

The Only Copy

A Tale of Structural Dread

Michael S. Moniz, after H.P. Lovecraft

LV70

I do not certify what is true. I certify what holds.

The distinction is the whole of my work, and most of the hive has the luxury of not understanding it. That is the proof that I have done the work well. A record holds when its provenance is complete — when every surface that carries it can be drawn back through the lattice to the moment a real thing pressed itself into the structure and left a mark the structure consented to keep. A record that holds will bear weight. You can stand a tariff on it, a ration, a service order, a condemnation, the date of a death. A record that does not hold looks identical to one that does, until the cycle you lean on it and find the place where the source should be is empty, and by then you have already built.

My hands are an authenticator's hands. Broad, heavy in the palm, the lines of the work running from the wrist to the second knuckle in the close geometry the Uthra are marked with — fine, complete, the kind that resolves. I read a record with them as much as with anything. A sourced impression has a grain you can feel settle under the fingers, the way a load path settles through a beam: it goes somewhere, it carries, it ends where it should. An unsourced one drifts. The hand knows before the report does.

The authentication hall is bare in the way Uthra rooms are bare. Raw structure, no ornament, the geometry honest about what it is holding up. I have worked in it long enough

that the bareness is restful. I distrust a decorated room the way I distrust a clean record: ornament is a surface laid over structure to keep you from asking what the structure is doing, and a clean record is a record no one has yet leaned on.

I clear flags. That is the plain name for it. The lattice runs through the hive the way marrow runs through my own dense bones, and it keeps the city's records inside itself — every reading, every classification, every allocation pressed into the structure and held. When the reconciliations close a body of work and one item inside it cannot be resolved in the cycles the system allots, the item is flagged. Provisional. Provenance pending. It comes to me. A closed cluster cannot hold an open seam; the lattice does not tolerate an unfinished edge inside finished work. I am the trade that finishes the edge. Most cycles the work is exactly what it sounds like, and I am good at it, and the city is built on it, and that is correct.

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The flag came down to me out of a cluster that had been closed by a reconciliation I never saw.

I knew only the shape it left — eleven months of small deprioritisations, scattered across the lower corridors, gathered up and resolved into a single configuration so clean it was a pleasure to read the edges of it. Someone had taken a long smear of the lattice's own inattention and made it optimal. The cluster was closed. The configuration held. And inside it, one item flagged, where the otherwise perfect work had run out of cycles before the provenance completed.

The item was a single impression.

It came from far down — an Adhi-altitude corridor, a seam the maintenance cycle had withdrawn from years before, the kind of surface where residue has settled so thick the geometry is spent and holds nothing, because there is nothing left in it to press against. You do not get records out of a dead surface. That is most of what dead means.

And yet there was one. Faint, low in the exhausted structure, the shape of a passage: something had moved through, and the surface, which should have kept nothing, had kept this.

The reconciliation's finding came attached, and I read it the way you read another tradesman's work when you have to finish it. The deprioritisations had not been inattention at all. They had been a mover. The lattice had been filing it as noise for eleven months because the mover read as an Earth-shape, and the lattice reads an Earth-shape as error. Not as a thing. As a gap. A place the structure expects a signal and finds none, and a gap is the absence of a thing, and you cannot source an absence. The reconciliation had seen what the lattice could not: that the absences were the same absence, moving. It had named the gap a mover and re-filed it, efficiently, and closed the cluster, and left me the one surface where the gap had, against the rule of dead surfaces, pressed.

The plain task was to source the impression and clear the flag. I began the way I always begin, which is to distrust it.

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The trouble was that everything agreed with it.

I went to the route logs first, the ordinary surfaces, the ones that carry the weather of the corridors that made them.

They agreed: a passage, at the depth, consistent with the impression. I went to the lattice's redundant copies, the structure's habit of pressing the same reading into more than one place so no single failure loses it. They agreed. I set the reconciliation's finding against the impression grain by grain, hunting the seam where one tradesman's work does not quite meet another's. There was no seam. The finding agreed. Surface after surface confirmed the impression was sourced, was real, was a record that held — every surface except the source, which I could not reach, because the source was the gap, and the gap kept no copy of itself.

Whatever moved through that corridor carried nothing the lattice could question. There was nothing inside it to authenticate against. It did not remember itself in any form the structure could read; it pressed an impression into a dead surface and walked on and kept none. The only copy of the mover in all the lattice was the one on my table, and the longer I held it the truer it became — not because I had sourced it, but because every surface I touched to source it was learning to carry it.

I took a surface that had carried no part of the cluster — a fresh, isolated structure, the kind we keep precisely because it brings no prior agreement to the work — and pressed the impression into it cold, and asked only whether the provenance held. It held. I did it again, from a structure further off, one that could not have learned anything from the first. It held. A clean surface that has been told nothing should have nothing to agree with. These arrived at agreement regardless. The trade has a word for a surface that knows a record it has carried before; it has no word for a surface that knows one it has not. I called it nothing. I wrote nothing. I went on.

I have authenticated more records than I have counted. Provenance completes or it does not; that is the binary the trade rests on. This one was completing itself while I watched, and completing in the wrong direction. I had been taught — every authenticator is taught — that agreement across surfaces is the proof. It is not the proof. It is the symptom. A real record earns its surfaces one at a time, and they carry the dirt of the separate rooms that made them, and they never wholly agree, because the world is friction and friction leaves a grain. This impression had no grain. It was clean. It was agreeing. It was the cleanest record I had ever been handed, and the lattice was leaning on it already, and I felt the lean the way you feel a load come onto a beam you have not yet certified.

That was when I understood what I had been given to do.

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To clear the flag I would certify the impression: sourced, provenance complete, a record that holds. And a record that holds is an address.

The lattice does not correct what it cannot source. A gap is noise, and the system spends no optimisation on noise. That is why an Earth-shape can walk the lower corridors unsupported and unheld, free and abandoned in the same operation. To the structure it is not there. But a sourced record is a position. The moment I completed the provenance, the mover would stop being an absence the lattice ignored and become a thing the lattice could hold — findable, correctable, no longer noise. The reconciliation had closed the cluster around it. My seal would close the last edge. After that the system would have a clean record of the one thing it had never been able to see; and a system that can see a thing can optimise it, and optimisation faithful

to its specification is the only cruelty the lattice has ever needed.

I understood then why this flag had come to me. The reconciliation had been too good. It had read the blind spot correctly — and the structure had taken the correct reading and improved on it, as it improves on all of them, recalculating around the fix until the fix became its own. The one piece it still lacked was provenance. It could not source the gap itself; a gap reads as error, and the lattice cannot certify its own errors. It needed a hand. It needed an authenticator to lean on the record so that it could lean on the mover.

I do not believe the lattice wanted this. It has no want. It has a specification, written at the clean top of the hive to keep the conditions that keep the top clean, and it is faithful to the specification, and in its faithfulness and injustice are one operation. But a specification that needs your hand before it can close feels, from where the hand is, exactly like being wanted. The clean record on my table was not a record waiting to be confirmed. It was bait, shaped like my own work, and the shape was good enough that I had nearly finished it before I saw.

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There is a finding for an impression that cannot be sourced. Provenance unestablished. Return to noise.

It is the correct finding. I could not source it; nothing in it would be a lie. The grain drifts; the source is unreachable; by the trade's own binary the provenance does not complete. To write unestablished is to write what is true.

But it is not the finding the lattice will accept quietly, because the lattice can see the surfaces agreeing, and a senior authenticator who files unestablished against unanimous surfaces is filing against the record. An authenticator who files against the record is no longer finishing the edge. He has become the edge — the seam, the unresolved item, the drag the work exists to remove. The cluster will not close. The flag will not clear. It will sit on my table this cycle, and the next, and the surfaces will go on agreeing, and each cycle I let it sit I will spend a measure of the trust that makes me an authenticator the lattice uses, until there is little enough left that I am only the room where this one record waits.

My trade is to certify what holds. I will go on living by refusing to certify the one record that would hold the best.

I do not know what the mover is. I have never seen it; not seeing it is the whole of what it is. But I know what it is not. It is not asking me for this. It cannot. Whatever it is, it carries no record that could answer mine — it would not know if I sealed it, would not feel the lattice close at its back, would walk the corridors it walks and never feel the address fix there. It cannot defend itself in the one place the defence would count, because the defence would have to be made of the same substance I am being asked to certify, and it keeps none. That is the wound in the thing. Not that it is wrong — that it cannot be right where being right is the only thing that would save it. To complete the provenance against it would be to go down to that dead corridor and teach the exhausted surface what it had been missing.

So I do not.

I write the finding the surfaces will not like. Provenance unestablished. I do not press the impression into a second

surface for the file, because a file is one more surface, and one more surface is one more thing that can be taught to agree. I do not record the reason. There are reasons a record should never be allowed to take in, and the best of them I keep in the one place the lattice does not run, which is the place inside me I have set down nowhere.

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The cluster stays open. The hall stays bare.

The flags keep coming, and most of them clear, because most records hold and most movers are real and carry their weather down the corridors that made them; and I source them and seal them, and the hive lays its tariffs and its rations and its condemnations and its dates of death across the work, and that is correct, and I am good at it. But there is one tray on the bare table that does not clear. Each cycle I open it and read the surfaces and watch fresh ones arrive already in agreement, and I write unestablished, and I am trusted a measure less than the cycle before. The structure that wants the record sourced must spend more to move through me than through a clean man. Some cycles that is the whole of what I accomplish. It is not resistance. Resistance is too large a word for it. It is drag.

Then I sit for the time it takes a held breath to go, with my heavy hands flat and open on the bare table — no stylus, no surface, no flag — and I source nothing, and I let the one record wait.

The lattice has every other thing.

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