the position she chose, facing the water. She gets the beads into Dulce's fist. Checks the two biggest, the ones who can run if she holds their hands. Runs the arithmetic one last time. Who I carry. Who I hold. And the one she can't save, and won't let herself look at, across the shed.

A toddler whimpers. Isa breathes the wrong-words song against its ear. Quiet. Stay quiet. Stay counted. Just a little longer.

And outside, on the grey water, so far off it's only a suggestion – the sound of a MOTOR. A boat. Coming up out of the mist. Isa lifts her head. And does not yet dare to hope, because hope is a thing the shed took from her on the first night. But she does the one thing hope leaves behind, which is: she gets ready.

CUT TO:

EXT. STAGING WARREN - FLOATING CAMPS - DAY

The Engineer knew Camilo was gone before Camilo did. By the time Camilo comes back up the coast, the machine he built has been turned – node by node, checkpoint by checkpoint – to point at him. A BOATMAN who owes him everything won't meet his eyes. A vendor's stall that should open for el peaje stays shut.

He does one thing on the way through that isn't about Isa – or not only. The MUTE GIRL from the Tigre has followed him even into his flight, three meters back through all of it. He can't take her where he's going. He finds a BOATMAN he still trusts and puts her aboard for the long downriver run to Pijibá – to the old man the churchwoman wept about

across her steel table. He has no name to give. So he pins a scrap of paper to her shirt.

INSERT – the note, in his hand: "she has no name yet. she is owed one. please."

She takes his hand in both of hers – the old grip – and he has to open her fingers himself, gently, the way he once closed a stranger's around returned money. And turns away. The last mercy he has left is not to make her watch where he goes.

His phone. BRAULIO (V.O.). Easy. Amused. Close.

BRAULIO (V.O.)

Stop walking, hermano. You're making everybody nervous. The old man wants me to give you the offer, so here's the offer – and it's better than you deserve. The churchwoman. In Yaviza. The one reading the bodies. The one you went and CRIED to.

BRAULIO (V.O.) (CONT'D)

You bring her to us – her and whatever's on her wall – and it all goes away. The case. The wall. The witness. And you get your girl back. Whole. One churchwoman for one daughter. The old man says you of all people know how to make a person disappear on this river. He says consider it your last cleaning. Where are you?

Camilo doesn't answer. He drops the phone off the plank walkway into the black water. Watches it wink out. A phone is a coordinate. And the not-answering is the answer.

EXT. STAGING WARREN - FLOATING WALKWAYS - DAY

And now the machine hunts him. A WHISTLE, sharp, relayed – one checkpoint calling the next, the alarm running ahead of him through the warren he built. Camilo MOVES – through the lashed-canoe maze, the plank walkways swaying over black water, the shanties on stilts.

TWO MEN step into a walkway ahead – men who a week ago would have parted for el peaje. Now they reach for him. Camilo doesn't slow. He knows this warren better than anyone alive – he drew the map – and he goes DOWN, off the walkway, into a gap between two rafts, under a low bridge of lashed logs, surfacing on the far side while they're still shouting behind him.

He uses his own system against itself: ducks into a vendor's stall he set the tax on, out its back; crosses a raft of stacked fuel drums; drops flat as a MAN with a rifle scans the wrong direction. Everything he built to move people so efficiently is, it turns out, exactly as efficient at moving one man through it, unseen – the last gift the tollbooth gives its maker.

He breaks out of the warren's north end. And there, ahead, the one way onward: the long plank footbridge, high over the fast channel. And on it, waiting – BRAULIO.

EXT. STAGING WARREN - PLANK BRIDGE - DAY

One way north out of the warren toward the node – a long plank footbridge, lashed high over the fast channel where the camps drain into the river. And at the center of it, waiting, unhurried, machete low in one hand: BRAULIO. Grinning. The dark mirror. The man Camilo is one bad order from having become – and on the Tigre very nearly became.

BRAULIO

There he is. You know you're not walking past me. So.

They FIGHT on the swaying bridge over the roaring channel. And it is not like the clearing – not clean, not slowed by the gift. It's close and graceless and desperate, two men who know each other's every move because they are, in every way that matters, the same man.

Fists, elbows, the machete-wrist caught and twisted. The planks buck under them. Braulio is stronger, and Braulio likes it, and Braulio has never once in his life hesitated – and that is the difference. That is the whole difference. Camilo has spent a lifetime hesitating. Braulio hasn't.

They go to the planks in a tangle. Camilo gets both hands on the machete-wrist. And Braulio, already grinning toward the killing move – certain, committed, unhesitating –

drives his whole weight forward into the place where the bridge GIVES.

A rotten lashing, older than the war. A plank drops out from under them. And Braulio – lunging, committed, weight all forward – goes with it. Off the broken edge. Into the fast black drain-channel that feeds the river that feeds the sandbar. The current takes him the way it takes everything – instantly, without heat, without arithmetic – folds him under, and is gone.

Camilo HANGS from the broken planks by both hands, over the roaring water. And he does not go in after him. He – who goes into rivers after children without deciding to – hangs on, and lets this one go. Maybe it's the last of the built man dying. Maybe it's the first honest thing he's done in years. He'll never know which, and it doesn't matter, because the water doesn't care and neither, anymore, does he.

He drags himself up onto the broken bridge, and goes north. Toward the node. Toward Isa. The last wall – running now not to hold a line, but to break one.

CUT TO:

EXT. PIJIBÁ - RIVERBANK - DAY

A boat noses the bank. The BOATMAN lifts down a small passenger – the MUTE GIRL. She stands in the mud, silent, watchful, a scrap of paper pinned to her shirt, three thousand meters and one dead man's promise from the funnel.

EFRAÍN comes down to the water. He crouches to her level, the way he crouched to Sol's mother's daughter once. Reads the note pinned to her shirt. Reads it twice.

INSERT – the note, in Camilo's hand: "she has no name yet. she is owed one. please."

The old noco looks at this small silent person the river-trade has washed to his door – one more child the green made into a number – and at the four words a killer he'll never meet sent along with her. He does not ask the boatman where she came from. On this river you learn not to ask.

EFRAÍN

(gently, in the old
language, then Spanish)
All right. All right. You're owed
one. We'll wait for the doctora.
She's good at that. Better than
anyone. She'll find the one that's
already yours.

He puts out his hand. The girl looks at it. And, after a moment, takes it – the grip, the mothers' grip, though she's a child. And lets the old man lead her up the bank, into the village, into the keeping. A thing owed a name, delivered to the one house on the river where names are given back.

CUT TO:

INT. FIELD STATION / INT. OPS CENTER - INTERCUT - NIGHT

Sol works Reyes. From every angle. The way she works a grieving mother, the way she works a jammed database – relentlessly, because it's the only tool she has left. She gives him the children. The ninety names she's assembling even now. A ten-year-old named Isabela Arboleda. What she looks like. The tooth she lost in an arepa.

He goes quiet. And the quiet has something human in it. And for a moment she thinks it's working.

REYES (V.O.)
I'm going to be straight with you,
because you've earned straight. I
hear you. I've flagged the
civilian presence, I've flagged
the minor, I've pushed it up the
chain. I've done everything the
process lets me do. But this is
not my call anymore, Marisol. It
went up.

A pause.

REYES (V.O.) (CONT'D)
And the individual at that node –
I need you to understand what he
is to the people above me. He's
not your river's murderer to them.
He's a designated node of a

foreign terrorist organization,
and we have not had a fix this
clean on a target this senior
since the listing. The assessment
upstairs is that a window like
this does not come twice.

And then the sentence she will hear for the rest of her
life.

REYES (V.O.) (CONT'D)
The civilian presence is
acknowledged. The collateral is
assessed. And it's been assessed
acceptable. I'm sorry. I argued.
It's above me.

SOL
Acceptable.

REYES (V.O.)
I know how it sounds.

SOL
You don't. You genuinely don't. I
have thirty of the last people
somebody assessed as acceptable in
a cold store behind me. I have
their teeth. I have their mothers'
phone numbers. There is no such
thing as an acceptable number,
Agent Reyes. There are only names
nobody bothered to write down. And
you're about to make ninety more
with a machine – to punish a man
for making them with a river – and
you can't even hear that you're
doing the exact same thing he
does. You've just got a cleaner
tool.

Silence on the line. Then, quietly:

SOL (CONT'D)
When's the window.

REYES (V.O.)

First light. Weather. The platform
needs the weather. It'll clear by
dawn. That's all I can give you,
Marisol. I can't stop it. I can
only tell you when.

First light. The rain – which was the clock for a hundred
people on the Tigre – is now the airplane's clock instead.
And it has been kind to no one.

EXT. TREE LINE ABOVE THE NODE - NIGHT

Camilo lies in the mud at the tree line and looks down at
where his daughter is. The river hub. The long open shed –
ninety-odd migrants held under guard. Forty men, at least.
More than he can fight. More than anyone can fight. And
somewhere in that shed, alive, held, a hook on a line –
Isa.

He can see the whole shape of it. And he can see that there
is no version of one man walking into that and walking out
with a child.

Two enemies, four hundred kilometers apart, lie against the
same locked wall in the same dark hour – the woman who can
see the airplane coming and cannot stop it; the man who can
reach the shed and cannot survive it. Each of them has
exactly one thing the other lacks. She has warning. He has
proximity. And neither of them knows the other is here.

CUT TO:

INT. TRIBUNAL - HEARING ROOM - DAY

The witness table. The red light.

PANEL VOICE (O.S.)
Doctor – when you gave the
coordinates. Did you know a strike
was possible?

She has thought about this more than anything in her life.

SOL
The answer you want is no. I gave
a man coordinates to find a child.
That's true. Write it down – it's
my defense, and it's real. But

here's the other true thing, and it's the one I have to live with. By the time I understood what I'd done, there were still hours. And I did not spend one second wishing I hadn't given the coordinates. Not one. Because giving them was the only thing that let me find her. I would have aimed that airplane at ninety strangers again – knowing exactly where it would be pointed – if aiming it was the only way to have a chance at pulling one of them out alive.

A beat.

SOL (CONT'D)

We all did the math. Every one of us. The man in the hills. The man in the office. Me. That's what the Darién is. It's the place where everyone finds out they always had a number in mind.

CUT TO:

EXT. TREE LINE ABOVE THE NODE - PRE-DAWN

Camilo lies in the mud and counts the guards, the guns, the angles. And the arithmetic comes back the way it's come back all night: no way in. No way in. One man cannot walk into forty and walk out with a child.

It is the same sentence the Darién has spoken for five hundred years to everyone who stood at its edge and thought they could cross it. And lying in the mud, Camilo hears it – and understands, at last, all the way down, that the numbers were never the thing that got anyone through this place.

Need was. Only ever need.

So he stops counting. And crawls down toward the water – toward the lashed docks where the node's canoes nose the black river – because water is the one road he knows better than any guard on that hardstanding. And there, in the dark under the docks, the mercy comes back for him.

A BOATMAN checks the lines. He turns at the sound of Camilo in the water, his hand going toward an alarm – and STOPS. Stares. In the grey pre-light his face opens into something Camilo hasn't seen aimed at himself in a long time.

BOATMAN

El peaje. It's you. You won't –
you won't remember. The Miel
trail. The bad night. The
freelancers. They had my wife and
me roped, they took everything,
our whole – everything we'd saved
to cross. And you came, and you–

His voice catches.

BOATMAN (CONT'D)

You gave it back. You knelt in the
mud and put it back in my hands
and closed my hands around it.
Nobody gives it back. Nobody in
this whole place has ever given
anything back. My son was born in
Panama because you gave it back.

He's already moving. Already deciding. And Camilo understands he is watching the only thing he ever actually built – not the funnel, not the tollbooth; this, one man's loyalty to the memory of one kindness – pay out at the exact hour of his death.

BOATMAN (CONT'D)

What do you need.

CAMILO

A way to the shed. The blind side.
And when it starts – because
something worse than me is coming
with the light – you take your
boat and get as far downriver as
it goes, and you don't look back.
You've paid enough. You paid on
the Miel trail. Go home to your
son.

The boatman tells him the way – a drainage gap behind the shed, a slack channel the guards don't watch because no one's ever been fool enough to come at the node from the

water. And then he presses something into Camilo's hand, closing his fingers around it the exact way Camilo once closed his: a folded KNIFE, and a book of MATCHES. Nothing. Everything.

Camilo slides into the black water and starts for the blind side of the shed. The sky in the east goes from black to the color of a knife. And for the first time in twelve years, Camilo Arboleda moves AGAINST the machine he built – not to hold the line, not to keep the throughput calm, but to break the whole thing open with his bare hands and get one child out before the airplane comes. And he is not afraid. And his heart, for once, does not do its slow terrible clockwork. It simply beats – fast, and human, and alive – all the way to the water.

CUT TO:

EXT. TURQUESA RIVER - RUNNING UPRIVER - NIGHT

Sol and Efraín run the boats upriver in the dark, against everything he ever taught her about the men's water – because the men's water doesn't matter anymore. Nothing matters but arriving. Efraín takes the bow, and calls the black river by voice, the way he called it in the flood.

EFRAÍN

Left – the snag – LEFT–

– steering her through a darkness that should kill them a dozen times, and somehow, this one night, doesn't. And the whole way, on the satellite phone that dies and wakes and dies, she works her last channel.

EXT. TURQUESA RIVER - A CLAN CHECKPOINT - NIGHT
(CONTINUOUS)

A LIGHT ahead on the black water. A Clan checkpoint – a lantern on a moored boat, two silhouettes with rifles, strung across a narrow reach. There is no way around it; the banks pinch here.

Efraín's hand goes back, flat. Kill the motor. Sol cuts it. And they DRIFT – silent, dark, low in the water, the current carrying them down the far edge of the reach while the lantern swings and a voice calls out into the night, questioning. Sol presses the dying phone to her chest to hide its glow. A rifle comes up, tracking the dark. Efraín

does not raise his own. He only watches, and breathes, and lets the river do what the river does – carry them past, unlit, unnamed, a nothing on the black water.

The lantern falls behind. The voice stops calling. Efraín lets out a breath, restarts the motor low, and they run on.

EFRAÍN

(quiet)

The river hid us. It doesn't do that for everyone. Don't get used to it.

OFF Sol – running upriver toward a strike she can't stop, to reach a child she may already be too late for, on a river that has decided, for its own reasons, to let her pass. This once.

CUT TO:

She's stopped trying to argue Reyes with reason. Reason is his tool, not hers. So she stops giving him arguments – and starts giving him VOICES. One by one, as the boats run upriver, she patches her net of mothers onto the line to Reyes. Woman after woman, in the dark, saying a name.

QUICK CUTS – filtered voices over the intercut of the boats running upriver and Reyes in his plywood room:

MOTHER 1 (V.O.)

That's my son at that place you're going to bomb–

MOTHER 2 (V.O.)

Here's what my daughter sounded like–

MOTHER 3 (V.O.)

He sang, he always sang, the wrong words–

And the last voice Sol patches through is MARA.

INT. MARA'S KITCHEN - CHICAGO - NIGHT (INTERCUT)

Mara, in a kitchen with a cake three days stale, for a son who has never come up out of this river. Of all of them, the one with the least reason left to hope, and the most

reason to be bitter – who instead has spent three years being the warmest voice in Sol's phone.

SOL (V.O.)

This one's boy is already gone.
She's been looking for a year.
She's not even calling for
herself. Tell him why you're
calling, Mara.

MARA

(worn, unkillable)

Because there's a mother at that
place tonight who still has hers.
That's all. There's a mother there
who still has a chance to keep
hers – and I don't. And if you do
this, you take her chance, and you
make her into me. And there are
already too many of me, señor.
There are already so many of me.
Don't make one more.

A beat.

MARA (CONT'D)

You have a daughter? I heard you
tell the doctora you understand
the math. There's no math. I did
the math every night for a year,
and it never once brought my boy
home. Don't.

And the line goes quiet. The longest quiet of the night.
Reyes, in the plywood room, the muted recital still playing
on the small screen in the corner. And then his voice comes
back – changed, cracked straight down the middle.

REYES (V.O.)

Weapons hold. I've called a
weapons hold. I can't promise how
long – I've told them confirmed
minors, confirmed non-combatants,
I've put my name on a hold – but I
bought you time, Marisol. I don't
know how much. Minutes. I bought
you minutes. USE them–

INT. TASK FORCE OPERATIONS CENTER - WINDOWLESS - NIGHT

Reyes on a secure video link. On the screen, half-lit, a SUPERIOR – a voice from higher up the chain, calm, reasonable, further from the mud than anyone.

REYES

Sir, I'm holding. I've got confirmed minors on that node – visual, thermal, count of nine, maybe more – confirmed non-combatants, migrants held against their will. This isn't a compound. It's a hostage situation with a high-value target standing in the middle of it.

SUPERIOR (V.O.)

I've read your flag, Agent. It's noted. It's assessed. And the assessment is that this target's value, and the closing window, outweigh the collateral estimate. We do not get this individual in the open twice.

REYES

The collateral estimate is children–

SUPERIOR (V.O.)

The collateral estimate is assessed acceptable. That's the finding. Your hold is released. Execute on weather. That's not a request, Agent – I need to hear you acknowledge.

A long beat. Everything Reyes believes about being one of the good ones, resting on the word he's about to say. On the small screen in the corner, the muted recital plays – his daughter, dancing.

REYES

(hollow)

...Acknowledged.

The link cuts. Reyes sits alone in the plywood room with the thing he just did. He did everything the process let him do. He flagged it. He held. He argued. And the process looked at the children and called them acceptable, and he executed it anyway – because that's the deal, that's the whole architecture of being one of the good ones. You don't decide. You flag, and you trust the box, and you do what the box comes back saying. And the box came back.

CUT TO:

EXT. THE NODE - WATER - DAWN

The boats come around the last bend into the node's water as the sky goes grey.

Sol sees it all at once – the long open shed, the held people, the guards turning now toward the two boats coming out of the dawn. And in the shed, through the open side: a GIRL. Ten. Dark hair. Not cowering – WORKING. Moving among the youngest of the held children with the fierce competence of a child who has decided someone has to keep the little ones calm and elected herself. A smaller child on her hip. Her mouth moving in what Sol knows, without hearing, is a song. Keeping four toddlers from crying, because crying draws the guards. Keeping herself and them alive by the sheer stubborn labor of her own will.

Isabela Arboleda. Who did not wait to be rescued.

SOL
(breathed)
That's her. Tío, that's her –
she's alive–

And across the node, from the water on the far blind side, Sol sees a second thing: a MAN coming up out of the river behind the shed. Soaked. Alone. A knife in his hand. Moving toward his daughter with everything he has left.

Even at that distance, even in that light, she KNOWS him. The architect. The shepherd. The father. Arriving at the exact same moment, from the opposite bank – so that the two of them, the namer and the unmaker, converge on the node from the water at first light, without a word passing between them. And meet, at last, in a single shared GLANCE across the waking chaos – she at the landing, he at the shed, the child between them. One look, carrying the whole

of a plan neither had time to make: I'll bring her to the water. Catch her. Get her down the current. Go.

Then the satellite phone in Sol's hand lights up. Reyes – stripped of everything. Reason. Sorrow. Hope. A man reporting his own defeat.

REYES (V.O.)

They lifted it. Marisol, they
lifted the hold – it went over my
head – it's – the platform's
inbound. It's INBOUND. You have
maybe four minutes. Get off that
node. Get everyone you can off
that node – GO–

CUT TO:

INT. THE NODE - HOLDING SHED - CONTINUOUS

Camilo comes up out of the water through the drainage gap, into the held dark of the place where they keep the ninety – and finds her in four seconds, because he has spent every night of his life imagining exactly where in any crowd his daughter would be. And she is where he knew she'd be: in the worst of it, holding the smallest one, singing wrong.

CAMILO

Isa.

She turns. And for one second her whole face is the video call – the enormous serious eye, the gap in her teeth. Papá. Pure and instant and undefended.

And then, in the next second, she sees the rest of it. The knife in his hand. The soaked ruin of him. The guards beyond the shed wall. The guns. The whole shape of the place he has walked into as if he owned it. And Camilo watches the truth arrive in his daughter's face the way the water came up the Tigre – all at once, everywhere, unstoppable. She is ten. She is not stupid. She has kept a calendar for two years. She looks at her father, standing easy and known and terrible in a cartel's holding shed with a knife in his hand – and she understands that Papá does not drive trucks.

ISA

(flat – his own
register, coming back at
him out of her small
mouth)

You. You're one of them. All this
time. You're one of the men who–

CAMILO

Yes. I'm one of them. I'm the one
they call el peaje. I've done
things, hija – things I can't –
there's no time to tell you, and
you shouldn't hear them anyway,
not from me. Everything you're
understanding right now is true.
I'm not what I told you. I never
was.

He's already moving her, already pressing her and the
toddler toward the drainage gap and the water.

CAMILO (CONT'D)

And I came anyway. That's the only
other true thing, and it's the
last one I get to give you, so
take it. I'm not what I said. And
I came anyway. And I'd do it again
a thousand times. I love you to
the moon.

Something crosses her face – not forgiveness; there's no
time for forgiveness, and maybe there never will be – but
the thing that survives underneath it. Her ten-year-old
hand tightens on his sleeve, even as her eyes tell him
she'll never see him the same.

ISA

And back. And back, and back.

He almost asks about Lucía. The question is already in his
mouth. And then he sees the careful way his daughter holds
a thing too big to carry across her own face – and he
knows. Lucía is not going to call from the other side. No
one ever calls from the other side. The river did to his
daughter the exact thing it did to him, and made her, at
ten, the last one left holding a hand that isn't there.
He'll grieve it later – if there's a later. There is no
later in this shed.

He turns her face toward the gap, toward the grey water, toward the two boats at the landing and the shape at the tiller he converged with across the whole night.

CAMILO

There's a woman. In the water. In a boat. You go to her – you and the little one – you go now, and you don't stop, and you don't look back at me. You get in the current, and you let it take you to her. She catches the ones the river brings. She'll catch you. Her whole life is catching you.

He puts his hand, once, lightly, on the crown of her head. The gesture. The last time.

CAMILO (CONT'D)

Run to the water, Isabela. Don't look back. Go.

And overhead – above the grey dawn and the waking node and the ninety-odd held and the two boats and the man and his daughter, so high it's only a change in the quality of the sky – something ARRIVES that wasn't there a moment before. A stillness. A held breath. The particular silence of a machine that has finished deciding.

Camilo looks up at it. At the airplane he has heard coming since the Engineer first said the word. Then down at his daughter. And SHOVES her – hard, the last shove – toward the water and the woman who names the ones the river gives back. And turns, to buy her the four minutes, with the only currency he has left.

Himself.

CUT TO:

INT. THE NODE - HOLDING SHED - CONTINUOUS

Four minutes. He knows exactly how to spend them.

He does not run after Isa. Running after Isa saves Isa and leaves ninety. The shepherd does not save one. He turns from the drainage gap – where his daughter is already slipping into the grey water – and goes the other way. Into

the shed. Into the held dark where the ninety crouch under the guns. And he does the thing the man at the tollbooth spent two years being too useful to do.

He breaks the line.

He CUTS the first rope with the boatman's knife, and shouts the word every person in that shed crossed a continent praying to hear.

CAMILO
¡CORRAN! The water – GO –

For one terrible second, nothing. They've been held so long that freedom doesn't compute. And then the second breaks – and the shed comes APART. Ninety people surging up and out toward the river in a flood of their own. And the guards turn to fire on a stampede – and find the stampede is everywhere. With a folded knife and one word, Camilo has converted the Engineer's tidy fixed node into ninety people running in ninety directions toward the one road he trusts: the water.

EXT. THE NODE - HARDSTANDING - CONTINUOUS

The four minutes, burning. Camilo moves through the chaos not like a man fighting but like a man DIRECTING – herding, shoving, pointing, his voice the clearing voice cutting through the panic: the water, the water, go to the water. He grabs a frozen MOTHER and turns her bodily toward the river. Lifts a fallen child to its feet and aims it downhill.

A GUARD swings a rifle up on a knot of fleeing children – and it's the YOUNG GUARD from the shed, the boy who told Isa to stay counted. For one held instant his finger is on the trigger and the children are in his sights. And then something behind his face – the thing that moved that night, and was put away – comes back. And he lowers the rifle. And steps aside. And lets them pass. Choosing, in the last four minutes of the node, which side of himself to be.

YOSELI runs past with the baby, DULCE by the hand – alive, the flat faraway look burned off by pure animal purpose, a mother again because there's a river to reach. Camilo doesn't know her name and never will. He just clears the path in front of her and shoves the next one after.

Above it all, the stillness in the sky holds. The held breath. Camilo glances up – once – then back to the work. Every soul he turns toward the water is one the airplane won't find in a tidy cluster. He is unmaking his own choke point with his bare hands, converting a target back into ninety scattering, unkillable people. The last thing the tollbooth ever does is refuse to be one.

EXT. THE NODE - LANDING - CONTINUOUS

At the landing, SOL stands thigh-deep in the river with Efraín. And the current comes to her the way it always comes – bringing what it's decided to bring. But this time, it is not the dead. It is the LIVING. Thrashing, terrified, alive. And she catches them. She and Efraín and the recovery men hauling person after person out of the current onto the boats and the bank. The same motion, exactly, as a thousand recoveries – the reach, the grip, the pull – except that these gasp, and cling, and are WARM.

INT. THE NODE - THE ENGINEER'S TABLE - CONTINUOUS

THE ENGINEER does not run. Camilo sees him, in the last of the four minutes, through the coming-apart – an ordinary man at a plank table, unhurried, closing his ledger the way a bank manager closes a branch at the end of a working day. Their eyes meet across the chaos. The Engineer does not look afraid, and does not look surprised. He looks, if anything, faintly rueful – a man whose forecast has come in exactly as predicted. And he lifts one hand. Not threat. Not mercy. Acknowledgment. One professional to another.

You cannot kill this by killing a man. The machine already has, somewhere down the coast, a new courteous man with new reading glasses learning the ledger. The airplane above is about to learn that too. And won't. Because airplanes do not learn.

EXT. THE NODE - LANDING - CONTINUOUS

ISA comes down the current into Sol's hands.

Sol knows her before she reaches her – the dark hair, the toddler still fierce-gripped against her, the stubborn working competence even now, even in the river, keeping the little one's face up. Sol reaches into the fast water the ten-thousandth time, closes her grip, and PULLS –

– and this time, this once, the thing she pulls from the river gasps, and clings, and is WARM. A living child. Isabela Arboleda. Come down the current into the arms of the woman whose whole ruined life has been one long rehearsal for exactly this catch.

Sol crushes her to her chest in the thigh-deep water and sobs once – hard, the only time – and sets her and the toddler into Efraín's arms in the boat, and turns back to the current for the next one. Because there is always a next one. Because there are eighty-nine more coming down.

And she looks up, once, across the water – toward the node, toward the shed, toward the man who sent his daughter down the river to her. And she SEES him. At the center of the scatter he made. Not running. Standing. Looking back at the water, to see – to make sure – that the current has her.

And the sky finishes deciding.

EXT. THE NODE - THERMAL / DRONE POV - CONTINUOUS

CUT TO the cold eye. The node in monochrome thermal, from six miles up – silent, weatherless, godlike. Ninety white-hot heat signatures, and the way they're MOVING now: not a tidy cluster anymore, but a bloom, spreading, breaking apart, streaming toward the dark line of the river. One man has turned a target back into a scatter.

In this view there is no Isa. No Dulce. No Hernán's ghost, no Doña Rosa, no mothers, no names. There are only warm smudges and cold ones, and a doctrine, and a box that came back saying acceptable. The screen cannot see a ten-year-old counting red beads. Screens have never once been able to. That is the whole horror of them, and the whole comfort – because you cannot feel a smudge become an orphan.

A reticle settles. Numbers cascade. Somewhere, a hand does not so much decide as confirm. And the cold eye, which cannot see names, releases the thing that erases them.

EXT. THE NODE - THE STRIKE - CONTINUOUS

It comes as LIGHT before it comes as sound. The whole grey dawn going WHITE. A flat hand of pressure across the river. And then the noise, arriving late and wrong – too big to be a noise, more like the removal of every other noise there ever was.

The node comes apart. The shed. The docks. The plank table, and the ordinary man closing his book. Gone. In the white. In the pressure. In the arithmetic made real.

And CAMILO – who stood at the center of it, looking back at the river to make sure his daughter was in the woman's arms, who saw, in the last half-second, that she was – goes into the white with that knowledge and no other. The man who spent his life making people into numbers, subtracted from the world in a single clean sum. And the river takes the place where he stood the way it takes everything – without heat, without arithmetic – and closes over it, and runs on.

Downstream, in Sol's arms, a living child breaks the surface of the water and BREATHES.

CUT TO:

EXT. TURQUESA RIVER - BELOW THE NODE - DAY

The season's rain comes at last – the rain that was the airplane's clock and the flood's trigger and the whole long dread of the story. It falls now on the ruined node, and the running river, and the boats full of the living and the dead, and does what rain does in the Darién: washes, patiently, everything, toward the sea.

They pull sixty-one people living from the water below the node. Sol will keep that number too – not as a comfort; a number was never a comfort, that's the whole of what she learned – but as a debt. Sixty-one, owed to a man who opened a shed with a folded knife.

She sits in the boat with a living girl wrapped in a foil blanket from a travel kit – the one useless mercy, buoyant, warming; the whole cheap catalog of the crossing reduced at last to the one thing that ever mattered. A blanket around a child who lived. Isa does not cry. Has not cried once – a child who learned that crying draws the guards, and has not yet been told she can stop. Sol holds her, and says, over and over, the only liturgy she has.

SOL

You're named. You're found.
Somebody knows you. You're not a
number. Your name is Isabela – and

somebody knows you – and you're
found.

Isa is quiet against her. And then, in a voice with almost nothing in it, watching the ruined node fall behind them in the rain:

ISA
The man. In the shed. The one who
told me to run to you.

Sol goes still. She knows exactly who the man was. She has his name, and his brother's name, and the wall he half-filled.

ISA (CONT'D)
He didn't come. After me. He was
supposed to be right behind me. He
said run and don't look back, and
I didn't look back, and – he
didn't come.

A long moment. Sol could soften it. Could fold it up small, the way Isa's mother folded things. But Sol does not lie to the found. It's the one thing she has never done.

SOL
No. He didn't come. He stayed, so
that everyone could run. So that
you could. He was the reason the
water was full of the living
instead of the dead this morning.
Do you understand what I'm telling
you?

Isa nods, slowly. She's ten. She's been to the bottom of a river. She understands more than any child should.

ISA
Was he a good man?

And Sol – who has spent this whole story unable to answer that question about him, who would have hanged him, who catalogued his dead – looks down at the living child in her arms that he sent down the current, and gives the only true answer there is.

SOL

He was a man who did a terrible amount of harm. And then, at the end, he gave his whole life to undo the smallest part of it. Both of those are true. I'm not going to tell you only the kind half, because you'll spend your life meeting people like him, and you should know they're real. He was both. And the last thing he was, was yours.

Isa presses her face into the foil blanket. And the rain comes down. And the boat carries a living child down a river, toward a woman's house, toward a name written careful at the top of a book of the dead.

CUT TO:

EXT. TURQUESA RIVER - RECOVERY - DAY

The days after. The rain has not stopped. Sol and her recovery teams work the water below the ruined node – patient, methodical, grim. The strike killed thirty-one. The flood the strike caused killed others. And the river, in the old way, is giving them all back, in gathers, against the sandbars. Sol kneels for each one. Reaches. Names what she can. It is the worst stretch of work of her life, and she does not stop.

On the bank, in a makeshift shelter, some of the SIXTY-ONE who lived – wrapped in foil blankets, hollow-eyed, alive. Among them, YOSELI, holding her baby, and beside her DULCE, and the small tribe. Reunited by the current. Isa sits with them a while, and then does not have to anymore, because their own mothers can keep them up now. She has been relieved of command.

CUT TO:

EXT. TURQUESA RIVER - SANDBAR - DAWN

First light. The mist. Sol, alone at the water's edge, reads the river the way she always reads it – and it brings her something. Low in the water. Moving with the patient inevitability of everything it decides to move.

A MAN. She wades out. Takes the feet, the way she taught them. Brings him in. And turns him, gently, in the shallows – and it's CAMILO. The river has carried him down to her, the way it carries everything, to the one door that would refuse to look away.

She goes very still. And then she does, for him, the thing he could never do for anyone – the thing he spent his whole life making sure no one could do. She kneels. In the mud. And keeps him whole. Her hands moving over him with a gentleness the living rarely get. The man who unmade names – knelt for, at the end, and named, by the one who reads them.

SOL

(quiet, to him, the only
liturgy she has)

I've got you. You're not a number.
I know exactly who you are. You're
found.

She does not weep. She's past the kind of weeping that empties you. She simply kneels, in the rain, over the architect of half the dead she carries – who opened a shed with a folded knife and sent his daughter down the river to her – and gives him the one thing he denied everyone, and could never claim for himself.

CUT TO:

INT. TASK FORCE OPERATIONS CENTER - WINDOWLESS - NIGHT

The screens are dark now, or showing somewhere else. A different jungle. A different hole in a different network. The machine does not stop.

REYES sits alone with a printed REPORT. We catch a phrase on the cover sheet: "...regrettable outcome. Collateral assessed within acceptable parameters. High-value node neutralized." A success, by every measure the report knows how to take.

On the small screen in the corner, muted, the recital plays again – his daughter, a time zone away, dancing. He watches it. And does not look like a man who won anything. Then an ANALYST leans in, points at a fresh screen – a new fix, a new ghost, a new center of a new hole. Reyes looks at it a long moment. And puts the report down. And goes back to

work. Because airplanes do not learn. And neither, it turns out, does the thing that flies them.

CUT TO:

EXT. PIJIBÁ - EFRAÍN'S PORCH - DUSK

Sol and EFRAÍN, in the last light, not talking. ISA sits a little apart, wrapped in a blanket, staring at the river – the flat, faraway look of a child who has been to the bottom of it. Sol watches her, worried.

And then Isa does a small thing. She flinches – at nothing, at everything – and her face crumples, and she CRIES. Finally. For the first time since the first river. Great, silent, shaking sobs. Efraín moves to go to her, but Sol puts a hand on his arm. Lets the child cry. Because crying, at last, means the guards are gone. Means she believes there's no one left she has to keep quiet for.

Sol goes and sits beside her – not holding her, just there, close – the way you sit beside the dead, except this one is alive, and warm, and weeping, and hers now, in whatever way the word can mean on a river like this.

CUT TO:

INT. TRIBUNAL - HEARING ROOM - DAY

The witness table. The red light.

PANEL VOICE (O.S.)

How many survived, Doctor? At the node.

SOL

Sixty-one. I keep that number too. Not as a comfort – I told you, a number was never a comfort, that's the whole of what I learned. I keep it as a debt. Sixty-one people are alive who would be on my table, because one man opened a shed with a pocket knife and turned a killing into a scatter.

A beat.

SOL (CONT'D)

You'll want to put that in the ledger opposite the thirty-one the airplane killed. As if it balances. It doesn't balance. Nothing on that river ever balanced. You don't get to subtract the saved from the dead and call the difference a good outcome. They're not the same column. They were never the same column. Every one of the ninety-two was a whole world. I can give you all their names, if you have the afternoon. I've kept every one.

CUT TO:

INT. FIELD STATION - YAVIZA - NIGHT

Rain on the roof. The girl asleep at last against Efraín. Sol opens her LEDGER – an ordinary, ruled, water-stained book, thick with three years of the dead. Page after page of names recovered, and names still blank.

She turns past all of them. To the first clean page. And does a thing she has never done in three years. In the space reserved for the dead, she writes a LIVING name.

INSERT – the ledger, in her hand: "Isabela Arboleda. Living. Found. Lost a tooth in an arepa. Kept the little ones from crying. Came down the river alive into these hands."

And then, below it – because she is the namer, because it is the only power she has left, and the only thing she can give – she writes two more.

INSERT – "Camilo Arboleda. El peaje. Who made the dead I carry, and who I would have hanged, and who opened a shed with a knife and turned a killing into a scatter, and sent his daughter down the river to me, and did not run. Named here by the one who reads them, because he spent his life making people nameless, and someone owed him this. Found."

And beneath his name, last – the one he could never write.

INSERT – "Mateo Arboleda. Brother of the above. Nineteen when the river took him. Eleven years gone. Never found, never named – until now. Found. Not in the water. In the keeping."

She closes the book. Outside, the river runs on toward the sea in the dark, carrying its record. And inside, a living child sleeps, and a woman sits with her hand flat on the cover of a book that now holds – for the first time, at the top of its last page, above all the dead – the living.

CUT TO:

INT. TRIBUNAL - HEARING ROOM - DAY

The witness table. The red light. Sol, finishing. There is a child asleep in a house on a river who does not like to wake and find her gone.

PANEL VOICE (O.S.)

Doctor Ferrán. Who is to blame.

SOL

You have a man in the hills who fed people to a river to hide a road. He's dead. And there's a new man in the hills already – courteous, with a ledger – and the road is still there, and the powder still walks it. You have an airplane that killed thirty-one people to punish the man who killed thirty, and called the thirty-one acceptable – and the people who flew it believe, sincerely, that they are the good ones. You have a country to the north that wanted the powder and didn't want the people, and got a great deal of both, and blamed the jungle. You have me. Who gave the coordinates.

A beat.

SOL (CONT'D)

You're looking for the one of us to write in the box marked

responsible. So the box can be closed. There is no one in the box.

SOL (CONT'D)

For five hundred years we told ourselves a jungle turned people back. It was never the jungle. It was always us – our appetites, our borders, our arithmetic, the number each of us keeps secretly in mind and swears we don't. The jungle was just the place we couldn't lie about it anymore. Because the jungle keeps the record. And returns it. Patiently. To whoever is standing in the water when it comes down.

She looks at them for the first time. All of them.

SOL (CONT'D)

The opposite of a number is not another number. It is a name. And every single one of them had one. That is my testimony. Now – if the panel is finished – I have a river to get back to.

She reaches forward. And STOPS THE RECORDER herself. The red light dies.

SMASH CUT TO:

EXT. PIJIBÁ - EFRAÍN'S PORCH - LATE AFTERNOON

A year on. The rains have come again to Pijibá, and the river rises the way it always rises, and it is, by every measure the ministry knows how to take, still poisoned – the mercury still in it, the foam mats still bleaching in the high branches, a season's rain not nearly enough to wash them down. The reports say it will take years. The reports are never wrong, and never once the whole of it.

Because this is also true. On the porch of the third house from the water, in the last gold of an afternoon before the rain, THREE CHILDREN sit.

ISABELA – eleven now – who lives with the churchwoman when the churchwoman isn't on the river, and who has stopped keeping a calendar, and who cries now when she needs to. Which Sol counts, privately, as the year's single greatest victory. DULCE, ordinary and squalling and loved. And the MUTE GIRL from the Tigre – the one a dead man could not name, and carried downriver, and laid at this door with a scrap of paper that said she is owed one, please.

She still doesn't speak much. But this evening, when the frogs start, she looks up at Sol across the porch, and says a WORD – quietly, the way you'd set down something you'd carried a long way. And it is a name. Her own. The one the river took her voice around, but never quite took from her.

Sol goes very still. Then she rises, and gets the book – the ordinary, water-stained book – and opens it to the last page, where a living name sits at the top, above all the dead. And she writes the girl's name there, in the girl's own hand guided under hers. The third living name in a book of the dead. And the two girls look at it in the lamplight.

And outside, the season's rain begins. It falls on the porch, and the river, and the second beach of plastic, and the foam mats in the high branches. It falls on the ruined node downstream, and the dry roads where the powder walks, and the red wound of the mine at the headwaters – all one water, top to bottom, the way a dead man learned it too late, and a living woman learned it in time. It does not wash any of it clean – not the poison, and not the grief, and not the appetite that made them – because rain does not work that way, and neither does the world.

But it falls. And under it, on a porch on a river that forgets nothing, a woman who spent her life kneeling for the dead sits with three living children and a book that finally, at the top of its last page, above every name the water ever took, holds the names of the ones it gave back.

The river runs on toward the sea in the rain, carrying its record, keeping its count. And for the first time in five hundred years, someone on its bank is keeping one too – not of the lost.

Of the found.

FADE TO WHITE.

BLACK.

TITLE CARD: In the years of the crisis, more than half a million people crossed the Darién Gap. The rivers of the region remain contaminated. The trade that moved them – and the appetite that fed it – continue.

FADE OUT.

THE END.