

Chapter One — Notification

T-MINUS 6:00:00

Dr. Ava Reyes was elbow-deep in a sink full of dishwater when her phone lit up for the ninth time in ninety seconds.

She'd learned, over four years at Verity Labs, to tell the difference between a normal alert storm and a real one by sound alone. Normal alerts arrived in polite little bursts, spaced out, apologetic, the kind of buzzing you could finish rinsing a plate before checking. This was something else. Her phone was vibrating against the counter hard enough to walk itself toward the edge, over and over, without pause, like something trying to get out of a box.

She dried her hands on her jeans and picked it up, already feeling the specific cold drop in her stomach that six years of this work had trained into her like a reflex.

The first message was from Devon Park, twenty-four years old and the fastest set of eyes on the night shift, the kid who'd once caught a fabricated hurricane photo eleven minutes after it posted because something about the shadow angles bothered him before he could say why. No punctuation, which for Devon meant genuine panic.

turn on any channel right now

The second was the automated system alert from the lab's monitoring pipeline, the one that watched for exactly this kind of thing, day and night, so that no human had to watch alone: HIGH-PRIORITY MEDIA EVENT — POTENTIAL SYNTHETIC CONTENT — SUBJECT: PRESIDENT MARSH — VIRALITY INDEX: CRITICAL.

The third was her director, Louis Okafor, and it contained exactly four words.

Car. Now. Don't argue.

Ava turned on the television without sitting down, the remote skidding off the arm of the couch where she'd left it that morning, back when tonight had just been an ordinary election night she'd planned to half-watch while doing laundry. The anchor's face had the particular stillness of someone reading words she didn't yet understand, off a teleprompter that was updating faster than she could process it. Behind her, a video played on loop, already stamped with a red banner across the bottom third of the screen: UNVERIFIED.

President Elena Marsh, at the Resolute Desk, in what looked exactly like the Oval Office at exactly the hour it currently was. Steady eyes. Folded hands. The small scar above her left eyebrow, catching the light the way it always did

in real footage, in a way Ava had genuinely never seen faked convincingly before.

“Effective immediately,” the recorded voice said, calm as a weather report, calmer than any President Ava had ever actually watched deliver news this large, “I have ordered United States forces to move against Drevanian positions along the Kesh Corridor.”

Ava's stomach dropped the way it did on the first steep foot of a rollercoaster, before her training caught up with her fear and told her, flatly: that is not real footage of a real event. Something about the phrasing was wrong. Something about the stillness of her hands was wrong. She couldn't have said what, not yet, not with words a court would accept. But sixteen years of watching faces for a living, first in film restoration and then in the harder, colder work of catching the ones built to deceive, had given her a kind of second sight, and the second sight was screaming at a pitch she hadn't heard it hit before.

Six hours and change until the polls closed on the East Coast. Less than that, somewhere, for whatever this video had already set moving that she couldn't see yet.

She grabbed her lab badge off the hook by the door, left the water running in the sink behind

her, and was in the car before the anchor finished her sentence.