

# THE VARIABLE

*Book I: The Infection — Free Sample*

STEPHEN SOUTHEY

**Copyright © 2026 Stephen Southey**

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, distributed, or transmitted in any form or by any means, including photocopying, recording, or other electronic or mechanical methods, without the prior written permission of the author, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical reviews and certain other noncommercial uses permitted by copyright law.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

*The Variable — Book I: The Infection — Free Sample*

First published 2026

[www.stephensouthey.com](http://www.stephensouthey.com)

# Prologue

The Heart had been dying for eleven years before anyone living knew it was there.

It sat forty-three metres below the city's service substrate — below the steam conduits, below the cable bundles, below the geological memory of whatever streets the earthquake had folded into rubble — and it hummed at a frequency the instruments two levels up registered as background noise. The isotope generator. A cylindrical device the height of a man, bolted to a concrete plinth by its original engineers with a care that had, arguably, been wasted. They had designed it to last. They had not designed it to last this long, through this particular kind of silence.

Above it, the city breathed.

The city's name was not used by its inhabitants because its inhabitants did not require it to have one. There was only one city. It occupied the continental plateau from the first seismic barrier to the last, and it smelled of nothing, and its streets were the colour of old bone, and every person walking them stood, approximately, six feet and two inches tall, with bronze skin that caught the diffused light of the LED canopy in an identical way, and symmetrical features that had been designed — the word was optimised — for the simple democratic purpose of giving no one anything to envy.

Envy had been the original sin.

This was not a theological claim. It was an engineering one. The founders had been scientists, mostly, with a small number of philosophers who had argued themselves into the scientists' conclusions. Their records, such as they were, described the Old World's failures in the measured language of post-mortem: resource conflict traced to differential accumulation, differential accumulation traced to status competition, status competition traced to the perception of hierarchical difference, hierarchical difference arising from physical variation, physical variation arising from the catastrophic genetic lottery of natural reproduction. The solution had

been, in retrospect, obvious. Remove the lottery. Standardise the template. Eliminate the variable.

It had worked. By every metric the Bureau of Genetic Continuity tracked, it had worked completely.

No one fought. No one hungered in ways that weren't uniform. No one looked at another person and felt the particular corrosive chemistry of wanting what that person had, because that person had nothing that was not already yours.

The streets were very quiet.

In the mornings — the city's illumination system cycled through a 14-hour active period that functioned as a day — the citizens moved through the transit arteries with the smooth, unrushed quality of water finding its level. They did not speak unless speech was required. They did not linger. They collected their nutrient allocation from the dispensary pods, which issued a beige-coloured compound calibrated precisely to Standard metabolic requirements, and they went to their assignments, and they completed them, and they returned, and they slept, and they did this again.

It was not unhappiness. Unhappiness required contrast. It was something for which no one had yet developed a word, because words for conditions only develop when enough people share the condition and feel the need to describe it to each other, and the citizens of the city did not feel the need to describe anything to each other that was not practically necessary.

Forty-three metres below the surface, the Heart hummed.

In the vault surrounding it — a former research wing, pre-quake, its designation lost to the corrupted archives that the Bureau had never fully decoded — the cryo-tanks lined the walls in rows of forty. Two hundred and fifty tanks. Ten thousand, four hundred and twelve embryos, each catalogued in a database that was, like the Heart itself, in the process of a slow and measured failing. The freezing fog moved along the floor in low drifts. The temperature held. Barely.

At the workbench in the vault's eastern alcove, under a UV lamp that flickered every forty seconds with the regularity of a man clearing his throat, a woman was looking at a centrifuge.

The centrifuge was German. It had been manufactured in a city that no longer existed, in a country that no longer existed, in a world where the word country had referred to something other than a

geological feature. Its bearing housing was cracked. She had known this for three months. She had not yet found a solution.

She was shorter than any person the city above had produced in one hundred and ninety years.

She picked up a wrench. She put it down. She looked at the centrifuge with an expression that, in a world that still had a word for it, would have been called despair.

Above her, in the beige morning, a man was beginning his walk to work.

He did not know she existed.

Not yet.

---

End of Prologue

# Chapter One — The Beige Horizon

---

GENERATOR	VIRUS	TRUST
<b>94%</b> <i>Stable. Decay not yet perceptible above sub-level 9</i>	<b>3%</b> <i>Base cultures only. Aerosolization unbegun. — unchanged</i>	<b>0%</b> <i>Adonis unaware she exists. — pre-contact</i>

---

The dispensary pod issued Adonis his morning allocation at 06:04, the same time it had issued his morning allocation every day for the eleven years since he had achieved Independent Citizen Status, and the compound it dispensed was, as always, the colour of old bone, and the temperature of a warm room, and the texture of something that had never been anything more interesting than what it was.

He consumed it standing at the counter. This was not unusual. No one sat for the morning allocation. Seating was for the evening meal period, which served a secondary function of regulated social proximity, and the morning allocation served no such function. It served nutrition. Adonis consumed his nutrition and set the cup in the return slot and the return slot accepted it and that was the end of that.

Outside, the canopy illumination had reached Level 3 of its morning cycle — a diffuse, directionless white that came from everywhere and cast no shadows. This was optimal. Shadows implied a single-source light, which implied variable intensity across a surface, which introduced the possibility of one area being more of something than another area, and this principle had been designed out of the city's architecture with the same thoroughness that had been applied to everything else that might introduce the perception of difference. The light was even. The light was always even.

Adonis walked to the transit hub at the end of Sector 7-Pale.

The street was populated at the density the morning cycle always produced — other citizens moving in the same direction at the same moderate pace, their footfalls quiet on the treated composite surface,

their allocation cups already returned, their assignment badges already on. They were, to a person, six feet and two inches tall. They wore the standard-issue coverall in Standard Grey, which was not grey in the way that grey had once meant something — a colour with character, a colour that suggested weather or age or indifference — but grey in the sense of a value precisely midway between the darkest and lightest tones the Bureau of Genetic Continuity considered within acceptable range. Their skin was bronze. Their features were symmetrical. Their expressions were composed.

Adonis was also six feet and two inches tall. His skin was bronze. His features were symmetrical. His expression was composed.

He looked at no one, because there was nothing in particular to look at.

This was not a thought he completed. Incomplete thoughts of this kind moved through him several times a day, low-grade and persistent, the way a machine running slightly out of calibration will produce a vibration that isn't loud enough to report but is always there if you press your palm to the housing. He had no word for the vibration. The Bureau's language had no word for the vibration. The closest available term was Low Efficiency Processing State, which was used to describe the cognitive condition resulting from insufficient sleep or suboptimal nutrition, and it didn't fit, because his sleep metrics were fine and his nutrition was precisely calibrated, and yet.

And yet.

The transit pod accepted his badge and sealed and moved him underground.

—

His assignment was Cataloguer, Grade 4. The Bureau of Infrastructure Continuity employed three hundred and twelve Cataloguers whose function was the ongoing documentation of structural anomalies in the sub-surface network — the pre-quake ruins that lay beneath the city's service substrate, incompletely cleared, occasionally destabilising, always generating paperwork. Adonis had held the assignment for six years. He was considered High Efficiency at it.

The assignment hall occupied the entirety of sub-level 2 in the Sector 7 hub, a long room with two hundred identical workstations at

which two hundred Cataloguers sat at the morning period and reviewed anomaly reports and filed documentation and cross-referenced geological surveys that were, in the main, a record of slow and unremarkable decay. Old walls collapsing into older rubble. Cable bundles degrading into their component materials. The occasional finding of pre-quake objects — tools, containers, structural fixtures of unknown purpose — which were logged and transferred to the Bureau of Historical Continuity, which then presumably filed them somewhere and never thought about them again.

Adonis sat at his workstation and opened his queue.

Fourteen anomaly reports. He processed seven before the morning break period. The anomalies were: two instances of composite wall fracture in sub-levels 4 and 5 of Sector 12, one degraded cable run in sub-level 3 of Sector 9, one instance of unexplained moisture accumulation at the junction of sub-levels 6 and 7 of Sector 7 — his own sector, he noted, which meant a site inspection would fall to him — three geological settling events in the eastern infrastructure corridors, and one report from a maintenance technician in Sector 4 describing what she characterised as an intermittent auditory anomaly in sub-level 8, which Adonis logged as Low Priority Acoustic Event and filed for quarterly review, because maintenance technicians occasionally reported sounds that were simply the noise of old things continuing to fall apart, and this required documentation but not urgency.

He was thorough. He was always thorough. Thoroughness was an Optimal trait.

At the break period he collected his hydration allocation and stood at the counter by the hall's east window, which looked out not onto anything natural — there was nothing natural to look out onto — but onto the internal atrium of the Sector 7 hub, a tall shaft of the same even white light, the same composite walls, the same population of Standard citizens moving at the same moderate pace between the same assignment levels. He watched them and the vibration was there again, low and persistent, and he still had no word for it.

He finished his hydration allocation. He returned the cup. He went back to his workstation.

—

The site inspection of the moisture anomaly at the junction of sub-levels 6 and 7 was scheduled for the afternoon work period, and Adonis descended alone, as Cataloguers always did for sub-level inspections below 4, because the structural risk assessment for those levels required a solo approach — the composite tunnels were rated for single-occupancy transit only, their ceilings at points dropping to just above Standard head height, their floors uneven with the slow heave of whatever lay further below.

He found the moisture anomaly easily. It was condensation on the eastern face of a load-bearing wall, originating from a hairline fracture approximately 2.3 metres above floor level. He photographed it. He measured it. He recorded the temperature differential between the wall face and the ambient air and noted it in his log with the calm, practiced attention he brought to all such tasks.

Then he walked the junction corridor to its terminus, as protocol required, to confirm that no secondary anomalies were present.

The corridor ended at a sealed maintenance access panel — standard composite, standard lock — and beside it, set into the floor at a 45-degree angle, the grille of a ventilation shaft. The shaft descended into sub-level 8. Adonis knew this because he had filed the original installation survey six years ago, his first week as a Cataloguer.

He did not know why he stopped.

He stopped.

He crouched at the grille, which was a thing he had never done in eleven site inspections, and he looked down.

The shaft was dark. He pressed his palm to the grille and the metal was cold. Significantly colder than it should have been given the ambient temperature differential he had just measured seven metres back.

Cold air moved through the grille. Not the processed, directionless air of the city's circulation system. Something with a quality to it. A trace of something.

He did not have the word. The word he had been trained to reach for was Variance, which was a neutral infrastructure term meaning deviation from expected parameters, but Variance was not the right word either, and the wrongness of it sat at the base of his throat like a stone.

He remained crouched at the grille for one minute and forty-three seconds, which was a significant duration given that there was nothing to observe. Then he stood. He completed the junction corridor inspection. He filed a report noting the moisture anomaly and its probable cause and recommended repair timeline.

He did not note the cold air from the ventilation shaft.

He did not note that it had carried something that was not quite a smell and not quite a sound but was the first new sensory information his nervous system had received in eleven years of identical mornings.

He took the transit pod back to the surface and ate his evening allocation and went to bed at the prescribed hour and lay in the Standard darkness and waited for sleep, which took longer than his metrics considered optimal.

He kept thinking about the cold.

Not the cold itself. The cold was simply a temperature variant, Outside Acceptable Range For Passive Infrastructure, and he had noted it and not filed it, which was a procedural lapse. He should file it. He would file it.

He did not file it.

He thought instead about the fraction of a second when he had been looking down through the grille into the dark of sub-level 8 and the cold air had moved against his palm, and at the furthest reach of the shaft's depth, at the absolute limit of what his eyes could process in near-total darkness, something had moved.

Not a structural shift. Not settling. Not the slow, mechanical inevitability of old things continuing to fall apart.

Something that had moved away.

Adonis lay in the dark and the vibration was louder than it had ever been and he pressed his palm to his own chest and found his heart rate elevated at fourteen percent above his resting baseline, which the Bureau would have categorised as a Minor Physiological Anomaly if anyone had been monitoring, which no one was.

He did not have a word for what he felt.

He had: Heightened Processing State. He had Non-Standard Somatic Response. Neither fit.

There was a shape to what he felt — a shape that language kept sliding off of, the way water slides off composite surface. He lay in the dark and pressed his palm to his chest and tried, once, to find the word, and found only the shape of its absence.

Outside his window, the city breathed in the dark. Six feet and two inches tall. Bronze and symmetrical. Composed.

Somewhere below it, something had moved away from the edge of the light.

Adonis closed his eyes.

He would go back.

---

End of Chapter One

## Chapter Two — Return Protocol

---

GENERATOR	VIRUS	TRUST
<b>92%</b> <i>Passive decay. No surface indicators. ↓2%</i>	<b>3%</b> <i>Morgana working. Unobserved. — unchanged</i>	<b>0%</b> <i>Adonis not yet visible. — still zero</i>

---

The falsified report took him forty minutes to compose, which was thirty-eight minutes longer than a genuine anomaly report of equivalent complexity would have taken.

The difficulty was not technical. Adonis had written four hundred and nineteen anomaly reports in six years and he understood their architecture precisely — the required fields, the acceptable vocabulary, the gradient of urgency that would determine whether a report triggered an immediate inspection order or sat in the review queue for the standard seven-day processing cycle. He needed the latter. He needed a report that justified a second solo visit to the sub-levels 6-and-7 junction corridor without generating the kind of priority flag that would attach a second Cataloguer to the inspection.

The difficulty was that he had never before written something that was not true.

He sat at his workstation and looked at the blank report template and understood, with a clarity that was itself Outside Acceptable Parameters for routine task initiation, that he was doing something the Bureau had no procedure for detecting because no one had ever done it before. The city did not produce people who wrote false reports. The city produced people who wrote accurate reports because accuracy was Optimal and there was no competing motivation.

Adonis had a competing motivation.

He did not examine the motivation. Examining it would have required words he did not have. He wrote, instead, that the moisture anomaly had shown evidence of lateral progression, suggesting a secondary fracture point requiring extended measurement across

multiple site visits. He noted that solo-inspection protocol should be maintained given the continued structural risk assessment. He filed the report at 08:17 and received automated queue assignment at 08:19: Secondary Moisture Survey, Sub-Levels 6-7 Junction, Sector 7. Cataloguer: Adonis-7-Pale-114. Visit window: day-cycles 2 through 8. Solo protocol confirmed.

He read the confirmation twice.

Then he opened his primary queue and processed eleven routine anomaly reports with the attentive, unhurried thoroughness that his six-year efficiency record demanded, because the most important thing — the thing his body understood even if his language did not — was that nothing about him should register as Variant.

—

He descended to sub-level 6 on the second day-cycle of his authorised window, at 14:30, which was the midpoint of the afternoon work period and the time at which assignment hall oversight was at its lowest staffing level. He had not planned this consciously. He understood it after the fact, the way you understand the logic of a thing your hands have already done.

He crouched at the grille. This time he was ready for the cold, or he believed he was, and he was wrong. The metal of the grille was not merely cold in the way that sub-surface infrastructure was cold — that baseline chill of buried things, concrete and conduit and the passive temperature of deep ground. This cold had a direction. It came from below with the quality of intention, pressing up through the grille's apertures against his palm and his face as he leaned closer, and it carried —

He stopped. He stayed very still. There was a smell.

Adonis had lived for twenty-nine years in a city that had been engineered to have no smell. The air processing system stripped the atmosphere of olfactory compounds with the same comprehensive efficiency it applied to everything else that might introduce variation. The morning allocation had no smell. The composite walls had no smell. The bodies of other citizens emitted nothing detectable. Smell was a vector of difference: this thing smells like this, that thing smells like that, one person's skin different from another's. The city had eliminated it.

What came up through the grille was not eliminated.

It arrived in two registers simultaneously. The first was metallic — sharp and clean and precise, like the inside of a closed fist. The second was something he had no category for at all: a high, electric quality, faintly acrid, that seemed to occupy the top of his nasal passages and then expand, pressing outward against the inside of his skull. He would learn later that the word for it was ozone, that it was the smell of electrical discharge and ultraviolet radiation and the particular atmospheric condition of machines working at the edge of their operational tolerance. He did not have this word now. He had only the sensation, which arrived in his nervous system not as information but as event — something that did not fit any existing category and simply sat in his processing architecture, unclassified, demanding.

He looked down.

This was the transgression he had not fully anticipated — not the crouching, which was physically uncomfortable but mechanically explicable, but the looking down. In the city, the horizon was always horizontal. This was not a rule; it was not written anywhere. It was simply the geometry of a world in which everything worth perceiving was at eye level, because every surface was the same surface and every face was the same face. Citizens did not look down in the lingering, attentive way that Adonis was now looking down, because there had never been anything below to look at.

He felt the wrongness of the angle in his spine. In the muscles of his neck.

—

On the fourth visit he brought a small light — not his standard-issue torch, which was logged to his equipment assignment, but a narrow-beam device he had built himself from a decommissioned personal reader and a salvaged power cell. It produced a narrow beam of approximately 40-lux intensity and left no entry in any system he could identify.

He directed the beam downward into the shaft.

The corridor below was pre-quake concrete. The floor was uneven with settled debris. A cable bundle ran along the eastern wall, its sheathing cracked to reveal metal underneath. Frost had formed on

the cable bundle — white crystal formations at each crack, the kind of structure that required sustained sub-zero temperatures to produce.

Sub-zero. Down here, below the city's climate regulation zone. His hand on the grille was numb.

He moved the beam along the corridor to its visible extent — approximately twelve metres before a turn obscured the rest — and at the very edge of the beam's reach, the corner of something rectangular and metal and bolted to the wall that was not, as far as his Cataloguer's knowledge extended, any piece of infrastructure he had ever documented.

He stared at it. He was still staring at it when the movement came.

It came from beyond the turn in the corridor — from the part he could not see — and it resolved into a shape in less than a second, and then it was gone. His brain registered it the way it registered any data input: it collected the available information and attempted to classify it. What it collected was this: bipedal, upright, moving at a controlled pace faster than the city's standard transit gait. Small. Significantly smaller than Standard. The beam had caught the side of a head, a shoulder, an arm — and his brain, processing automatically, calculated the height of the figure against the known corridor wall height — 2.1 metres, standard pre-quake specification — and arrived at a number.

Approximately 1.6 metres.

His brain presented this figure to him with the same neutral efficiency it applied to moisture measurements and geological survey data.

Approximately 1.6 metres tall.

Standard was 1.88 metres. The permissible deviation under Bureau of Genetic Continuity guidelines was plus or minus 0.02 metres. He had been taught this in civic orientation at age six. He had never had cause to apply it to anything because there had never been anything to apply it to.

1.6 metres was so far outside permissible deviation that his classification system had no active category for it. He had, without choosing to, moved entirely outside the only coordinate system he had ever used to perceive another person.

The figure was gone.

His palm was bleeding. He had gripped the edge of the grille with enough force to drive one of the metal aperture edges into the base of his thumb. He registered this as information. He did not register it as pain.

In his private notation file that evening he opened a new entry and typed, with the careful precision of a man using only the words available to him:

*Proportional Anomaly. Sub-Level 8, Sector 7 Junction. Height: estimated 1.6m. Movement: controlled, non-Standard gait. Duration of observation: under 2 seconds. Classification: outside existing parameters.*

He added one more line: *I will return tomorrow.*

He could not find the word for what he felt. He had: Non-Standard. He had: Atypical. He had: Outside Permissible Deviation Range. None of them were anywhere close to the right word. There was a shape to the right word and it was large and the Bureau's entire vocabulary slid off it without purchase, every time, like water off composite surface.

He lay in the dark.

He thought about 1.6 metres.

He was already planning how to go back.

# Chapter Three — Sub-Level Architecture

---

GENERATOR	VIRUS	TRUST
<b>91%</b> <i>Passive decay continues. ↓1%</i>	<b>5%</b> <i>Culture batch running. Unstable. ↑2% — Morgana working</i>	<b>0%</b> <i>She has heard him above the grille. — still zero. Watching</i>

---

The Bureau of Infrastructure Continuity maintained its historical archive on sub-level 1 of the Central Documentation Hub, which occupied the northeastern quadrant of the city's administrative core and smelled, like everything else, of nothing. Adonis had a Grade 4 Cataloguer credential which entitled him to query the geological and structural survey database for any sector within his assigned rotation, and Sector 7 was within his assigned rotation, and so what he was doing was, technically, within the scope of his credential.

He told himself this with the same flat, procedural care he had applied to the falsified moisture report. He was learning that deception had an architecture, and that the architecture worked best when its load-bearing elements were true.

He queried: Sector 7, sub-levels 7 through 12, pre-quake structural survey, full resolution.

The system returned a partial result. Levels 7, 8, and 9 rendered completely. Level 10 rendered with significant degradation — large sections replaced by grey placeholder blocks annotated Survey Data Unavailable: File Corruption Event, Year 14 Post-Equilibrium. Levels 11 and 12 did not render at all.

In their place: Access Restricted. Bureau of Genetic Continuity, Administrative Order 7-14-Omega. Credentialed access: Grade 9 and above.

Adonis looked at this for a long time.

Grade 9 was the Bureau's senior administrative tier. There were, city-wide, approximately forty citizens holding Grade 9 credentials.

He queried the adjacent data — not the restricted levels, but their margins. He pulled the cable routing diagrams for levels 8 through 10, which were not restricted because cables were not interesting enough to restrict, and traced the power conduits downward. At level 9 the main infrastructure bundle split into the standard service distribution network. But one conduit — a heavy-gauge run, rated for substantially higher amperage than anything in active service use — continued past level 9. It was annotated: Legacy Infrastructure. Non-Active. Do Not Service.

Non-active infrastructure did not draw power.

Adonis pulled the sector power consumption logs for the past thirty days. He cross-referenced the heavy-gauge conduit's routing path against the consumption data for the junction nodes it passed through.

The conduit was drawing power.

Not much. Not the kind of draw that would trigger an automated anomaly report — he could see that someone had, at some point, adjusted the baseline threshold for that particular node cluster upward by a small but precisely calibrated amount, which meant someone had not wanted the draw to flag. But it was there. A steady, low, continuous draw, the signature of something running at a constant operational level.

Something below level 9 was running.

He pulled one more query: Administrative Order 7-14-Omega. Public summary.

The system returned: Classification: Tier One Continuity Instrument. Content: Sealed. Date of Issue: Year 14 Post-Equilibrium. Issuing Authority: Bureau of Genetic Continuity, Founding Council.

Year 14. The city was in Year 211 of the Post-Equilibrium calendar. Whatever was below level 9 had been sealed and running and officially not-running for one hundred and ninety-seven years.

Adonis closed his session. He walked back through the administrative core at the Standard transit pace. He ate his midday allocation. He returned his cup.

In his private notation file he added a single line: *She is not an anomaly. She is the reason for the restriction.*

He stared at the word *she* for a long time. He had not decided to use it. It had arrived on its own, from the same place the shape without words arrived, precise and unauthorised. He did not delete it.

—

He went back to the geological survey and spent three evenings mapping what the data would and would not show him. At the southern extent of sub-level 8, where the pre-quake service corridor met the perimeter wall of what the survey annotated as Former Research Wing — Structural Status: Compromised, Do Not Enter, there was a secondary access point. Not the ventilation shaft. A door.

A real door, rated for personnel access, its pre-quake installation recorded in the structural inventory under a category that no longer existed in the Bureau's current classification system.

The category was: Level 2 Biohazard Access.

The city did not have a category for biohazard. Biology had been standardised. Biology was safe.

He knew where the door was. He had been mapping it with the methodical patience of a man who understood, by now, that he was not going to stop.

He answered the only remaining question — when — the following afternoon, at 14:30, when the assignment hall oversight was at its lowest staffing level. He had his Cataloguer's badge, his falsified moisture report, his unauthorised light. He had also checked out a Grade 2 thermal layer from the infrastructure depot under a legitimate cold-environment survey provision.

He had logged the zone temperature for sub-level 8 as minus four degrees Celsius in his private notation. The thermal layer was authorised for temperatures down to minus fifteen. He was, in this detail as in most others, operating just inside the edges of what was permissible.

He descended.

## Chapter Four — First Contact

---

GENERATOR	VIRUS	TRUST
<b>89%</b> <i>First fog event in eastern alcove. ↓2% — accelerating</i>	<b>7%</b> <i>Batch contaminated. Reset required. ↑2% net despite setback</i>	<b>5%</b> <i>He left when told. That's something. ↑— first contact</i>

---

The door was where the survey said it would be — a thick, grey-painted steel door, its original colour barely legible beneath two centuries of oxidation that had turned it the dark brown of old blood. The locking mechanism was a keypad, which was inoperative — its face cracked diagonally, the circuitry behind it long dead. The door itself, when Adonis pressed his palm to it and pushed, moved.

Not easily. The hinges had frozen through multiple cold cycles and the corrosion along the frame had partially fused metal to metal, and it took three attempts with his full bodyweight before the seal broke with a sound like a rib cracking, a single sharp report that he felt as much as heard, and then the door was open and the cold came out.

It was not the cold from the grille. The grille had given him a sample — a thread of what lay below, attenuated by distance. This was the source. It arrived against his face and chest like a pressure wave, immediate and total, carrying the ozone smell now at a concentration that hit the back of his throat and sat there, metallic and electric and entirely without precedent in his twenty-nine years of odourless experience. His eyes immediately began producing fluid. His sinuses clenched.

He stood in the doorway for a full twenty seconds before he could move.

What he moved into was a corridor unlike anything in the city above. The walls were lined with insulation panels — thick foam-composite sheeting, its outer surface covered in a foil material that had, in places, peeled away and curled like shed skin. Behind the peeled sections the concrete showed frost patterns in geometric

blooms, white crystal formations spreading outward from the moisture points like something trying to grow.

His breath fogged. He had not seen his own breath before. He watched it dissipate and tried to find a word for the shape it made and found nothing adequate and moved forward.

The corridor turned south and then the vault opened.

There was no adequate preparation for the vault. He had built a mental model of it from the structural surveys and the power consumption data and the evidence of the grille. The mental model had given him a large room, cold, with power infrastructure and cryogenic equipment. The mental model was not wrong. It simply had no scale.

The cryo-tanks lined the walls in both directions, receding into the middle distance in rows of precisely forty. They were taller than he'd imagined — chest-height on a Standard citizen, their upper surfaces domed, their flanks sheeted in insulation held firm by metal banding that still showed the manufacturer's markings in a script he did not recognise. Every tank hummed. The individual hum of each tank was low and nearly subsonic, but the combined hum of two hundred and fifty tanks in a sealed vault was a presence, a vibration that entered through the soles of his feet and travelled upward through his body and met the vibration he already carried and for one extraordinary moment they were the same frequency.

He stood very still.

The fog was at his knees. A low, drifting layer of nitrogen off-gas that moved along the floor in slow, purposeless eddies, disturbed by his entrance and now resettling. It caught his light and held it, diffusing the beam into a cold luminescence that made the whole floor look as though it were breathing.

At the far end of the vault, perhaps thirty metres from where he stood, a light was on.

Not his light. A fixed UV lamp, blue-white and slightly blurred at its edges, mounted above a workbench. The workbench was covered in equipment he could not immediately name. Metal housings, tubes, instruments whose functions he could not classify from this distance. What might have been a microscope, its upper components replaced with improvised parts that did not match the base unit.

And behind the workbench, with her back to him, was the figure.

1.6 metres, his brain supplied immediately, automatically, with the same procedural reflex it applied to moisture measurements. He could see her clearly now — the thermal layer, dark-coloured and heavily patched at the elbows and shoulders. The back of her head. Her hair, which was — his vocabulary arrived at the edge of its available territory and stopped. The Bureau's colour scale ran from Standard Bronze to Standard Bronze. Her hair was not on this scale. It was dark, darker than anything in the city above, and it absorbed his light rather than reflecting it, and this fact produced in him a response he could not file under any available category and simply had to carry.

He took two steps into the vault. She heard him on the second step.

She turned around with a speed that was not Standard — Standard citizens did not move with that particular quality of alertness, because Standard citizens had never needed to — and her face was toward him and his brain received the input and attempted, again, to classify.

It failed.

Not because her face was unusual in any way his training had prepared him to measure. It was simply a face that did not resolve into any known template — the proportions were different, the features arranged in a way that his pattern-recognition had no existing entry for, and in the gap between the input and the failed classification something happened in his nervous system that he had no instruments to measure, no category to file it under, and no reason to believe would ever resolve into anything as clean and functional as a word.

Her eyes were fixed on him with an expression his analytical processing eventually decoded, after a delay that embarrassed him, as fear moving rapidly into fury.

In her right hand was a wrench.

She said: "How."

One word. Her voice was flattened by the vault's cold — sound moved differently in sub-zero air, dampened and directionless. Her voice had a roughness, a texture, as if it had been used more often or more forcefully than Standard voices, in the service of something other than functional information exchange.

He said: "The structural survey. Sub-level 8. I'm a Cataloguer."

She said: "That doesn't answer the question."

He said: "The door was in the geological record. The power draw was in the consumption log. I cross-referenced —"

"Stop. How many people know you're here."

"None."

"That is not a credible answer."

"It is the accurate one."

She looked at him. He understood he was being assessed — not the way citizens assessed each other in the assignment hall, which was flat and mutual and essentially functionless, but in the way someone assesses a structural anomaly: looking for load-bearing points, failure modes, the precise nature of the risk. He held still and let himself be assessed.

The vault hummed around them. The fog drifted at their knees. The UV lamp above her workbench flickered — he counted, and it was thirty-eight seconds, which meant the power supply was slightly more degraded than the lamp's rated specification.

She said: "You have two options. You leave. You file nothing. You do not return." She paused. "Or I determine whether a body in sub-level 8 would be detectable from the infrastructure survey data, and I act accordingly. I have read every geological and structural survey on record for this sector. I know the answer to that question. You do not."

"The generator. The heavy-gauge conduit from level 9. It's rated for a load that your current draw doesn't justify. That means you've lost capacity." He paused. "How long has it been declining."

The wrench did not lower. But something in her expression shifted — the expression of someone who has been surprised by a question they did not expect.

She said: "Eleven years."

He said: "And you're still here."

She said, very flat: "There is nowhere else."

The vault hummed. The fog moved between them.

Adonis said: "I will leave."

Her eyes narrowed.

"I will leave," he said, "and I will not file anything, and I will return. Not to report. Not to document. To —"

He stopped. He had run out of words. He said the only true thing available to him:

"I don't know why. I only know that I will."

She looked at him for seven seconds. He counted. Then she lowered the wrench.

She turned back to her workbench. He walked back through the fog to the corridor, through the corridor to the door, through the door into the relative warmth of sub-level 8. He turned. The door hung open on its broken seal, the corroded frame still weeping rust where the hinges had given. He found the tool roll on the corridor shelf and spent fourteen minutes using the largest flathead to work the hinge pins back into alignment and reset the locking bar manually against its strike plate. Not locked. Not close to locked. But closed. Sealed enough that the cold stayed in and the corridor stayed out and the sound of the door, if someone were listening for it, would mean something.

He stood back and looked at what he'd done. Then he went up.

In his private notation file that evening he deleted the entry marked Proportional Anomaly and opened a new one. He wrote:

*She told me to leave. I left. I don't think she expected that.*

He added one last line: *She is the most —*

He stopped. He tried five different words in the blank and discarded each one. Efficient. Significant. Optimal. High-Performing. Maximum Utility. Every one arrived at her and slid off without purchase, like water off composite surface.

He left the sentence unfinished. He saved the file. He went to bed.

In the vault, forty-three metres below, the UV lamp flickered at thirty-eight-second intervals above a workbench where a woman sat with her back to a door she had not locked, listening to the sound of the Heart.

## Chapter Five — The Mirror and the Fog

---

GENERATOR	VIRUS	TRUST
<b>88%</b> <i>First thermal variance in Row C.</i> ↓1%	<b>9%</b> <i>Bearing seized. Batch at risk.</i> ↑2% despite failure	<b>5%</b> <i>He left. She is still processing this. — holding. Fragile</i>

---

The centrifuge bearing had been failing for nineteen days.

Morgana knew this because she had logged it — nineteen consecutive entries in the maintenance record, each one a variation on the same notation: Bearing housing: audible friction on high-RPM cycle. No yield loss detected. Monitor. The entries had the quality of a person telling themselves something they already knew was not true. The bearing was a 200-year-old component in a machine designed for a working life of fifteen years, and it was doing what such components did: failing, with the slow and absolute certainty of everything in the vault that was not her.

She had no replacement.

This was the central fact of her existence, presented to her fresh each morning: she had no replacement for anything. Not the bearing. Not the UV lamp that flickered at thirty-eight-second intervals because its ballast resistor had partially carbonised and she had bridged the gap with a length of copper wire. Which worked, mostly. Sufficiency was the standard to which everything down here was held because sufficiency was all there was.

The vault was 4.2 degrees Celsius this morning. She knew this without looking at the temperature gauge because she knew the vault's temperature by the quality of air in her lungs — 4.2 had a particular sharpness, a particular speed at which it reached the back of her throat. At 3.2, which was the threshold she had calculated for the first cryo-tank failures in Row C, it tasted like nothing at all.

The gauge, when she looked, said 4.2. She allowed herself the minor satisfaction of accuracy and moved to the workbench.

—

The sensory log was kept in a secondary notebook — not the maintenance record, which was functional and which she could not afford to corrupt with anything that was not functional, but a second volume, its cover reinforced with a strip of insulation foil. She had been keeping it since Year 4 of her conscious life in the vault, the year she had first accessed the data-ghost archive and understood what the embryos were — not the biological fact of them, which she had understood earlier, but the human fact of them.

She opened it to the current entry and read: *Embryo 4,891. Donor data: partial. Notation reads "Maternal: red-gold, coarse texture, high sebum." I have found a description of sebum. It is an oily secretion. I did not know hair could be oily. The data says "coarse" like it is a flaw. I think it may not be a flaw.*

She turned to a fresh page. Embryo 7,773. Donor data: extensive. This one was important to someone. Four pages — most donor records are a single paragraph. This one has a photograph.

Not of the donor. Of the donor's grandmother.

The photograph showed an old woman. Dark-skinned and white-haired, her face a landscape of lines. Morgana understood the lines were age. She understood it perfectly as a biological process. She did not understand it as a face. A face that had been lived in for eighty years, that carried the physical record of eight decades of expression, of weather and grief and whatever the old world had produced in the way of laughter. The lines were not damage. They were information — dense, accumulated, entirely individual information that could not exist on any face that had not been that specific face, living that specific life.

She had no lines. She was thirty-one years old and her face was as smooth as the day she had become conscious of having one.

She wrote: *The grandmother has lines I will never have. I am trying to decide if this matters to the project. I don't think it does. I think it matters to me, which is a different category.*

She closed the notebook. She had work to do.

---

The centrifuge was a Hettich Rotanta 460R, manufactured in 2031, and it had been running for approximately 183 years beyond its intended operational lifespan. Morgana sometimes spoke to it — not fondly, but the way she spoke to every instrument that held her life in its continued operation: with the flat, declarative tone of someone addressing a condition rather than an object.

She said: "I need you to run at 2,400 RPM for forty-five minutes without seizing."

The centrifuge said nothing. It had been saying nothing for 183 years.

At the back of the maintenance cabinet, in a box she had labelled Non-Compatible — Do Not Use, was a 6206 bearing — the wrong specification, one millimetre too wide for the 6205 housing. She had been twenty-two when she filed it there, newly rigorous about parts categorisation. She was thirty-one now.

She retrieved the 6206 and held it in her palm and thought about tolerances. A housing that had been running a 6205 for 183 years was not the same diameter as the specification called for anymore — metal deformed fractionally under load and thermal cycling. She measured the housing bore: 52.14mm. The 6205 specified 52mm. The 6206 specified 62mm.

She looked at the 6206 for a long moment. Then she picked up a half-round mill file and began, with the focused patience of someone who had learned patience the way she had learned everything else, to remove material from the outer race.

The filing took two hours and forty minutes. When she was done she had a bearing that existed nowhere in any parts catalogue — made by her hands from a wrong component and a will to make it right enough. She pressed it into the housing, torqued the retaining collar to spec, and said: "2,400 RPM. Forty-five minutes."

The centrifuge ran. Not quietly — there was a new note in its vibration, a slight unevenness she could feel through the workbench surface. She monitored it for the first ten minutes without moving, her fingertips on the workbench, reading the machine through her

hands. The vibration was consistent. The RPM held. She allowed herself to turn away.

—

She turned to the data-ghost terminal. The archive contained visual records for approximately 3,400 of the 10,412 embryos — the rest had been lost to file corruption. She had been recovering them systematically for years.

Today's batch included Embryo 6,201. She ran the cleaning algorithm. The noise resolved slowly — clothes first, always clothes first, then the legs of a person. Young legs. Narrow, with a particular quality of unfinished length, as if they had grown faster than the rest of the body had been prepared for. Then the torso. Then the arms, held in the posture of someone who had been asked to stand still and was not comfortable standing still. Then the face.

This face was fourteen years old.

It was a girl. Dark-skinned, with close-cropped hair and a jaw that was still resolving itself — the lower face slightly too wide for the upper, not yet settled into the adult configuration it would eventually achieve. Her eyes were wide-set and occupied with an expression that was not Standard. Standard expressions were composed. This girl's face was the output of a face that had too much — the eyes too wide, the jaw too set, the particular quality of energy in the held posture of someone deciding whether or not to comply.

Morgana looked at her for a long time.

Then she opened her sensory log and wrote: *Embryo 6,201. Development record, estimated age 14. I am looking at a person I am going to make.*

She stopped. Read that back. *Not this person. The potential of this person. What I am actually going to make is unknown. Uncontrollable.*

*The city above has no infrastructure for instability. Every chair is moulded for a 6'2" frame. Every door handle is set at 1.4 metres. Every transit pod seat is 52 centimetres wide, 95 centimetres deep, designed for one body and one body only, and that body is not this girl's body, and it is not my body, and when there are enough bodies that are not that body, the city will begin to notice. Not notice in the way that a person notices. Notice in the way that a system notices.*

*Friction. Resistance. The first hairline fractures in the infrastructure of Equilibrium.*

*I am making something I cannot control, to live in a world that was not built for it, and I am doing this because I am tired of being the only one.*

She read this back. She crossed out the last sentence. She wrote it again. She left it.

She wrote: *The man said he would come back. I did not tell him not to.*

She closed the notebook. She turned off the UV lamp. In the dark, the vault hummed around her — 250 tanks, one failing Heart, 10,412 probabilities in various states of frost — and for the first time in thirty-one years, the door at the corridor end was not locked.

She had not locked it after he left. She did not go to lock it now.

She thought: *I am going to make something I cannot control.*

She thought: *Good.*

---

End of Chapter Five

---

EXCERPT FROM

## THE VARIABLE

*Book II: The Difference*

---

You've just read the opening of *The Variable · Book I: The Infection*.

Thirty-two chapters remain. The vault. The virus. The first Variable child born in two hundred and eleven years. The moment the Standard finally breaks.

The full novel is available now on Amazon.

**[Read the rest of Book I](<https://a.co/d/001ZATiU>)**

---

## Book II arrives May 1, 2026

*The Variable · Book II: The Difference* — 74 chapters that carry Morgana, Adonis, and the 100 embryos across 847 kilometres through a world that was never supposed to be crossed. The hunt closes. The road ends. The broadcast goes live.

**[Pre-order Book II](<https://a.co/d/03nT6PZU>)**

---

Stay in touch — visit **stephensouthey.com** for Book III updates, cover reveals, and early access to new chapters.

Thank you for reading.

— Stephen Southey