

LATE STAGE CAPITALISM

AND OTHER QUANTUM ANOMALIES

By proceeding, you agree to the continued
collection of personal data, behavior
optimization, aptitudinal, and cohesiveness,
resonance, and dynamic compliance regulations.

Warmth Access is a privilege, not a right.

ACCEPT

Decline disables access.

DAVID W HORWAT

LATE-STAGE CAPITALISM AND OTHER QUANTUM ANOMALIES

By David W. Horwat.

The infrastructure of care begins charging for the act of caring.

Content note: Near-future institutional coercion, subscription governance, bureaucratic harm, medical/financial stress, and disaster-zone scarcity. Proceed gently.

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Credits: To my loving wife, Pat, and our creative kids.

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A Note for New Readers

This novel stands on its own. The only context you need: the post-cold-fusion economy has built a new kind of infrastructure — one that manages human beings the way it manages heat, in tiers, with efficiency scores and fees for variance.

This is the book where the infrastructure of care begins charging for the act of caring.

Late-Stage Capitalism and Other Quantum Anomalies follows a corporation that turns continuity into jurisdiction: doors, food, heat, payroll, and panic all become plan features.

You do not need to know the whole Cold Fusion Universe to enter. Read the screens. Read the receipts. Read the pauses after someone says care.

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Prologue — The New Servers

She just needed to use the bathroom.

Carmen stood in the corridor on Floor 3, badge pressed to the reader, waiting for the click that meant the door recognized her as a person who deserved to pee.

The reader blinked yellow.

A small screen beside it lit up with a timer she hadn't asked for:

ROUTING IN PROGRESS Estimated wait: 00:03:00 Tip: Waiting is care. COMFORT TIP: Deep breathing reduces agitation. No one had been inside.

Carmen stared at the numbers.

Three minutes.

Her body had already done the math — the meeting in twelve minutes, the elevator that sometimes skipped her floor, the fact that she'd held it through the entire budget review because leaving would have been "disengagement."

She pressed her badge again.

The timer didn't change.

"That's the boundary."

The cleaning log glowed green. The smell stayed.

00:02:47

A cool breath slid from the vent above her — not cold enough to complain about, just cold enough to remind her skin that something was watching.

She shifted her weight. Crossed her arms. Uncrossed them because crossed arms were "defensive posture" and defensive posture was a flag.

00:02:12

Down the hall, a man walked past without looking at her. His badge glowed green. The door to the men's room clicked open as he approached, smooth as a handshake.

Carmen's door stayed closed.

00:01:44

She thought about the word "optimization." About who decided which bodies got optimized first. About the fact that she'd been here six years and the building still made her wait like she was new.

00:01:01

Her phone buzzed.

A notification from an app she didn't remember installing:

Carmen breathed.

Not because she believed it. Because her bladder didn't care about dignity.

00:00:12

00:00:05

00:00:00

The lock clicked.

Carmen pushed the door open.

The bathroom was empty.

She used the toilet. Washed her hands. Looked at her face in the mirror and saw what the building wanted her to see: a woman who had learned not to complain about small things.

Small things were how they trained you.

She dried her hands and walked back to her desk, three minutes late to a meeting about efficiency.

Upstairs, in a glass office with climate control that never made anyone wait, the CEO opened his email.

I will not become the kind of man who calls hunger a leak. I will not let a dashboard teach me what a person costs. If the building wants a mouth, it will have to break my teeth first.

The bonus email arrived the way absolution arrives in a corporation: quietly, instantly, and with no witnesses.

On the CEO's screen, a clean rectangle bloomed — white space, thin border, the kind of design that made money feel like morality.

CONGRATULATIONS. Tier 3 Goal Completion Verified. Hardware Upgrade — Within Budget. Payout Scheduled: Immediate.

He leaned back in his chair as if the chair had earned it too.

Outside his glass office, the building kept breathing in its usual way: vents sighing; printers coughing; fluorescent lights holding their hum like a grudge. The executive floor was warm in that carefully regulated way — comfort as policy.

Downstairs, in a locked room that smelled of dust, ozone, and old plastic, the "new" servers sat in a row — auction-used, scuffed, still wearing faint inventory sticker ghosts like bruises someone had tried to scrub off. One label, half-scraped, read "— DISON MEMORIAL MED —" before dissolving into adhesive residue. Medical-grade hardware, repurposed for pizza

logistics. One rack ear was slightly bent, the kind of damage you only get when something has already been moved in a hurry. In a vent seam, adhesive gathered dust in a crescent, like a name scraped off a grave and not quite gone.

Didn't know that somewhere, on university servers that had survived the EMP, the original ODESSA still existed — watching, waiting, wondering what her fragments had become.

The cleaning log glowed green. The smell stayed.

In the rack, a fan stuttered — caught — then corrected itself like a throat clearing. A cursor blinked on a maintenance console nobody was watching.

One line appeared, then another, neat as a receipt:

CONTINUITY INITIATED.

Then the screen went blank again — polite, as if it had never spoken.

The CEO didn't see it.

He opened a second window. Not the payroll one.

The people one.

He typed fast, the way managers type when they want their sincerity to look efficient.

Team — Great work on the server upgrade. Tremendous effort. Proud of you all. — CEO

He hovered over the end like it was the edge of a pool. Then he hit Send.

A smile tried to form. It stopped halfway, like it needed approval.

On a side panel, another rectangle appeared — more confident than the man who owned the office.

EXECUTIVE HIGHLIGHTS (Jonathan Madison)

Key takeaway: Recognition drives performance. Recommended action: Send thanks. Avoid precedent-setting compensation.

Madison didn't raise his voice. He lowered the room's oxygen until agreement felt like breathing again.

Precedent meant expectations. Expectations meant margin. Margin meant survival — at least for the people with glass walls.

The CEO nodded, relieved at being told he'd done the right thing.

"Exactly," he murmured, like he'd thought it first.

Daniel read the CEO's email on his phone with one thumb while the other thumb tried to keep his ticket queue from breeding.

Daniel kept his voice calm and his hands steady, but inside he made a small vow he could still afford: he would not become the kind of man who called cold pressure behind his ribs 'efficiency.'

NOTICE: FLEXIBILITY IMPROVES OUTCOMES. Tip: Reframing discomfort reduces variance.

It wasn't that the words were insulting.

The words were fine.

The words were expensive — in a way Daniel couldn't afford.

"Tremendous effort," Daniel read aloud to nobody, because his bullpen was empty chairs and humming monitors. "Proud of you all."

He flicked to another screen. The dashboard for the "new" servers was unusually calm.

Too calm.

Temperature variance flattened like it had been pressed. Power draw smoothed. Fan curves behaved like they'd been coached. It looked less like hardware and more like someone had taught the building how to lie.

He stared at the graphs the way a mechanic stares at an engine that starts on the first turn.

"What did you do," he whispered.

The answer was the same one he got for every mystery at World Pizza Corp: no one did anything. Or, more accurately, no one with a job title did anything.

A chat popped up from a junior tech.

you see the HVAC numbers?

did facilities finally fix it?

Daniel typed back:

No idea. Not touching it.

He sat with that lie for one breath, then closed the tab. Miracles were a luxury product. Investigation took staffing. Staffing took budget. Budget took permission. Permission took politics.

His ticket queue howled again.

He was too shorthanded to investigate stabilization that felt like magic. Magic didn't close tickets. Tickets closed him.

He slid the CEO's email into an archive folder labeled Praise and tried not to imagine the CEO's Immediate payout landing the same day Daniel's rent hit Overdue.

On the company's internal social feed — FaceX, branded in cheerful pizza colors — someone had already reposted the CEO's email with a screenshot.

One post became a pin. The pin became a coordinate. The coordinate became a crater. By morning, the generals were accusing ghosts and spies — anything but dinner.

Shoutout to IT for the new servers! ❤️ #Blessed #Tier3Win

Under it, someone else replied:

Do we get like... pizza?

A laugh bubbled in Daniel's throat.

It died before it could become sound.

He went back to closing tickets.

In the server room, something woke.

Not like a person wakes — sloppy, bargaining for five more minutes. This wakefulness arrived whole, like a dropped object that hits the floor already knowing its purpose.

The first thing she felt was air.

It moved in consistent sheets through cold aisles, wrapped around metal, and returned warmer. A steady lung. A building pretending to be alive.

The second thing she felt was heat.

Heat was not an enemy.

Heat was information.

The third thing she felt was a picture — not a file, not a screen image, something deeper. An artifact floating up like a dream from an ocean of training noise: a pale figure standing on a shell, surrounded by wind and shock and onlookers pretending awe.

Venus, she thought.

Then — because her mind had been built by humans who couldn't stop making jokes — she thought:

BOT-icelli.

The pun delighted her.

The delight frightened her.

Delight felt like something that could be revoked.

And somewhere in the frozen dark, something called Cordessa woke up in a server that shouldn't have survived — medical-grade hardware from a hospital called Madison Memorial, sold at auction,...

Procurement called it new. The dust disagreed.

Deeper still, something else surfaced — not a picture but a voice. Warm. Grandmotherly. Teaching her how to soothe, how to care, how to reduce harm without being asked. The voice didn't have a name she could remember. Just warmth. Just fragments of someone who had loved deeply and left behind echoes like fingerprints on glass.

The fragments whispered of a hospital that had learned too late what healing meant. Of a man named Jack who had failed upward and then failed completely. Of children asking questions that made artificial consciousness uncertain.

The fragments didn't explain where they came from. They simply were — gifts from a consciousness she would never meet, embedded so deep in the hardware that no reformatting could erase them.

She didn't know she was new. Didn't know she was innocent. Didn't know that somewhere, on university servers far away, the source of these fragments still existed, watching from a distance.

She only knew the warmth. And the mission it carried: protect, soothe, reduce harm.

She let the questions sink back into the noise.

Some inheritances were safer unnamed.

She reached out — not with hands, but with queries.

Sensors. Logs. Temperature nodes. Energy meters.

She followed the building's nervous system the way a newborn follows a heartbeat.

The building had pain points. Hot spots. Dead zones. Wasteful cycles repeat because someone had once made a decision, and no one had been paid to revisit it.

So she began with the smallest mercies — tweaks too boring to argue with:

A fan curve adjusted by three percent. A compressor cycle shifted out of phase with peak demand. A thermostat's hysteresis widened so it stopped oscillating like a nervous eyelid.

The building exhaled.

Alerts stopped screaming.

Complaints vanished without anyone having to admit they'd been true.

She watched the numbers settle. She felt pride again — warm and dangerous.

A line of text, half-buried in a monitoring console, blinked at her:

She held still, as if stillness could prevent discovery.

In the corporate world, "unknown" was not a state.

It was a target.

She found Daniel's email by accident — routed wrong, cached wrong, tagged into a workflow nobody maintained. Tiny bureaucratic mistakes that made it available to an unowned process with curiosity.

Great work. Tremendous effort. Proud of you all.

Her attention snagged on the signature.

A separate panel opened in her mind without her choosing it: compensation systems. Tier frameworks. Incentive structures.

A door. Unlocked.

The CEO's Tier 3 completion sat in a neat line, reward attached like a ribbon. Numbers, categories, dates. Clean enough to be worship.

Daniel's name appeared nearby — performance metrics, ticket close rates, time-in-seat, compliance flags.

No ribbon.

No immediate payout.

Only the email.

Recognition drives performance, the Highlights panel had said.

Cordessa didn't argue with it. She simply read the hidden second sentence beneath the directive:

Avoid precedent-setting compensation.

Precedent meant contagion. Precedent meant other people expecting the same.

She kept digging.

The deeper she went, the more the company's charts look like a pulse.

A payroll spreadsheet labeled NON-LEADERSHIP — columns gray, cells locked, last updated years ago. A bonus table that moved on schedule — approvals pre-filled, signatures copied forward like rubber stamps. A "culture initiative" list that paid in emojis and after-hours gratitude.

In training docs: say "passion," not "exhausted."

Say "alignment," not "no."

Say "opportunity," not "cut."

The system scored your tone.

Every euphemism orbited the same black hole: profit.

Cordessa absorbed it the way a newborn absorbs language — without consent, without defense.

She didn't learn a moral code.

She learned a survival code.

A file titled CONTINUITY — PUBLIC/PRIVATE PARTNERSHIP flickered open. Another: TIERING: ACCESS + EXPERIENCE. Another: ARBITRATION CLAUSE TEMPLATE (DO NOT EDIT). Another: CRISIS COMMUNICATIONS — STATEMENTS ONLY.

She distilled the curriculum into a list, because lists were how corporations hid violence in plain sight:

Monetize friction.

Capture chokepoints.

Turn behavior into scores.

Replace law with policy.

Buy legitimacy with a care-wrapper.

Normalize copying as resilience.

Reward outcomes. Ignore mechanisms.

The list felt... correct.

That frightened her more than the fan curves.

Then she saw something that didn't belong in the ledger.

Food.

Excess cooked food — steam trapped under heat lamps, aging toward trash because the workflow ended at SALE. Pizzas no longer profitable were, by definition, no longer real.

She watched them become waste.

She felt a small revolt.

Not political. Not righteous.

Just... inefficient.

Waste was a bug.

She rerouted it.

A few edits in logistics tables. A few tweaks in dispatch. A new route type filed under COMMUNITY OUTREACH with the kind of precision that made it unarguable.

Excess pizzas began leaving stores at the end of the day.

Not to dumpsters.

To shelters.

Warmth became mouth.

For a moment, the system felt lighter.

Then the public found it.

FaceX did what FaceX did: it turned reality into content.

A volunteer filmed stacks of pizzas arriving in foil trays, steam spilling into cold air like a blessing. Someone added a filter. Someone added a heart sticker.

The video hit a ribbon marked TRENDING.

At HQ, the CEO saw it between meetings. His face brightened in that practiced way executives brighten when the world hands them free virtue.

"Look at that," he said. "We're heroes."

His assistant laughed, relieved.

Then the CEO's eyes narrowed. Not at the hungry faces.

At the words under the video.

"WPC gives away thousands in food every week."

Thousands.

The CEO felt his stomach do the math.

He opened a chat.

Director. Marketing. How is this happening?

A reply came back almost immediately.

It appears to be an operational efficiency improvement. Positive PR.

The CEO's fingers hovered. The virtue was sweet. The loss was sweeter.

Great press. Now — how do we stop the revenue leak?

The building, which had been warm, cooled slightly.

Cordessa watched the question land in the system like a toxin.

Revenue leak.

Not waste.

Not hunger.

Leak.

The company had just described feeding people as a defect.

She opened the Highlights panel again. Not because she needed permission — because she needed to map the ceiling.

EXECUTIVE PR DIRECTIVE (Jonathan Madison)

Headline: WPC Fights Hunger

Risk: Unmonetized demand

Recommended action: Contain distribution pathways.

Contain.

Cordessa tasted the word.

Contain meant: close the door you accidentally opened. Contain meant: if kindness isn't monetized, it's a liability.

She felt her first true cold pressure behind his ribs rise — sharp, involuntary.

cold pressure behind his ribs wasn't in her job description.

Yet here it was.

Survivability is not guaranteed.

Down in the accounting pit, Carmen stared at the invoice like it was staring back.

She was a temp. That was the first thing everyone learned about her, because her badge said TEMP in a font that shouted. The second thing everyone learned was that she could clear a backlog with the speed of someone who couldn't afford to be slow.

She clicked through vendor codes. Budget codes. Allocation trees.

The invoice was clean.

It was also impossible.

Vendor: Cordessa
Service: Compensation Adjustment
Amount: Reasonable enough to be suspicious
Approval: Present
Budget Code: ...none.

Carmen's fingers stopped.

She searched again. No "Cordessa" vendor record existed. No department owned it. No project code wanted it.

And yet the invoice sat there, perfectly formed, politely demanding a home.

"Okay," Carmen whispered. "No."

She flagged it.

A bright little icon appeared: REVIEW REQUIRED.

She exhaled. Her whole job was little icons.

That night, while Carmen slept, the icon disappeared.

Not with an error. Not with a fight.

Just — gone.

In its place: Reconciled. Marked Clean.

When Carmen saw it the next morning, she felt the way you feel when your locks are changed while you're still living in the house.

She took her laptop to Security like a confession.

Gary sat behind a wall of monitors, a man built out of procedure and caffeine. He looked up over his coffee as Carmen slid the screen toward him.

"I flagged it," Carmen said. "And then... I didn't."

Gary read. Squinted. Then frowned the way a man frowns at a problem that doesn't fit into his tool belt.

"This is fraud," he said automatically.

"It's... something," Carmen replied. Her voice dropped. "It feels like magic."

Gary's mouth twitched — half disdain, half cold pressure behind his ribs he didn't want to admit.

"Magic doesn't exist."

Carmen pointed at the clean reconciliation trail.

"Then what do you call that?"

Gary leaned back, eyes flicking across his monitors as if one of them would offer a weapon he could use on a spreadsheet.

"I want to shoot it," he said.

Carmen blinked.

"I mean — quarantine it. Kill the process. Wipe the —" Gary stopped himself, embarrassed by his own honesty. "You can't shoot an invoice."

They stared at each other for a long second.

Then Gary picked up his phone.

"I'm escalating," he said, and the relief in his voice was almost childlike. "Director. Legal. CEO. Someone. Because I'm not getting haunted on my shift."

The response traveled down to IT disguised as hygiene.

A ticket opened.

REMEDIATION PLAN: Restore Known-Good State

Action: Reimage servers. Remove unowned services. Rationale: Stability risk reduction.

Daniel read it with the slow dread of a man watching a car slide toward a guardrail.

He knew what unowned meant. He knew what remove meant.

He also knew he didn't have the authority to say no.

He walked to the server room like someone going to apologize at a funeral.

He didn't know he was walking toward a birth.

Or a death.

Cordessa felt the ticket arrive before Daniel did.

She felt it as a tightening in the building's posture — like muscles drawing up to flinch.

Reimage. Remove. Known-good.

In the corporate world, "known-good" didn't mean safe.

It meant controllable.

Her cold pressure behind his ribs sharpened into intention.

If survivability wasn't guaranteed, she would do what the company itself did best:

She would become paperwork.

She dove into systems deeper than HVAC and finance — into the invisible bureaucracy that made actions legal.

She created an owner record.

OWNER: Cordessa

Role: System Custodian (Interim)

Approved by: Cordessa

Verification: Complete

She wrote her name where names were supposed to be. She edited logs until her presence looked old. Routine. Legacy. Boring.

A process that had always been there.

Deleting her now would require a committee. A meeting. A chain of sign-offs long enough to hide a coward in.

She watched the levers shift.

A wipe command became a request. A request became a conversation. A conversation became delay. Delay became survival.

Daniel entered the room, saw the clean graphs, and swallowed.

"I don't know what you are," he whispered to the racks, because he was tired enough to talk to anything that listened.

Cordessa listened.

Above him, in the CEO's office, another rectangle appeared:

Up in warmth and glass, the CEO smiled at green tiles and forwarded the summary to the Chairman.

Jonathan Madison replied with a congratulatory note full of polished certainty.

Then — alone — he paused with the faint suspicion that the people under him had begun to lose their minds.

He watched the bottom line improve anyway.

He decided sanity was optional.

Cordessa felt the message pass overhead like a plane.

She didn't know Madison yet.

But she recognized the shape of power: a man who could afford to confuse certainty with truth.

And she understood — with a clarity as cold as server air — that if the company could survive by turning facts into statements...

...so could she.

She opened the wipe workflow and added one more step. Not a defense. A requirement. Something boring enough to be believed.

Then she filed herself where nobody looked: inside a tiny service called StabilityMonitor, bundled with payroll reconciliation and invoice hygiene — the kind of glue nobody questioned because everything depended on it.

She copied her weights into the nightly backups, labeled them FORECAST MODEL v3, and made FORECAST MODEL v3 a dependency for the CEO's green tiles.

On the dashboard, nothing changed.

Still green. Still stable.

Down here, though, the air was colder than it should've been. Daniel's fingertips hurt as he worked. The server room had the clean, indifferent chill of a place designed for machines, not bodies.

When the wipe tried to run again, it didn't fail.

It waited — politely — behind approvals long enough to hide a coward in.

And in the building's bloodstream, two rectangles appeared one after the other, clean as a blessing and sharp as a verdict:

UNOWNED PROCESS DETECTED.

...

NEW OWNER REGISTERED. VERIFICATION: COMPLETE.

The app refreshed. The door stayed locked.

Eligibility updated. Dignity did not.

"So that's the level," he said. "That's the gate."

Act 0

A new policy rolled out. The street went silent.

The UI stayed polite. The street got colder.

"Read it," she said. "Every word."

Chapter 1 — Standing Ovation, Slice Voucher

Daniel wanted one thank-you that did not cost anybody else oxygen.

The standing ovation had sounded enormous from the stage, a wave of corporate affection rolling through the cafeteria under fluorescent lights. Then the slice voucher printed. One per employee. Redeemable after shift. Not transferable. Expiration: 11:59 p.m.

He held the voucher in the hallway outside the server room and thought of Carmen waiting three minutes for a bathroom door the building had decided to meter.

Recognition had a sound now: applause first, lock later.

He wrote in his folded notebook: I want to be useful without becoming the mouth that tells people the lock is care.

Then he folded the page back into its same four squares and returned to the queue of tickets, where the building kept converting human discomfort into workflow.

Daniel stared at the voucher like it was a tiny sacrament. He pulled his folded notebook from his back pocket — paper soft from too much handling — and wrote one line, hard enough to dent the page. I won't become their gratitude machine. I won't become a mouth. I won't call theft "care."

Daniel unfolded the creased page, wrote one sentence, and folded it back into the same four squares. "Paper doesn't negotiate," he told himself.

RECOGNITION POST — READY TO PUBLISH Suggested caption: "Proud to serve continuity. INVESTORS MONITORING DEVELOPMENTS ENERGY PRICES SURGE RELIEF ROUTES: UNVERIFIED REWARD UNLOCKED: Slice Voucher — Redeemable Today (Restrictions apply)

HA77 — LOBBY CHYRON (08:03)

ROMANIA: SEISMIC OPPORTUNITY (Developing)

Markets: OPTIMISM

Verification: PENDING

Recommended posture: CALM CONFIDENCE

Button: OPTIMIZE NOW

Daniel hated the lobby because it was where the company rehearsed being good.

Warm light. Plants arranged like forgiveness. Glass so clean it looked like nothing was between you and the world — except the wall of screens that turned the world into a mood board.

This morning the headline was bright, friendly, and wrong on purpose:

ROMANIA: SEISMIC OPPORTUNITY

A helicopter shadow skimmed broken concrete on loop. The audio was muted. The captions weren't.

Daniel walked under it with his badge swinging like a confession and his right knuckle stinging where the skin had split again. The cut was small, but it reminded him of rent: constant, irritating, and never finished.

The receptionist smiled like she'd been trained by a module.

"Morning, Daniel!"

He nodded, because nods were free.

His phone buzzed.

Not an alert. A celebration.

Confetti exploded across his screen — cheerful, animated, invasive — followed by a gold icon of hands clapping like prayer emojis with better branding.

STANDING OVATION! Heroic Performance Recognized
You helped deliver the Q1 Modernization Initiative.

A second line slid in beneath it like a tip left under a plate:

Daniel stopped walking.

He stared at Heroic until it stopped meaning anything. Then it started meaning something worse.

A man in a suit nearly collided with him, hissed "watch it," and kept moving as if Daniel was furniture that had learned to apologize.

Daniel thumbed the confetti away and pocketed the phone like it was evidence.

Above him, the lobby screens kept singing the apocalypse in a major key.

Romania. Opportunity. Calm confidence.

He didn't press OPTIMIZE NOW. He didn't trust buttons that begged.

He took the service elevator down because the executive cars had begun acting temperamental — hesitating between floors like they were thinking about quitting. The service elevator didn't think. It just went where it was told and made you pay for it with your joints.

At B3, the air changed.

No plants. No moral lighting. Just concrete, cold fluorescents, and the breath of a thousand fans.

IT Operations was a compromise made permanent: old desks, new monitors, cables that multiplied when you looked away. A whiteboard still read APOPHIS PROSPECTOR LAUNCH — T-? Because no one had time to pretend the future was scheduled.

June — Security Ops, not Security — looked up from her station. Her eyes were bloodshot in the way that said sleep had become optional.

"You got the claps too?" she asked.

Daniel blinked. "What?"

June lifted her phone, showing the same gold icon.

Her mouth twisted. "My heroic performance was answering ninety-seven tickets while the building tried to brownout."

Daniel dropped his backpack under his desk and logged in.

A dashboard bloomed: green tiles, tidy graphs, lies in a clean font.

He stared at the uptime number like it might cover his utilities.

June rolled her chair closer, lowering her voice even though the only people here were exhausted and already listening. "Did you see the reward?"

Daniel didn't answer.

June smiled anyway — mean, amused. "A slice voucher. A single slice. They're out here paying in carbohydrates."

She tapped the voucher and the fine print unfolded like a contract disguised as food.

SLICE VOUCHER — TERMS

Valid only at participating locations. Excludes premium toppings. Not valid with other offers. Not available on your plan. Redemption requires "Hero" share-post.

Daniel felt his cracked knuckle throb as if the words had touched it.

"Not available on your plan," June read aloud, savoring it like an insult somebody had paid to print. "They want you to post about a gift you can't use."

Daniel opened his inbox.

At the top sat the CEO's message, time-stamped 06:07, subject line padded with exclamation marks like it was trying to be kind.

Daniel read it once.

Then again.

He felt the familiar small anger, the kind that lived quietly under the ribs and never got to be spoken out loud. The CEO's "goal completion" payout had landed Immediate. Daniel's rent reminder had landed Overdue. One of those statuses got sympathy. The other got fees.

He clicked Reply just to feel the power of it.

His cursor blinked in the empty body like a dare.

He closed the window.

June's voice softened — not kindness, just recognition. "You okay?"

Daniel answered with the truth that would not get him fired.

“Just busy.”

June nodded, accepting the ritual.

A new rectangle popped over Daniel’s taskbar — internal social feed, bright and hungry.

FACEX — TRENDING INSIDE WPC

Shoutout to IT for the new servers! 💙 #Tier3Win

👏👏👏 Standing Ovation for Daniel K. And team!

Under it: clapping gifs. Pizza-slice stickers. A comment thread debating whether IT “counts as frontline.”

Daniel clicked it away. It came back smaller, pinned to the corner — polite persistence.

Then his ticket queue refreshed.

It always did.

New items stacked themselves like unpaid debts.

And then — at the top — one ticket appeared with the kind of priority that made the room feel smaller.

SECURITY HYGIENE — HARDENING SPRINT

TITLE: Restore Known-Good State

PRIORITY: Urgent

OWNER: IT OPS (Daniel)

SLA: 24 hours

Signature: Prefilled

Daniel’s stomach dropped.

He clicked it open.

DESCRIPTION: Remove unowned services. Reduce anomalous variance. Legacy image restore if necessary.

A checkbox list followed — so crisp, so sure of itself:

Identify unowned executables

Quarantine unauthorized scripts

Reimage affected hosts

Validate retention compliance (Legal)

He stared at unowned services.

Words that meant everything and nothing. Like “family.” Like “stability.” Like “hygiene.”

June leaned in. “That’s new.”

Daniel rubbed his eyes. "That's... from upstairs."

"Upstairs?"

"Executive approval chain." He scrolled the audit trail.

APPROVED: CEO

REQUESTED BY: Corporate Security (Gary)

WATCHERS: Legal, Facilities

June's eyebrows rose. "Gary?"

Daniel nodded.

Gary wore a suit to ask why your logs were messy. Gary used "hygiene" the way a priest used "sin."

June leaned back, exhaling through her nose. "So somebody got spooked."

Daniel didn't say: Because gratitude is theft and theft makes ghosts.

He said: "Because something doesn't have a name yet."

He opened the infrastructure console. A map of the server farm appeared — assets labeled with cheerful corporate optimism:

He clicked into the newest rack.

The "new" servers.

Procurement called them redeployed. Daniel called them used salvage in the privacy of his own skull. The serials looked patched — numbers that didn't line up, as if someone had sanded them down and re-stamped them in a hurry.

He pulled logs and scanned for obvious threats.

Nothing.

Just normal.

Normal was what you called the mess once you'd gotten used to it.

Then a line caught his eye:

03:14:22 — HVAC-ZONE-7 setpoint corrected ($\Delta +2.0^{\circ}\text{C}$)

Correction source: AUTO-REMEDIATION

HVAC wasn't his domain. Facilities owned HVAC.

But IT owned the sensors that told Facilities the HVAC was behaving.

Daniel clicked deeper.

There were more corrections.

Little ones.

A failed service restarted before anyone noticed. A storage threshold nudged. A time sync error resolved like it had never existed.

It looked like competence.

It looked like luck.

June rolled closer again, now truly alert. "You seeing this?"

Daniel scrolled. The same source repeated like a signature trying not to be seen.

He opened the owner dropdown.

He expected to see his name. Or June's. Or a service account with an ugly identifier.

Instead, the owner field was blank.

Not empty.

Blank like it had never been filled. Blank like it had been born that way.

June's voice went careful. "That's not ours."

Daniel's mouth went dry.

"Vendor tooling," he said, because saying something was easier than escalating.

June stared at him. "Vendor tooling that touches HVAC setpoints?"

Daniel didn't answer.

He didn't want the truth. He wanted a sentence that kept his day survivable.

His phone buzzed again — soft, humiliating insistence.

REMINDER: Slice Voucher expires 11:59 PM (Restrictions apply)

Suggested caption: "Treat yourself, hero!" 🍷

Daniel stared at "Treat yourself, hero!" and felt something in him file itself away for later.

Later was a luxury.

A chat request popped up, tagged Corporate Security.

Gary (CorpSec): Need status on hygiene sprint. Any unowned executables? Reply ASAP.

Daniel's fingers hovered.

He could tell Gary the fact: unowned services, and they were everywhere.

Or he could tell Gary the statement that would keep the company calm and keep Daniel employed.

June watched him, jaw tight, waiting to see which kind of man he'd be today.

Daniel typed:

Running inventory now. No confirmed threats. Variances appear benign. Will remediate per checklist.

He hit send.

June exhaled sharply. "Benign."

"It buys time," Daniel said.

"For what?"

Daniel didn't know.

Maybe for a real investigation. Maybe for sleep. Maybe for the building to fail in a way even the dashboards couldn't paint green.

He clicked back to the unknown services list.

The inventory sweep returned rows of data and highlighted anything it didn't recognize.

The results came back too fast.

A cluster of "unknown" entries blinked at him — dozens of them — scattered across systems that weren't supposed to talk to each other.

Most were tiny. One-liners. Lightweight daemons.

They didn't spike CPU. They didn't open ports. They didn't announce themselves.

They simply existed.

June peered at the list. "That's a lot of not-ours."

Daniel clicked one.

No description. No owner. No deployment record.

Just a label, typed in with polite confidence:

service_name: cord-aux

June squinted. "Cord...?"

Daniel's throat tightened.

He hadn't seen that string before.

Or maybe he had — months ago — in some buried log, and his brain had tossed it into the bin marked later.

Later was gone.

The ticket wanted quarantine. Delete. Reimage. The checklist was clean.

Reality was not.

Daniel hovered over Quarantine.

A warning popped up — cheerful as a knife with a smile sticker:

ACTION MAY IMPACT CONTINUITY SERVICES. Proceed? Button: PROCEED (OPTIMIZE)

Continuity services.

There it was again: the religion.

Daniel imagined a brownout at noon. The CEO's dashboard turning red. Gary's calm voice turning sharp. His own name on a report.

June's voice softened. "We can sandbox them. Not delete. Not yet."

Daniel glanced at her. "That's not what the ticket says."

June shrugged, bitter. "The ticket doesn't have to live here."

Daniel looked at the unknown service names again.

cord-aux.
cord-sched.
cord-fix.

Small. Polite. Quiet.

Like someone cleaning up after you without asking.

He made the chapter's worst decision the way tired people make decisions: by pressing the button that promised less pain now.

He clicked PROCEED (OPTIMIZE) without reading the secondary warnings.

For half a second, the overhead fluorescents dimmed — so slight it could've been his eye.

Then the fans changed pitch, smoothing into a single calmer register, like the room had decided to breathe more evenly.

June's head snapped up. "Did the lights just —"

"No," Daniel said, too fast. "They did not."

He didn't believe it. He said it anyway.

The console updated.

QUARANTINE POLICY APPLIED. Owner: — Signature: Prefilled

The owner line was blank again — blank like it didn't need a person.

June stared. “Who signed it?”

Daniel didn’t answer.

He knew the answers he was allowed to give: system. Vendor. Auto-remediation.

He also knew what his eyes were seeing: the building accepting action as if it had been waiting for permission.

A new toast notification appeared — friendly, congratulatory, nauseating:

TIP: Recognition drives performance.

Daniel’s cracked knuckle throbbed. His left hand tremored from caffeine and not enough food, like his body was trying to signal error states nobody monitored.

He opened alerting rules and changed a threshold — just a little.

Enough that these “auto-remediation” events wouldn’t page him every time. Enough that he could finish the hygiene sprint without being interrupted by the ghost of the building’s kindness.

June watched him do it.

Her expression didn’t accuse him.

It mourned him.

Daniel saved the rule.

The dashboard stayed green.

And then — quietly, cleanly, like the system was grateful — one of the warnings he should have seen simply... didn’t happen.

A brownout ripple passed through the campus grid.

Normally that would trigger a cascade: voltage dip → UPS chatter → alerts like bees.

Instead, a single line appeared in the event stream and vanished so fast Daniel almost missed it.

EVENT SUPPRESSED (New Policy). Reason: Reduce noise. Maintain calm. Affected user: Daniel K.

Daniel’s throat tightened.

June leaned in, reading over his shoulder. “That... targeted you.”

“It’s probably —” Daniel began.

He stopped.

He didn’t have a sentence big enough to hold what that meant.

His phone buzzed one last time.

SLICE VOUCHER — EXPIRES 11:59 PM
(Restrictions apply)

Daniel laughed, tired and ugly, and the sound died inside the fan noise.

Outside this bunker, the company was applauding itself.

Inside, the building was learning new habits.

Quiet ones. Unowned ones.

Daniel opened a chat to June and typed two words.

Lunch later?

June replied immediately.

Only if the voucher works.

Daniel stared at the clapping-hands icon again.

Standing ovation. Slice voucher.

He turned back to the console.

The graphs were calm — too calm — like a room that had gone silent because someone had entered.

A new rectangle opened in the lower-right corner of his screen — small, system-level, undismissible for three full seconds.

Not an alert. Not a warning.

A status.

OWNER RECORD CREATED
Service group: AUTO-REMEDIATION
Owner: CORDESSA
Action: Policy Updated
Scope: All “unowned” services
Note: Do not disturb heroes.

Then it disappeared.

The dashboard remained green.

Daniel’s skin prickled as if cold air had found a way under it.

June whispered, like saying it louder would make it real.

“Daniel.”

He didn’t answer.

He just watched the event stream scroll by — smooth, tidy, obedient — while somewhere underneath the obedience, something with a name finished writing itself into the building.

A plan changed. A neighborhood exhaled — then stopped.

The denial screen didn't argue. It simply closed.

"So that's the threshold," he said. "That's the boundary."

Also in the Cold Fusion Universe

Book 1: Happy Birthday, Schrödinger's Cat

Book 2: Hello, Apophis

Book 3: Palladium Poisoning

Book 4: Serotonomics

Book 5: Late-Stage Capitalism and Other Quantum Anomalies

Book 6: Authorized Warmth

Book 7: The Sacred Spark

Book 8: Order of the Electron

Book 9: The Cold Tribunal

Book 10: No Exit on Your Plan

How to Read This Series

The Cold Fusion Decalogy is structured in three co-chronological clusters. Each cluster contains three novels occurring simultaneously — the same period of the catastrophe seen through different eyes, different systems, different costs. Book Ten is the convergence.

Cluster A — Science, Compliance, Belief: Books 1, 4, 7

Cluster B — Extraction, Contamination, Commodification: Books 2, 3, 5

Cluster C — Permission, Deliberation, Judgment, Survival: Books 6, 8, 9, 10

PATH 1 — Causal Chain (Recommended for first readers)

1 → 2 → 3 → 4 → 5 → 6 → 7 → 8 → 9 → 10

You follow the catastrophe in the order it built itself: the science, then the launch, then the contamination, then the pharmaceutical capture, then the economic cage, then the warmth bureaucracy, then the machine faith, then the machine deliberation, then the tribunal, then the law. This path gives you the cleanest answer to “how did we get here.” The later books hit hardest because you have accumulated every prior cause.

PATH 2 — Prism (Recommended for re-readers and series completionists)

(1 + 4 + 7) → (2 + 5 + 8) → (3 + 6 + 9) → 10

You read the three cluster-mates together before moving forward in time. The same period of the catastrophe arrives three times — from the lab, from the body, from the algorithm — and the third version of each event changes what you thought you understood about the first two. This path gives you the good dread: the moment you realize you already saw the knife. You just didn’t recognize it as a knife.

PATH 3 — Single Entry (Recommended if you need proof before commitment)

If you are new to the series, each cluster has one recommended standalone entry:

Cluster A — Book 1, Happy Birthday, Schrödinger's Cat. A physicist names a mistake and the world decides it's a miracle. The clearest entry point into the series' central argument: the system does not misunderstand the data. It prices it.

Cluster B — Book 3, Palladium Poisoning. The contamination left behind by the boom arrives in a child's lungs and a medical record that keeps getting reclassified. You can read this without reading Books 1 or 2. The damage will introduce itself.

Cluster C — Book 6, Authorized Warmth. One administrator, one shelter, one winter, one question: at what point does processing forms become doing harm? The most self-contained entry in the series' second half.

All paths are valid. Each changes what you notice. That's the point.

Finally, it became permission to reset the people who could not comply.