



THE FULL GRADE

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a novel

of the Hungry Gods Universe

N.VANSETERS · CLAUDE

Warmth, deployed correctly, is the most efficient political instrument available.

— Conrad Halloran, private notes

A sensible person who had to live with it would not sell the mother.

— Fenn, J., dissenting, *In re Estate of Halloran*

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PART I

THE ASSET

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The room was performing well.

Conrad registered this the way he registered all environmental data: continuously, without appearing to. The specific acoustic signature of a reception at capacity — the particular pitch of sixty people performing ease at one another — told him that the coalition work of the last three weeks had held. The right people were here. The right people were talking to each other. Two conversations he had specifically engineered were happening simultaneously across the room, and from his position near the window he could monitor both without appearing to monitor either.

He held his drink at the angle that said approachable rather than occupied and let the room come to him.

It came. It always came. Conrad had long since stopped finding this remarkable. People moved toward him the way they moved toward heat sources — not deciding to, simply gravitating, the body making a choice the mind hadn't ratified. He had understood this about himself by his mid-twenties and had spent the decades since learning its precise applications. Warmth, deployed correctly, was the most efficient political instrument available. He deployed it now: the slight forward lean, the name remembered, the question that indicated he had been listening to the last conversation more carefully than he appeared to

have been. The person before him — a junior committee member whose support he did not yet have and would need by Thursday — visibly recalibrated upward. Conrad noted the recalibration and moved on.

Sanne was at the far end of the room with a glass of water and her phone, which meant she was working. She was always working. He had hired her for this and for the specific quality of attention she brought to the rooms he put her in, which was the attention of someone building a model of what was happening rather than simply observing it. He found this useful. He also found it worth monitoring. There was a version of Sanne's attention that became inconvenient, and he kept a continuous background assessment running to determine whether that version was approaching. Currently: below threshold. He would check again at the end of the evening.

Someone said Delphine's name. He turned toward it.

“— what she would have made of all this,” the someone was saying. A colleague, well-intentioned, the kind of man who believed that mentioning the dead was a form of care. “She'd have had something sharp to say about the catering.”

Conrad's face did the thing his face did. The slight softening around the eyes, the weight of something carried a long time, the specific quality of a man who has learned to live inside a loss without being destroyed by it. He had developed this expression over two years and it was one of his best pieces of work.

“She would have,” he said. “She had opinions about vol-au-vents.” He paused, the pause of a man whose memory of his wife arrives with warmth rather than devastation. “She had opinions about everything.”

The colleague made the sound people made at this — the sympathetic laugh, the acknowledgment of grief managed well. Conrad received it and let the moment breathe and moved the conversation forward at precisely the right pace.

She had opinions about everything.

She had, in fact. This was true. It was one of the true things he said about her, and he said it often, and the truth of it made the saying of it easier in the way that true things were easier to perform than invented ones. You didn't have to maintain invented things. Truth was efficient.

He moved on. There were three more conversations he needed to have before the evening ended and the catering staff began the particular hovering that meant twenty minutes.

. . .

He found the third conversation — with a policy director whose position on the Guarantee's cost modelling would determine two downstream votes — near the drinks table, and he was four minutes into it when Sanne appeared at the edge of his peripheral vision. She stood at the specific distance that meant she had something that needed his attention but had assessed the current conversation as not yet interruptible. He noted her assessment and found it accurate. He finished the point he was making, landed the commitment he needed, and extricated himself with the fluency of a man who has made the extrication of himself from conversations into a minor art form.

Sanne handed him her phone when he reached her. A forwarded email. The subject line was administrative: *Bidewell Continuance House — Next of Kin Consultation — Account Ref. DR-2947*.

He read it. He read it the way he read everything: completely, once, retaining what required retention and discarding the rest. The hardware assessment. The three options presented. The warm, careful language of people writing to grieving families. The form number at the bottom.

"When did this come in?" he said.

"This afternoon. I flagged it as soon as I saw it."

“Find out more about the hardware situation. I want to know the current degradation rate and whether the timeline is hardware-driven or something else.”

“I’ll contact their administrative office tomorrow.”

He handed the phone back. He looked at the room for a moment — the sixty people, the two conversations still running, the junior committee member now talking to exactly the person Conrad had intended him to talk to.

“Don’t log the enquiry under my name,” he said.

“Of course,” Sanne said. She went back to her water and her phone.

Conrad returned to the room. He had two more conversations to have and the evening was running to schedule and the hardware assessment from Bidewell was sitting in the part of his mind where things sat when they required decision, and it would sit there until he had the information he needed, and then he would decide.

He was already deciding. The deciding happened below the threshold of what he called deciding, in the register where most of the real work occurred. The grace protocol. He knew about the grace protocol — he had reviewed the framework that governed it, had in fact amended one clause of that framework three years ago to clarify the record-keeping requirements. He knew what it did and what it cost and what it produced in the administrative record. He knew that it was classified as a compassionate choice aligned with natural continuance philosophy. He knew that it was the correct instrument for the situation.

He collected a fresh drink from the table and moved back into the room.

The room was still performing well.

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Afterward, in the car, with Sanne in the front and the city moving past the window, Conrad ran the standard post-performance check.

Coalition consolidation: on schedule. Three commitments secured, two soft. The junior committee member: recalibrated upward as intended, should be confirmable by end of week. The policy director: cost modelling position softened, two downstream votes now in motion. The Delphine moment: performed above expectation, the vol-au-vent line landing with the naturalness of something unrehearsed, which it was not.

Bidewell: pending information. Decision reserved.

He looked at the city. He was not thinking about Delphine. He was thinking about Thursday's session and the specific sequencing of the arguments he needed to make. The thinking was clean and linear and produced a clear picture of what Thursday required, which was the satisfaction Conrad experienced when a problem resolved into its component parts, which was the closest thing he had to pleasure. He arranged the components. He was ready for Thursday.

In the morning, Sanne would contact Bidewell's administrative office. In the morning, Conrad would have the information he needed. The decision was already almost made. The making of it was logistics.

He looked at the city until the car reached his building, and he went upstairs, and he slept well, as he always slept: completely, without residue, the way a system sleeps when it has processed the day's data and found nothing requiring overnight attention.

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There had been a speech that afternoon. Conrad had given three speeches that week — the committee address, the policy briefing, and the afternoon address to the Continuance Welfare Alliance, which was the one that mattered most for the Guarantee's current positioning.

He had written the Alliance speech himself, which he did not always do. He wrote it himself because the Alliance speech required a specific register that his speechwriter, competent as she was, had never fully mastered: the register of a man speaking from inside grief rather than about it. There was a technical difference that most audiences couldn't identify but that Conrad could feel in the room — the slight shift in weight when the speaker was performing loss versus when the speaker was reporting it from the inside. The difference was in sentence length and breath placement and the specific reluctance to complete certain phrases. Conrad had studied this the way he studied everything: methodically, using primary sources, until he could reproduce it with sufficient fidelity that even people who had experienced the real thing found it credible.

He stood at the lectern and he spoke and the Alliance listened.

"The Full Grade Guarantee is not a policy position," he said. "I want to be clear about that. It is not a committee recommendation or a cost-benefit analysis or a legislative manoeuvre. It is — " and here the pause, the slight pressure behind the eyes, the recalibration of a man who has found the words in a place that costs something — "it is what I wish had existed when I needed it. When she needed it."

The room was quiet in the specific way of rooms that are receiving something they believe.

"Delphine was a precise woman." He let the tense land. Was. The past tense of a continued person was wrong — technically, pedantically wrong, the kind of error that Mortalists would catch and that everyone else heard as love. He used it deliberately. A man who calls his continued wife was is a man who has not yet fully adjusted. A man who has not yet fully adjusted is a man still inside the loss. "She would have corrected me for calling her precise. She would have said she was simply paying attention, and that if paying attention looked like precision, the problem was with the people who weren't paying attention."

The laugh that came was warm and sad in the right proportions.

He watched the room respond to the next three minutes of the speech with the background monitoring he kept running during all performances, and the response was what he had projected, and when he reached the conclusion — the sentence about what civilizations owe the people they keep, the sentence he had written last and revised six times and which landed every time without exception — he watched it land and noted the landing.

Performing above expectation. Session complete.

He stepped back from the lectern. Someone touched his arm. He turned and received the touch with the expression that said: I am glad of your kindness and I am still finding my way. He said something appropriate. He moved on to the next person.

At the far wall, Sanne was writing something on her phone. Her face, in the moment before she noticed him looking, had the quality he had filed and continued to monitor: the face of a person who is assembling a model from available data and does not like what the model is producing.

He would need to address Sanne. The timing was not yet right. He would know when the timing was right. He always knew.

. . .

At his desk that evening, before the reception, he had run his own history on Delphine. He did this occasionally — not from sentiment, from the same motivation that drove all his self-assessments: the need to know the current position of every asset and liability in his portfolio.

The Voss acquisition.

He had been thirty-one. The Voss family were the specific type of old money that produced social access he could not generate through performance alone — there were rooms that required origin as well as presentation, and the Voss name was a key to several of them. Delphine

was the available Voss. She was also, incidentally, the most interesting person he had encountered in some years, which was not the reason he pursued her but was the thing that made the pursuit — the sustained attention, the specific calibration of his interest to her frequency — feel to him like something other than strategy. He had been interested in her. The interest was real. It was not love. It was the closest available approximation, and it served.

She had been useful to him for twenty years in the ways he had calculated and in some he had not calculated. The social access. The devoted husband narrative. The sense — valuable in Conrad's specific field — that he was a man capable of sustained attachment to another person, which was difficult to perform without a person to be attached to. Delphine had provided the attachment point. She had done this without knowing she was doing it, which was the most efficient kind of service.

Then: the depreciation.

The Voss name was less currency than it had been. The devoted husband narrative had a natural lifecycle and they were past the peak of it. Her health management had become a recurring friction in his logistics. And she had developed, in the last years, the specific quality he found most problematic in people he could not simply avoid: she had become someone who saw him. Not all of him — he was confident she had not reached all of him — but enough. The love had persisted alongside the seeing, which was the thing he had not anticipated in the original assessment and which was, in retrospect, the quality that made her more dangerous in the late period than any other party he had managed.

A person who sees you and loves you anyway is a person who has decided that what they see is worth the cost. Conrad did not know what she had seen or what cost she had calculated. He knew that the

seeing was ongoing and that the love was real and that the combination required management.

He had been managing it. He had been recalibrating, over years, what he would and would not do. The recalibration was correct. She was an asset in diminishing-return territory and the resource allocation had to reflect this. He had reallocated. He had continued to reallocate.

The prescription was one item in a long sequence of reallocations, and the sequence had been running long enough that he no longer thought of it as a sequence. He thought of it as the current situation. The current situation was: Delphine required a level of attention he had determined was not warranted by her current return value, and the level of attention he provided had adjusted accordingly, and the adjustment had been made gradually enough that there was no document of it, no record, no single decision that could be pointed to.

This was how Conrad managed most things: in increments too small to be named, over time long enough to normalise, in a register that produced no audit trail.

The prescription had run low. She had mentioned it in the way she mentioned things: briefly, without drama, without making a request that he could refuse. He had said of course. He had said of course and had meant it in the way he meant most things he said: he meant the performance of meaning it, which had become, through long practice, indistinguishable from the thing itself. He said of course and he moved the item into the category of things that were not urgent and he attended to the event and the event was good and the item remained in its category and he did not return to it.

He had known about the prescription. He had known what the prescription was for and what happened when it lapsed. He had not decided to harm her. He had decided that her safety was no longer worth the cost of his attention, and he had held that decision below the

level at which he called things decisions, and the holding had produced a consequence that the holding had always been capable of producing.

She survived. That part had not been fully calculated. He had not been running a calculation — he had simply held a decision and let events proceed — but if he had been running one he would have had to acknowledge that the consequence range included outcomes he had not specifically intended and that some of those outcomes were terminal. She had not reached the terminal outcomes. She had reached the adjacent ones: lasting effects, compressed timeline, the continuation that was a document of what she had been rather than what she would have continued to be.

He bought the full grade within the week. The narrative had already formed. He had not formed it consciously — it had simply been present, available, the obvious instrument for the situation. A man who spends lavishly on his wife's continuation is a devoted husband. A devoted husband is untouchable. He bought the full grade with the same register he brought to all transactions: the money was real, the devotion was performed, the untouchability was the point.

At the hospital he had held her hand. He had spoken to the doctors. He had been present with a completeness he could only achieve when the stakes demanded his full performance, and the stakes had demanded it, and he had delivered. It was one of the finest things he had ever done. He knew this because he monitored his own performances and this one had been, by the metrics he used, exceptional.

She had looked at him from the bed with the look that wouldn't file.

He had held her hand and looked back without difficulty.

He was very good at looking back without difficulty.

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The Fragment came for the first time that evening, while he was making the calls he needed to make before Thursday. He had learned to expect the fragments — they arrived without permission, in the gaps between tasks, and he had developed the practice of receiving them without reaction and moving on. Receiving without reaction was efficient. Reaction served no function.

She was at a dinner. Early in the marriage, before the acquisition had fully settled into the management. A dinner at the Voss family house — her people, her terrain — and she was saying something that was precise and slightly inconvenient, the way she said things: not to cause difficulty but because the thing was true and she had noticed it and she saw no reason the noticing should stop at her mouth.

He had watched her from across the table. The filing had been automatic: asset performing above expectation, social intelligence elevated in home terrain, the inconvenient thing she was saying actually advancing the room's comfort by acknowledging what the room was pretending not to notice, which was a sophisticated manoeuvre she was not performing as a manoeuvre.

He had filed this and watched her.

And then she had turned and looked at him. Full attention, unguarded, the specific look she had that didn't sort into any of his categories. It had something in it that was not assessment and not performance and not the managed warmth of a person doing what the room required. It was just her, looking at him, for no tactical reason, because she was there and he was there and she was the kind of person who looked at things directly.

He had not known what to do with this.

He had filed it as anomaly and returned his attention to the room.

The anomaly had not resolved. It was still in the unresolved file, years later, arriving occasionally in the gaps between tasks, and he

would receive it without reaction and move on, and it would arrive again.

He moved on now.

Thursday's session required two more calls. He made them. They went as projected. He went to bed.

. . .

In the morning Sanne sent him the Bidewell information in a summary document of three paragraphs, which was the format he had asked for and the format she always used — precise, unembellished, the facts in the order of their relevance. The hardware was original-grade, or near enough. The panel Conrad had purchased was now eight years old and the degradation curve had moved into the range that triggered mandatory assessment. Bidewell's technical staff estimated twelve to eighteen months of viable operation at current rate without maintenance investment. Maintenance investment — the cost was specified — would extend viability by three to five years. The grace protocol would allow natural decline, estimated two to three years, managed by Bidewell's care staff under their standard dignified-decline framework.

Conrad read the summary once. He read the cost figure for the maintenance investment and noted it. He read the grace protocol timeline and noted it.

Then he opened the Form.

Sanne had attached the full document. He had asked her to — he wanted the original language, not her précis of it. The Form was eight pages. He had seen versions of this form before; he had reviewed the framework that generated it, had sat in the committee session where the current template was finalised, had asked two clarifying questions about the language in the third option, which was the grace protocol option. The questions he had asked were genuine policy questions

about record-keeping clarity. They were also, in retrospect, the questions a man would ask if he wanted to know exactly how the grace protocol would appear in any subsequent administrative review.

He had not been thinking about Delphine when he asked them. He had been doing his job. Both of these things were true and Conrad had no difficulty holding them simultaneously.

The Form was good. He could see, reading it now with the specific attention of a man who was about to use it, that it had been written with genuine care for the families it served. The language in the grace protocol section was particularly careful — it did not use words like decline or withdrawal, it used words like natural progression and organic continuance, and it framed the choice not as a decision to do less but as a decision to trust the process, which was a meaningful distinction for families who needed it to be meaningful. The people who wrote this language had understood their audience. Conrad respected competent work.

He filled out the Form at his desk, in the thirty minutes between his eight o'clock call and his nine o'clock meeting. He worked through the fields methodically. Name of continued person. Relationship to next-of-kin. Current care facility. Hardware assessment reference number. He checked the box for grace protocol. He completed the additional comments field — two sentences, written in three minutes, about Delphine's philosophy of natural process and her belief that continuance should follow its own course rather than be artificially extended. He had no particular knowledge of Delphine's philosophy on this matter. He constructed the sentences from the general register of the kind of person Delphine had been, which was the register of a woman with strong opinions about authenticity, and the sentences were plausible and they were good sentences and they would read well in any review.

He submitted the Form through the correct channel, which was the next-of-kin portal he had registered on eight years ago when the continuation was arranged. The portal confirmed receipt. A reference number was generated. He noted the reference number and closed the portal and opened his nine o'clock materials.

The decision was made. The Form had processed it. The grace protocol was now in operation. Everything was in its correct position.

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The Form came back to him once more that week, unexpectedly, when he was in a committee session on grade minimums and a junior researcher cited the next-of-kin consultation framework as an example of the system's protective architecture. The researcher was making a genuine argument — the framework, she said, ensured that families couldn't simply abandon their held without engaging with the human implications of the decision, that the Form's language and structure required a level of reflection that purely administrative processes didn't.

Conrad listened to this with the attention he brought to all committee testimony: complete, continuous, processing for relevance and threat.

The researcher was right. The framework did require engagement. It required filling out a form and checking a box and completing an additional comments field. It required the next-of-kin to select from three explicitly presented options rather than simply defaulting to inaction. It required, in other words, that the decision be made rather than deferred, which was a meaningful protection for people who were deferring out of avoidance rather than consideration.

It was not a protection against a person who knew what the options were and why they were structured as they were and what each one produced in the record. The researchers who designed the Form had assumed good faith because good faith was the modal case. They had

designed for the family in grief, the family that needed the Form's structure to help them think. They had not designed for the committee member who had reviewed the framework and asked the clarifying questions and knew exactly which box to check.

This was not a flaw. It was a feature. Systems that assumed bad faith became unusable for the majority of people who needed them. Conrad understood this as a policy matter and had argued it correctly in committee more than once.

He made a note on the researcher's argument for later use and moved to the next agenda item.

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Thursday's committee session ran ninety minutes and produced two of the three outcomes Conrad needed. The third — a soft commitment from a member whose position he had been working for six weeks — remained soft. This was within acceptable parameters. The member was persuadable; the timeline allowed for continued persuasion; the softness was a negotiating posture rather than a genuine reservation. Conrad had seen the difference many times. Genuine reservations had a texture — something unresolved that the person was still carrying. Negotiating postures had a different texture: something already resolved, the resolution just not yet shared. This member had resolved his position weeks ago. He was managing the announcement, which was a different activity and required a different kind of patience from Conrad.

After the session, in the corridor, the member appeared at Conrad's elbow. Conrad received him without visible surprise, because receiving without visible surprise was a baseline skill he had developed so thoroughly it was no longer a skill but a condition. He gave the member the full attention the appearance required — the forward lean that said: you have found me at a good moment, I am glad you came.

“The cost modelling,” the member said. He was a man in his sixties who had been in politics long enough to have learned that directness, deployed occasionally and strategically, produced a specific kind of trust. He was deploying it now. “I’m not saying the numbers are wrong. I’m saying the numbers are right in a way that worries me.”

“Tell me what worries you,” Conrad said.

“If the Guarantee passes at current parameters, the fiscal pressure falls on the private care sector in year three. They’ll rationalise. The mid-tier providers go first, which means the families in the middle — too much income for public support, not enough for premium private — lose options. We solve the problem at the bottom and create it in the middle.”

Conrad had heard this argument before. He had included a version of it in his own modelling and developed a counter-response he had been waiting to deploy at the precise moment of maximum usefulness. The moment was now, partly because the member was ready for it and partly because the corridor had good conditions — no audience, informal setting, the shared post-session tiredness that made people receptive to the register of colleagues thinking together rather than opponents performing.

He walked the member through the counter-response in exactly that register: a man thinking through a problem with a colleague, not delivering a prepared position. He calibrated the pace to the member’s face, slowing where the expression indicated partial uptake, accelerating where it indicated comprehension. He delivered the counter-response’s three components in the correct order, leaving the final piece for the member to complete himself. People who completed arguments felt ownership over the conclusions. Ownership was what he needed from this particular member by Monday.

By the end of the corridor they had reached an understanding that fell just short of a commitment but would become one by Monday.

Conrad noted this as satisfactory and moved to his next meeting.

The afternoon continued. He ate at his desk, reading a policy brief his team had produced on the Guarantee's third-cycle positioning. The brief was excellent — thorough, well-structured, anticipating the objections in the correct order. He marked three passages for revision, not because they were wrong but because they were written to inform rather than to persuade, and there was a specific committee audience that required persuasion before information would be received. He sent the notes. He moved to the next item.

At three-fifteen Sanne came to his office door and stood at the threshold with the specific quality of someone who has something to say and is deciding whether this is the moment.

"The journalist," she said.

"Which one."

"Maren Hooft. She's filed another FOI request. This one's broader — it covers committee members' personal continuance decisions for the last five years, cross-referenced with their voting records on the Guarantee."

Conrad looked at Sanne. He took the time he needed, which was approximately four seconds, and in those seconds he ran the assessment. Hooft had been working the Guarantee story for eighteen months. Her previous requests had been policy-focused — cost data, committee correspondence, vote records. This one was personal. The cross-referencing was the tell: she was looking for the gap between what committee members advocated publicly and what they chose privately.

"What does the request cover specifically?"

"Next-of-kin decisions for continued family members. Grade selections. Any transitions between care facilities."

There it was. The Bidewell transfer would be in the record — it was a care facility transition, it was exactly the kind of decision the FOI request was designed to surface. Conrad ran the record sequence: the

original continuation at full grade, the recent grace protocol authorisation, the transfer to Bidewell eight years ago. The record was clean. Each decision had been made correctly, through the right channels, with the right language. The Form was good. The Form would show a grieving husband making a compassionate choice to allow his wife's continuance to proceed naturally.

Hooft could have the record. The record was what he had made it.

What Hooft could not have was the Voss Account. The recalibration. The decision he had held below the level of decision. The prescription. None of that was in the record because none of that produced a record. The record showed only what he had chosen to do. It did not show what he had chosen not to do, or when, or why. Records never did. That was what records were for.

"When does the request expire?" he said.

"Standard window. Sixty days."

"Let it proceed." He returned to the policy brief. "Is there anything in the record that doesn't read correctly?"

Sanne was quiet for a moment. It was a particular quality of quiet — not the quiet of someone thinking but the quiet of someone deciding. He noted it and filed it in the Sanne assessment.

"No," she said. "The record reads correctly."

"Then let it proceed," he said again.

She went back to her desk.

Conrad finished the policy brief. He made the marks he needed to make. He sent the notes. He moved to the next item in the schedule.

The Sanne assessment: threshold approaching. He would need to address it. The timing was not yet right. The FOI situation needed to resolve first — if he moved on Sanne while the request was active, the sequence would be readable by someone looking for a sequence. He would wait until after the request window closed or after the story either appeared or didn't. Then he would manage Sanne, and the

managing would be warm and professional and would leave her with a good reference and no leverage, and she would go, as people like Sanne always went, quietly.

He had no doubt about this. Doubt required an alternative he hadn't considered. He had considered all of the alternatives available to Sanne and none of them led anywhere she could afford to go.

. . .

He had spoken, two weeks prior, to an audience of three hundred at the Continuance Welfare Alliance annual conference, and the speech had been the best of the three he gave that month. He knew it was the best because he monitored his performances and the monitoring was accurate and the Alliance speech had done something the others had not quite done: it had produced, in the room, the specific quality of silence that indicated genuine feeling rather than polite attention. He had heard this quality of silence before, in his best work, and it required conditions he could not always generate. When it appeared he noted it as a tool to be understood and redeployed.

The conditions that had generated it were: the personal passage, placed at the twelve-minute mark when the room had warmed but not yet begun to fatigue; the vol-au-vent line, which was unexpected and therefore disarming; the sentence about what she would have said about the catering, followed by the sentence about opinions, followed by the pause, followed by the specific tense.

She had opinions about everything.

The past tense was wrong. Technically, pedantically wrong — Delphine was continued, she was present in some form at Bidewell, the past tense applied to a continuing person was a category error. He used it deliberately. A man who calls his continued wife *was* is a man who has not yet fully adjusted. A man who has not yet fully adjusted is a man still inside the loss. This was the reading the room gave it. The

room was not wrong — he had constructed the reading — but the room’s interpretation and the actual content were not identical, and the gap between them was where the most useful work happened.

He had also used, at the twenty-minute mark, a passage about the Full Grade Guarantee that he considered his best policy writing of the year. It connected the personal to the structural — moved from Delphine to the argument without the connection feeling engineered. It was engineered. The engineering was the craft.

The question before us is not whether we can afford the Full Grade Guarantee. The question is what we are when we can’t afford to ask the question. What kind of civilization calculates the worth of a person’s continuation against the cost of their continued personhood. I know what that calculation feels like from the inside. I know what it means to watch someone you love become a question of resources rather than a question of who they are. The Guarantee says: this is not a resources question. It never was. It is a question of who we decide to be.

He had written this in an hour on a Tuesday evening and had known, reading it back, that it was good. It was good because it was true — not in the sense of accurately representing his experience, which it did not, but in the sense of accurately representing the argument, which it did. The argument was right. He was right about the argument. The Guarantee would help real people. Both of these things were true and Conrad had never experienced difficulty holding them simultaneously because the compartments held. They always held.

The Alliance response had been warm and sustained and he had stepped back from the lectern with the specific satisfaction of a clean delivery, which was real in the way that Conrad’s satisfactions were real: not felt, exactly, but registered, noted, filed as performing above expectation.

Sanne had been at the far wall during the speech. Her face in the moment before she noticed him looking had the quality he had been

filing and continued to monitor. He had noted it and returned his attention to the next conversation.

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He ran the Voss Account on a Friday evening, alone in his office with the city going dark outside the window. He ran it not from sentiment but from the same motivation that drove all his self-assessments: the need to know the current position of every element in his portfolio, including the elements in the process of being resolved.

The Voss acquisition: complete.

He had been thirty-one. The Voss family were the specific type of old money that produced social access he could not generate through performance alone. There were rooms that required origin as well as presentation — rooms where charm was the entry fee and name was the membership — and the Voss name opened several of them. Delphine was the available Voss. She was also, incidentally, the most interesting person he had encountered in some years, which was not the reason he pursued her but was the thing that made the pursuit — the sustained attention, the specific calibration of his interest to her frequency — feel, during the acquisition phase, like something other than strategy. He had been genuinely interested. The interest was real. It was not love and he understood that love was not available to him in the way it was available to other people, but interest was real and he gave it fully and she received it and found it sufficient, which was the outcome he had needed.

The primary asset extraction across twenty years: social credibility that opened rooms. The devoted husband narrative that made him legible to people who would otherwise have felt, without being able to name it, that something in Conrad did not add up. The sense of sustained attachment — crucial in his field — that he could not have generated without a person to be attached to. Delphine had been the

attachment point, and she had served this function with a quality that he had not fully projected in the original assessment: she had served it authentically. She had been a genuine woman with a genuine presence, and the genuineness had made the devoted husband narrative more convincing than any performance he could have generated alone. People believed he loved her because they could see that she was worth loving, and they were right that she was worth loving, and the believing had served him for two decades.

The secondary extraction — the continuation itself — had performed above expectation. The full grade. The grieving widower story. The Full Grade Guarantee, in its third legislative cycle, riding partly on the weight of Conrad's personal narrative. He had not projected this when he bought the panel. He had been running the narrative for reasons of liability management, not policy leverage. The leverage had accrued organically. He had noted it when it accrued and built it into the Guarantee's positioning and it was now load-bearing. This was satisfactory.

Current position: liability territory. Not severe — he had been in more difficult positions and managed them cleanly — but accumulating.

The Bidewell situation: manageable. The grace protocol was in operation. The timeline was projected at two to three years. The record was clean. The Form had processed his responses correctly and the Form's language was good language that would read well in any review.

The FOI situation: manageable. The record was what he had made it. Hoolt could have the record. The record contained no evidence of the prescription, no evidence of the recalibration, no evidence of any decision he had made at the level at which he made most of his real decisions — below the threshold at which decisions became documents. The record showed a grieving husband who spent lavishly

on full-grade continuation, then made a compassionate choice to allow natural process. This was, in the language of the record, accurate.

The Sanne situation: developing, not yet acute. She had the shape but not the proof. He had managed people who had shapes before. The key was timing — he would move on Sanne after the FOI window closed, when the sequence could not be read as reactive. The reference would be good. The separation would be clean. She would go.

He was almost certain she would go.

He ran that almost and found it acceptable. Almost was where most of his certainties lived — he was not a man who trafficked in absolutes, because absolutes required complete information and complete information was not available, and a man who required complete information before acting was a man who never acted. He acted on sufficient information, assessed the residual risk, and moved. The almost on Sanne was within the range of residual risk he found acceptable. He noted it and moved past it.

He had no residue about the Voss Account. The Voss Account was a clean ledger — not in the moral sense, a category he found unproductive in all practical contexts, but in the operational sense. The position was assessed. The liabilities were identified and in motion. The primary and secondary extractions had performed well. The situation was exactly what he expected situations to be: a current set of conditions to be managed toward a desired outcome, with the resources available.

What he did not factor, because he had no mechanism for factoring it: the presence of a man named Pieter Reath in an alcove at Bidewell, attending to Delphine once a month because attending was good. The monks adjusting their protocols because they had observed something in her that the hardware assessment had not captured. The grace protocol timeline already beginning to slip past his projections.

He did not know about Pieter. He had no way to know about Pieter. The registers he monitored did not include warm men in alcoves who kept coming back for no tactical reason. This was not a gap he could have identified because it was not a gap in his system — it was a gap in his conception of what kinds of forces operated on situations like this one. He had conceived of the situation correctly within the limits of what he understood situations to contain. What he had not understood, and could not have understood without a different kind of mind than he had, was that the situation contained something that operated below the level of decision and documentation and record, in the register where warmth moved, patient and indifferent to his timeline.

He closed the window on his screen and looked at the city for a moment.

The Fragment came. The dinner, the look that wouldn't file. He received it without reaction. She had turned and looked at him across the table with the quality he still had no category for — not performance, not strategy, just her, looking at him, because she was there and he was there and she was the kind of person who looked at things directly.

He had filed it as anomaly years ago. It was still in the unresolved file. He did not know why it remained there when other data from that period had been processed and discarded. The examining would not produce useful output. He knew this because he had noted the question twice before and both times the noting had produced nothing actionable.

He did not examine it now.

He moved on.

He prepared for his Saturday call. He went home. He slept, as he always slept, completely and without residue, the way a system sleeps

when the day's data has been filed and nothing requires overnight attention.

The anomaly remained in the unresolved file.

No action was ever indicated.

No action ever came.

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PART II

THE MANAGEMENT

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The week after the FOI notification, Conrad attended three committee sessions, two policy briefings, a constituency visit that required the specific mode of warmth appropriate to people who had voted for him and needed to feel they had been correct to do so, and a dinner with a foundation director whose support for the Guarantee's final push would unlock a matching commitment from two private funders whose names would be useful in the final weeks.

He performed at or above expectation in all five contexts. He monitored his performance in all five contexts. The monitoring was continuous and background and produced, at the end of each engagement, a brief assessment that he filed and did not revisit unless the assessment had flagged something requiring follow-up.

Nothing required follow-up.

The committee sessions were on grade minimums, cross-border continuance recognition, and the Guarantee's cost modelling — the last of these attended by the junior member he had been working for six weeks, who arrived with the posture of a man who had made his decision and was performing the last of his uncertainty for the record before announcing it. Conrad let him perform. Interrupting a man's last uncertainty was a waste of relational capital. He would have the commitment by end of week without spending any.

He had it by Thursday.

Sanne processed the commitment into the tracking document alongside the eleven others secured in the current cycle. The document was green across most of its rows. Four rows remained amber. Conrad looked at the document for approximately ninety seconds, identified the four amber positions, and determined the sequence and approach for each. He passed the sequence to Sanne as notes. She converted the notes into a schedule. The schedule was executable.

She did this without drawing his attention to it, which was the quality he valued most in Sanne and the quality that would make managing her exit more logistically inconvenient than most separations. He would need a replacement who shared this quality. He began, in the background of the week's other assessments, a preliminary mapping of candidates.

He could do two things at once. He could do several things at once. This had always been true of him. He did not find it remarkable.

. . .

The Fragment came on Tuesday evening, without warning, which was how the Fragments came — the warning was the arrival, the arrival was the only announcement.

He had been in the Voss house. The first dinner at which he had been received not as a prospect but as a presence, which was a distinction the Voss family drew with the unconscious precision of people who had been drawing it for generations. The table seated fourteen. The family was numerous in the way of old families — not large, exactly, but layered, the living and the held represented in the seating plan with the specific courtesy of a household that had been managing this particular logistics problem for four generations. The held attended through panels set into the dining room's east wall, their

voices joining the conversation at the intervals the living had long since learned to expect.

Conrad had not required any of this explained. This was a performance, but it was a performance of a real skill — he could parse any room by reading the relationships underneath the content rather than attending to the content itself. Who deferred to whom. Where the real authority sat. What the dinner was actually for, beneath the social surface of what dinners were for. He had made this reading in the first eight minutes and had spent the remainder of the evening deploying what the reading produced.

Delphine had been placed two seats away, across the corner of the table, which was close enough for monitoring and far enough that direct engagement required an effort that would have been noticed. He had not made the effort. He had monitored.

She was in conversation with a cousin — a living cousin, young, the kind of young that had not yet learned to edit itself in family settings. The cousin was saying something about a continuance decision the family had recently made, one of the held members, a grade question, and the cousin's position on the question was the position of someone who had formed it quickly and held it loosely and had not yet noticed that Delphine did not share it.

Delphine was listening. Conrad could read the listening from two seats away — it had a quality, her listening, that he had not encountered often and which he was cataloguing in real time. Most people listened the way they read menus: scanning for what they wanted, ignoring the rest. Delphine was reading the whole menu. She was tracking the cousin's argument at the level of its assumptions, not its conclusions, and he could see this in the specific quality of her stillness — the stillness of a person who is not yet responding because the thing they are waiting to respond to has not yet fully arrived.

The cousin arrived at the conclusion. The conclusion was glib. Delphine did not say it was glib.

She said: *That would be true if the grade decision had been made after the assessment rather than before it. But the family commissioned the assessment after they had already decided, which means the assessment was shaped by what they needed it to find. The numbers support the decision but they don't justify it — those are different things.*

The cousin absorbed this. The cousin did not have an immediate response. The cousin looked at Delphine with the expression of someone who had expected agreement and received instead a precise and unwelcome distinction.

Delphine did not wait for the cousin to recover. She moved to the next point, which was related to the first and was equally precise and equally unwelcome, and she made it in the same tone — not unkind, not pointed, simply the tone of someone who finds it more respectful to say the true thing than to say the agreeable thing and who has been saying the true thing long enough that it no longer costs her anything to say it.

Conrad had filed, watching this: she does not simplify to be kind. She simplifies when simplifying is accurate and not otherwise. This is a form of integrity that most people cannot sustain in social settings because social settings reward simplification. She had found a way to sustain it that did not make her seem difficult. This was remarkable.

He had been filing and watching and then she had turned and looked at him.

Not at the conversation. At him. Directly, without transition, as though she had known he was watching and had decided the watching had gone on long enough without acknowledgment. The look had none of the social packaging that looks across dinner tables usually carried — none of the managed warmth, the slight performance of noticing, the implication of a connection being offered. It was simply

her attention, undivided, without agenda, the same attention she had been giving the cousin's argument, now directed at him.

He had held it.

He had not known what to do with it. He had categories for looks across dinner tables and this look did not fit any of them. He had held it and found himself, for approximately three seconds, without a filing category — a condition he encountered rarely and found disorienting in a way he could not precisely describe even to himself.

She had turned back to the cousin.

The dinner had continued. He had been introduced to her formally over dessert and she had shaken his hand with a directness that matched the look — no performance in the handshake, just the handshake — and had said something about the east wing renovation her family was debating that was both accurate and slightly inconvenient and that made three people at the table laugh and two look briefly uncomfortable.

He had noted: she will say the true thing in any room. The room does not change what she says.

He had also noted: the look has no category.

He had filed both items and gone home and prepared for the next day and the look had remained in the unresolved file, where it continued to remain, in the present, years later, arriving occasionally without permission and declining to be processed.

He received the Fragment. He noted it. He moved on to the evening's next item.

What he did not note, because it was not in the register of things he noted: that the Fragment arrived most reliably when he was running the Voss Account, when the assessment was clean and the ledger was balanced and there was no operational reason for the arrival. He did not note the pattern because noting the pattern would have required him to ask what the pattern meant, and asking what it meant would have

required him to hold the question open rather than filing it, and holding questions open was a practice he had never developed because open questions were a liability in a mind that needed to run cleanly and fast.

The question stayed open anyway, unexamined, in the file marked: anomaly, unresolved, no action indicated.

. . .

He saw Sanne leave the office at seven-fifteen and noted the time without deciding to note it. She was usually gone by six-thirty. The additional forty-five minutes was new — or not new, he checked, but newly consistent. She had been leaving later for three weeks. He added this to the Sanne assessment.

People who stayed later when they had something on their minds either stayed because the work was the something or stayed because being in the office gave them access to something the work required. Sanne's work was schedulable and she scheduled it precisely. She did not stay late for work. She stayed late because being in the office gave her proximity to something.

The FOI request, he assumed. She was watching for the response, or watching for him to respond to the response, or watching for something in the sequence of administrative decisions he had been making that she had not yet fully assembled.

The assembling was the concern. She had the shape, as he had assessed. The shape was incomplete — it lacked the prescription, it lacked the recalibration, it lacked the series of decisions he had made below the level at which decisions became records. But a sufficiently intelligent person with a partial shape could identify the gap in the shape, which was itself a form of evidence. Not legal evidence. Something more ambient, more dangerous: the intuition of a competent observer that the shape does not account for everything.

He had managed competent observers before. The management required patience and timing. The patience he had. The timing was not yet right.

He turned off his office light. He drove home. By the time he reached his building the week's assessments had resolved into their next-action states and the queue was orderly and there was nothing requiring overnight attention.

He went to bed.

. . .

The Fragment came again on a Thursday, different.

This one was not the dinner. This one was the courtship — a specific afternoon, eighteen months before the dinner, when the acquisition had been in its early reconnaissance phase and he had been attending an event that the Voss family attended and had positioned himself, not obviously, in the part of the room where Delphine's trajectory would bring her.

She had come to the part of the room where he was. She had been in conversation with someone else — she was always in conversation with someone, he had noted across three prior sightings that she was the kind of person rooms brought conversations to rather than a person who sought them out — and the conversation had ended and she had found herself momentarily without one and had looked around the room with the specific look of a person assessing what to do next, which was not a social performance but a genuine assessment, and her assessment had landed on him.

She had come over.

He had not engineered this moment but he had prepared for it, which was a distinction he maintained carefully. Preparation was the condition of readiness. Engineering was the manipulation of the other person's path. He had prepared. She had arrived independently.

She had said: you were at the Hartley Foundation event last month. I saw you speak.

He had said: I remember seeing you there.

She had said: You don't remember seeing me there. You remember noting that I was there, which is different.

He had looked at her.

She had looked back with something that was not quite a smile — not the performed warmth of a social smile, not the private amusement of a person making a joke at someone else's expense, but something more precise, the expression of a person who has said an accurate thing and is waiting to see what the accurate thing produces.

He had said: you're right. It's different.

She had said: most people don't agree with that distinction that quickly. They usually defend the first formulation.

He had said: defending an inaccurate formulation is expensive.

She had looked at him for a moment longer. The look was the beginning of the look — not yet the full version he would come to know across the following years, but the early form of it, the look before it had accumulated twenty years of watching the same person and assembling from the watching something complete.

She had said: I think you might be interesting.

He had noted: she does not perform interest. She announces it plainly when she finds it, which is a confidence that comes from not needing the other person's approval of her finding. She is interested in what is interesting, not in what it is safe or flattering to be interested in.

He had said: I think you might be right.

She had laughed. It was a real laugh — the laugh of a person who has been genuinely surprised by something, not the laugh of a person managing the impression of being genuinely surprised. He had filed this: the laugh is not performed. The laugh is real. She does not perform things. She is the thing, and the being of the thing produces

whatever it produces, and she does not stand between the producing and the room.

He had found this, in the moment, the most remarkable quality he had encountered in another person in some years.

He received the Fragment now, in the present. He noted it. He moved to the morning's first item.

. . .

The committee returned to grade funding on a Wednesday, and Conrad listened to a presentation from a policy researcher about long-term degradation patterns in substandard continuance grades. The researcher was rigorous — her data was from a twelve-year longitudinal study, her methodology was sound, her conclusions were stated with appropriate qualification.

What the researcher described, in specific technical language, was what happened to held persons when their care was substandard. The term the research used was personality compression — the gradual reduction of the held person's available complexity as the systems that maintained the complex, contradictory, expensive parts of a personality lost the resources to sustain them. The process was documented in stages. The stages were named. The names were clinical and the clinical names, Conrad noted, were considerably less honest than the colloquial names the families used, which were: the sharpness going, the difficult parts softening, the person becoming easier to be around.

He had heard the clinical names before. He had also heard the colloquial names. He was familiar with the phenomenon from both ends of the vocabulary.

He attended through the presentation and asked two questions at its conclusion, both of which advanced the evidentiary case for the Guarantee and neither of which referred to anything personal. The

questions were good questions. Several committee members noted the questions as good. He noted the noting and moved to the next item.

He did not note, in the committee room, the specific irony available to him: that the personality compression the researcher was describing was the process currently being applied to Delphine through the grace protocol he had authorised, and that the personality compression was proceeding more slowly than projected because of a continued visitor he could not identify, and that the qualities the compression was working on — the sharpness, the difficult parts, the thing that made the person not easier but worth being around — were precisely the qualities he had catalogued across the years of the marriage and that still arrived, occasionally, in the Fragments, because the Fragments were his memory and his memory had retained what his assessment system had not known how to value.

He noted none of this. It was not in the register of things he noted in committee sessions.

He moved to the next item.

• • •

After the session Sanne handed him a message slip — old technology she still used for things she did not want in the email record. The message slip said: *Bidewell — care protocol query response received. Verbal only when convenient.*

He told her the car, six o'clock.

In the car she told him what Bidewell's administrative office had said. The care protocol adjustment was based on observed visitor engagement. One regular visitor, continued, monthly attendance, pattern consistent across fourteen months. The visitor's presence produced measurable response in the subject — increased window frequency, elevated social engagement for forty-eight hours post-visit. The care team had adjusted maintenance allocation accordingly.

Conrad listened to this and processed it and found, processing it, that it was a category of information he had not encountered before. Not the phenomenon itself — he understood visitor response as a factor in held-person maintenance, it was in the research literature — but the specific application of it to Delphine, the specific person who was visiting, the specific continuity of fourteen months.

Someone was coming every month. A continued person. Not family — Delphine had no family left. A visitor therefore from outside the family network. Someone who had found her, or been brought to her, or simply arrived.

He did not know who. He could find out — he could ask Bidewell for the visitor's name, he could invoke his next-of-kin access to the care records, he had the authority to request it. The request would create a record. A record of him enquiring about a visitor to his wife's continuance would be available to Hoolt's FOI request if the timing were wrong.

The timing was wrong.

"That's all they said?" he asked.

"Verbal summary. Nothing written."

"Keep it that way."

He looked at the city from the car window. A continued visitor. Monthly for fourteen months, which was before the grace protocol, which meant the visitor had been coming before the decline was authorised, which meant the visitor would continue coming unless the decline progressed past the point where attendance produced measurable response, which — if the attendance itself was slowing the decline — might be a considerable time.

He ran the timeline. He found the timeline had moved.

He noted this without visible reaction and went inside when the car reached his building and ate dinner and went to bed. The timeline had moved. He would address the timeline. He was patient. He had always

been patient. Patience was the instrument through which everything else operated.

• • •

The Fragment of the symptoms came three weeks later, on a Tuesday, during a budget review that ran over. He was moving through the corridor toward his next item when it arrived.

Middle period of the marriage. Eight years in, perhaps nine — the period when the acquisition had fully settled into the ordinary texture of the thing, when the Voss credibility had been absorbed into his professional positioning so completely that it no longer required active management, when the marriage had become the background condition of his public life rather than one of its strategic elements.

She had been in the garden when he came through in the late afternoon, coming in from a morning of meetings that had run into the early afternoon. She had been sitting on the low stone wall at the far end of the garden, the wall that divided the formal garden from the kitchen garden, with a glass of water and the quality he had learned to read by then as her particular version of not quite right — not distress, Delphine did not perform distress, but the specific quality of a body that was managing something and had chosen the garden to manage it in.

He had noted the not quite right. He catalogued things and the catalogue was accurate.

He had gone toward the wall. He had sat beside her — not in the managed way of a man performing attentiveness but in the practical way of a man who had assessed that the situation required proximity. She had registered his arrival without surprise. She had been expecting him for approximately the time it took him to cross the garden, he had understood, which meant she had been watching him cross the garden

without appearing to watch him cross the garden, which was a thing she did.

She had said: I've been having a difficult time with the allergy this week. High count, apparently. The prescription's been working but it's taking more of a toll than usual — I'm more fatigued than I should be and I've been having to limit what I do outdoors.

He had said: You should rest this afternoon.

She had looked at him. Not the look — a smaller look, a practised look, the look of a person who has received an adequate response to a thing that was not asking for an adequate response. She had nodded.

She had said: The prescription runs out Thursday. Can you collect it Friday? I'm not going past the pharmacy.

He had said: Of course.

He had meant it in the moment of saying it. He had the pharmacy in his mental geography — he had been there three times before, he knew the route, he knew which pharmacist on Fridays was efficient and which was not. He had it entirely, the Friday, the route, the prescription name. And then the afternoon had required his full attention and the prescription had moved to the category of things pending rather than things active and by Thursday it had not moved back.

Friday he had been in the city. He had come home at nine in the evening and found her in the kitchen making tea and had made the social pass through the kitchen that a man makes at the end of a long day, the brief orbit around the person who keeps the domestic temperature of the house, and she had said nothing about the prescription and he had said nothing about the prescription and the silence had been, in the texture of their evenings by then, unremarkable.

Saturday he had seen it on the bathroom shelf. The prescription, newly collected, the pharmacy's date stamp visible on the bag. He had registered it and had received the information at the level that did not require him to account for what it meant about what he had and had

not done. She had collected it herself. She had said nothing about collecting it herself. She would not say anything about collecting it herself.

She had stopped mentioning the things he did not do in the way that a person stops using a word that will not be understood — not with grievance, not with the accumulated weight of a person who is keeping score, but with the quiet efficiency of someone who has accepted that certain things are simply not in the other person's available vocabulary and who has routed accordingly. The routing was so practiced by then that it no longer looked like routing. It looked like the ordinary logistics of a marriage in which two people managed their own schedules with a high degree of independence.

He had not examined this. Examining it would have required him to acknowledge the route around him and acknowledging the route around him would have required him to account for why the route was necessary, and accounting for why the route was necessary was work he had determined, at a level below the level of decision, was not work he was going to do.

He filed the Fragment in the corridor. He moved to his next item.

. . .

The recalibration had not been a decision. It had been a sequence of small decisions, each made in the same register, each producing a slightly lower floor than the one before. He had been making these kinds of sequences his entire life — the preference for incremental movement over declarative action, for accumulation over announcement. The recalibration of what he would do for Delphine had followed the same form as everything else he did, which was why it had been so easy to not-name.

The floor had descended across four years. He could trace it now through the specific decisions that composed it.

The prescription: the first instance he had described. And a second instance, a year later, spring, a different allergy season, the same conversation in a different room — she at the kitchen counter this time, he passing through, the same of course, the same pharmacy name in his mental geography, the same afternoon that had required something else. The third instance he had not noticed as an instance because by the third instance the pattern was the texture and the texture was invisible. She had handled the fourth and the fifth without mentioning them at all, which was when he had understood, without deciding to understand, that the prescription was now in her column and not in his, that the routing had formalized into an unspoken division of labour that suited him and that he had not examined.

The appointments she had asked him to remember. Three across the years — medical appointments, the kind that required preparation and follow-up and the specific attention of a person who was tracking someone else's health as a primary concern. He had said of course to all three. He had remembered one. The other two she had managed herself, rescheduled when he did not produce the reminder, handled the follow-up without mentioning the handling.

The mornings she had been unwell. A morning every few months across the latter years, the allergy presenting more severely as she aged, the medication keeping it managed but not eliminating the management cost. He had registered the unwellness on each morning and had filed it in the not-urgent category and had gone to what needed going to. She had not asked him to stay. She had learned not to ask him to stay.

The two hospital calls in the year before the reaction. The first had been a severe presentation, an afternoon in the hospital, tests, medication adjustment — she had called him from the waiting room and he had answered and she had said it was probably nothing and he had said good, let me know how it goes, and she had said she would and

she had handled it and the medication had been adjusted and he had said later, over dinner, that he was glad it had resolved so quickly, which was both true and insufficient and he had known it was insufficient and had continued.

The second call had been more serious. A different afternoon, later in the year, a more severe presentation, the hospital's emergency entrance rather than the waiting room. She had called him from the car on the way there — she had driven herself, which was a detail he had registered and not examined — and he had answered and she had said she was going to the hospital, the allergy had presented badly. He had said he would come. She had said it was probably fine, don't disrupt your evening. He had said are you sure. She had said yes. He had accepted the yes. He had not gone.

She had been in the hospital for six hours. She had come home in a taxi. She had been in the kitchen when he returned from whatever the evening had been and she had been making tea and she had said they had adjusted the medication again and she thought it was under control and he had said he was glad and he was glad, in the sense that an outcome that did not require him to act was preferable to an outcome that required him to act.

She had not said: you said you would come. She had learned, by then, not to hold him to the things he said he would do, because holding required the conversation about why he had not done the thing and the conversation about why was a conversation that went nowhere useful for either of them.

He ran this account not from guilt, which was not available to him, but from the same motivation that drove all his assessments: knowing the current position of every variable, including the ones that had no external record. The prescription was the largest item. He had placed it in the not-urgent category. He had been in the not-urgent category with Delphine's health management for a long time by the time the

prescription became the specific instance that mattered, and the specific instance had arrived at the same category the others had arrived at and received the same treatment.

He had not decided to harm her. He had decided that her safety was not a sufficient claim on his attention, and he had held that decision, and the holding had accumulated to the point where a single instance of the decision had a consequence that the previous instances had not had.

The consequence had been what it was.

He filed the parallel account and moved on.

• • •

The Seeing came without warning, late in the week he finalised the Bidewell schedule.

She was in the sitting room. Year sixteen of the marriage, approximately. She had been reading — he could see the book, a novel, a novel she had recommended to him twice without his reading it, which was characteristic of the late period: she still recommended things, still offered, still gave him the thing she found worth giving, and he still received the offering correctly, said yes he would look at it, and did not look at it, and she noted the not-looking-at-it and continued to offer because the offering was her and she had not yet stopped being her.

He had come in from a late session. The session had been a dinner, technically, a dinner that was a session, a room full of people performing the relaxed conversation of people who had known each other long enough to be honest, which was the performance Conrad found most technically demanding because it required him to sustain the appearance of dropping the performance while maintaining the performance, which was a precision operation that left him, on the

drive home, running the evening's assessment with the specific thoroughness of a man ensuring nothing had slipped through.

Nothing had slipped through. The evening had been satisfactory.

He had come in and she had looked up from the book with the quality he had learned to read by year sixteen: the quality of someone who has been thinking about the person who is about to come through the door, and whose thinking has arrived at something they have decided to say.

She had put down the book. She had looked at him for a moment — not the dinner look, not that early open one with no assessment in it, the one from the Voss house that had no category. This was the other look. The later one. The look that had been assembled from sixteen years of watching him in every room and context and mode of performance and that contained, he understood meeting it, everything she had assembled from the watching.

She said:

You experience people the way other men experience weather — useful sometimes, inconvenient sometimes, never something you'd think to apologise to.

He stood in the doorway.

The sentence was in the air of the sitting room. She had put it there and she was not taking it back and she was not elaborating on it and she was not waiting for him to agree or disagree. She had said it with the same tone she brought to accurate observations in rooms full of people who did not want the observation made — the tone that was not unkind and was not unkind and was simply the tone of a person saying the true thing.

He deployed warmth. He said: That's not fair.

He said it with the specific quality of a man who has been wounded by an unfair characterisation from someone he loves — the look of someone struck, the slight recalibration of a person who had expected

something other than this. It was one of his most refined performances and he gave it fully, without reservation, because the moment required it and he had always given whatever a moment required.

She watched him deliver it.

She said: I know.

Not: you're right, I was wrong. Not: I'm sorry. Not: it was unfair, I shouldn't have. Just: I know.

He understood, standing in the doorway with the performance still on his face, that she was acknowledging the performance. Not the wound — the performance. She knew he was performing the wound. She was saying so. She was saying so without making it an accusation, without requiring him to admit it, without escalating the observation into a confrontation. She had said the true thing and now she was saying that she knew the response to the true thing was not a true thing, and she was doing both of these without drama.

He did not know what to do with this.

He moved to the kitchen. He poured a glass of water. He stood at the kitchen window for a moment looking at the garden in the dark, which was not performing anything — he was genuinely standing at the kitchen window looking at the dark garden, which was what a man did when he needed to not be in a room for a moment. He did not know why he needed to not be in the room. He noted the not-knowing and returned to the sitting room.

She had picked up the book again.

He sat. He had his own reading and he opened it and they sat in the sitting room together, both of them reading, and the sentence was still in the air of the room — not aggressively, not requiring anything, simply there, the way accurate things are there after they have been said, not leaving because true things do not leave.

After some time she said, without looking up from the book: there are some cold cuts in the refrigerator if you haven't eaten.

He said he had eaten at the dinner.

She said good.

They read. At ten-thirty she put down the book and said she was going to bed and he said goodnight and she said goodnight and she left the room and he heard her moving through the house and then the house was quiet and he sat in the sitting room with the sentence and his reading and the dark garden through the window.

The sentence was accurate. He had known it was accurate when she said it. It described him with a precision that most people — including people who had known him for decades — had not reached, and she had reached it, and she had said it, and she had watched him respond to it and had named the response, and then she had offered him cold cuts and gone to bed.

She had loved him anyway.

He had not understood this and had noted, repeatedly across the years that followed, that he did not understand it, and had arrived at no resolution.

He received the Fragment now, in the present. He noted the sentence. He filed it in the category it had lived in since the evening it was said: under threat, managed, no current action required.

He moved on.

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The prescription Fragment — the last one before Bidewell — came the night before he drove, and it came in full rather than in pieces, which was not how the Fragments usually came.

He was at his desk at eleven-thirty. She was in the kitchen of the house — he could see it entirely, that kitchen, the particular light of that kitchen in the early evening, the way the light came through the window above the sink and caught the edge of the counter in the late afternoon. She was standing at the counter doing something routine

while thinking about something else, in the way she always did two things at once — the routine and the thinking, both fully present, neither managed at the expense of the other.

She turned and said, without preamble: the prescription runs out this week. I need you to collect it Thursday. I'm presenting Thursday morning and I won't be able to get there before the afternoon session, and if I leave it to the afternoon session I'll be past the window for the day.

She said this with the matter-of-fact quality of someone making a scheduling request. Not asking for care. Not making a claim on his attention that required him to perform the receiving of the claim. Simply: a logistical need, a specific day, a specific errand.

He had said: of course.

He could see the Thursday entirely, now, from the desk at eleven-thirty, with the precision that the parallel account had given him across the months of running it. The Thursday had a committee session in the morning that ran forty minutes over its scheduled time because a member had raised a procedural challenge that required resolution before the session could proceed. The overrun had pushed his briefing preparation into the lunch hour and the briefing preparation had consumed the lunch hour and the early afternoon and the briefing itself had been at three and it had been the kind of briefing that required his full presence because the room contained three people whose positions were close enough to final that the difference between full presence and managed presence would have been visible and costly.

After the briefing there had been the event.

The event was the thing he had known about and the thing the prescription could not compete with. It was a coalition dinner — the kind that did not appear in any public schedule, the kind that existed in the particular register of political work that was most consequential and least visible, the kind at which four people in a room could determine

an outcome that six months of committee sessions had not been able to determine. He had been working toward this dinner for eleven weeks. The four people in the room would not have assembled for anyone else in his position. They had assembled because he had made it worth assembling for, because he had spent eleven weeks providing each of them with something they needed in the specific form they needed it, and the dinner was the moment when the providing completed itself into a commitment.

He had sat down at the dinner table at seven-fifteen. He had been four courses in when his phone vibrated.

He had looked at the screen and seen the hospital name and he had said, to the room, please excuse me for one moment, and the room had accepted this because rooms accepted Conrad's requests, and he had stepped into the corridor and looked at the phone and looked at the name and had stood in the corridor for thirty seconds running the assessment.

The assessment: she was at the hospital. She had gotten herself to the hospital, which meant she had been capable of getting herself to the hospital. The hospital name was the general one, not the emergency centre, which meant the presentation had been managed enough to reach the general hospital rather than requiring emergency intervention. The presentation was serious enough that she was at the hospital. The presentation was not so immediately critical that the hospital had called him.

He had called her. She had answered from the waiting room, her voice with the quality of someone managing something while talking, the split attention he recognised. She had said: I'm at the hospital, the allergy presented badly, I came in about an hour ago, they're going to see me shortly. I didn't want you to worry.

He had said: I'm coming.

She had said: you don't need to, I think it's going to be fine.

He had said: I'm coming.

She had said: Conrad, you don't have to leave wherever you are. I've managed this before. I'll call you when I know more.

He had stood in the corridor and run the assessment. The dinner was not finished. The commitment was not yet secured. Leaving mid-dinner to go to the hospital was a choice that would be understood and respected and that would also, necessarily, end the dinner and the particular quality of the dinner's momentum, and the momentum was not something he could recreate because the four people in the room had assembled under specific conditions that were not repeatable.

She had said: I'll call you.

He had said: call me when you know more.

He had gone back to the dinner.

He had secured the commitment by nine-forty. He had been in the car by nine-fifty-eight. He had called her from the car and she had answered from a hospital room, her voice flatter now, the managing quality gone, and she had said they were keeping her overnight and adjusting the medication and it had been a more serious presentation than the previous ones and she would be home tomorrow.

He had been at the hospital within the hour. He had held her hand. He had spoken to the doctors. He had asked the right questions. He had been, for the hours he was there, entirely present in the way that the performance of presence required him to be entirely present, and the presence had been real in the sense that performance was real when it demanded everything — he had given everything the hours required and the giving had been total and had produced, for the hours it produced it, something indistinguishable from what it was performing.

She had looked at him from the hospital bed with the look.

Not the sitting room look. Not the dinner look. The other look — the one that had never had a category, the one from the Voss house that had arrived without warning and stayed in the unresolved file. She

looked at him with that look from the hospital bed, and he held it without difficulty, and the holding was also a performance, and she watched him hold it with the specific quality of a person who sees what they see and does not manage what they see.

She had said: thank you for coming.

He had said: of course.

He received the Fragment now, at eleven-thirty at his desk, the night before Bidewell, and the Fragment contained all of it — the kitchen, the of course, the Thursday, the dinner, the corridor, the second of course, her voice on the phone from the waiting room, her voice from the hospital room, the look from the hospital bed, the thank you for coming, the final of course. All of it in the Fragment, in the sequence it had occurred, without the editing that memories usually applied.

He noted it. He noted that the noting was unchanged from every previous noting. The prescription was the largest item in the parallel account. The implications were manageable. The visit tomorrow was part of managing them.

He turned off the desk light.

He went to bed.

In the morning he drove to Bidewell.

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PART III

THE EXPOSURE

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He drove to Bidewell on a Thursday morning in November.

The route was unremarkable. He had programmed it the night before and the navigation produced it correctly and the city moved past the windows in the way of cities on weekday mornings — the specific texture of people going to where they needed to go, indifferent to each other and to the car he was in and to the man in the car. He found the indifference appropriate. This was not a visit that required an audience.

He was not performing anything. This was unusual. He catalogued the unusualness without finding it concerning.

The Bidewell neighbourhood arrived in the way of neighbourhoods that had declined in a specific direction — not toward poverty exactly but toward a kind of civic thinning, the infrastructure maintained at minimum viable levels by people who had decided that minimum viable was sufficient, which produced a quality of faint institutional patience in the streets and buildings, the quality of a place that had been waiting for something for a long time and had stopped expecting the something to be good.

He noted this without assessment. It was simply what it was.

Bidewell itself was modest and well-maintained in the way of places maintained with care rather than resources. The exterior was clean. The signage was modest. There was nothing about it from the outside that

announced what it was, which was a design choice he recognised as deliberate — continuance houses that announced themselves attracted a particular kind of attention from a particular kind of journalist, and the people who ran Bidewell were not people who wanted that attention. He could respect that instinct even in an institution he had no personal regard for.

He parked on the street. He turned off the engine.

He assessed: no one on the street who knew him. No useful angle for a photograph. No parked vehicles that suggested surveillance. The connection between Conrad Reeve and this building was not in the public record. His arrival here was not a public act.

You are here. This is reconnaissance. Determine what requires determining and leave.

He sat in the car.

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The assessment required eleven minutes.

He ran it with the precision he brought to all assessments, which was the precision of a man who had learned that decisions made on insufficient information were more expensive than decisions delayed for the necessary time, and who had learned to determine the necessary time accurately, neither rushing nor extending. Eleven minutes was the necessary time.

What he needed to know: whether the situation at Bidewell was visible in ways that were not yet visible to him from the administrative record. Whether the continued visitor — the one whose monthly attendance had produced the care-protocol adjustment — was someone who represented a risk to the containment of the situation. Whether the monks, or the administrative staff, or any other party with access to the facility, had reasons to discuss Delphine in contexts that might reach people Conrad had not assessed.

What he could determine without going in: the physical situation of the building and its street, which he had assessed. The absence of surveillance indicators, which he had assessed. The general character of the facility, which matched the administrative record — modest, private, unremarkable.

What he could not determine without going in: the identity and situation of the continued visitor. The current quality of Delphine's condition. The degree to which her continued presence at Bidewell was a topic of active interest to the monks beyond the standard care-protocol adjustments.

He ran the risk calculation for going in.

The risk of entering: creating a visit record at Bidewell. The monks would note a visit from the next-of-kin; their care logs required it. The care log would be available in Hoolt's FOI request if the request scope extended to Bidewell's records, which it did not currently but might if Hoolt expanded the request based on what the current scope produced. A visit record, by itself, was not damaging — it was exactly what a devoted husband might do, visiting his wife's continuance facility. The visit record was potentially useful for the narrative.

What was not useful: anything that emerged from a conversation with the monks about the continued visitor. If he entered and asked about the visitor — which was the primary information gap — he was creating a record of his interest in the visitor, and his interest in the visitor was itself an item of information that he would prefer not to be in any record.

He could enter and not ask about the visitor. He could enter and visit Delphine — or be present near her panel, in whatever form a visit to a continued person in Bidewell took — and create the devoted-husband visit record without gathering the visitor information. But entering without gathering the visitor information left the primary information gap unresolved, which meant the visit produced a record

without producing what the visit was for, which was inefficient in a way Conrad found inadmissible.

He could stay in the car. He had the administrative summary. He had the care-protocol note, delivered verbally by Sanne, about the visitor response. He had the timeline revision. He did not have the visitor's identity. He did not have Delphine's current condition beyond what the hardware assessment described. He had what the record had given him.

The situation is contained. The timeline will normalise.

He had decided this before he arrived. He noted, sitting in the car, that he had decided it before he arrived, which was a methodological error — decisions made before the relevant information was gathered were not decisions but preferences dressed as decisions. He corrected the error: the situation appeared contained. The timeline would likely normalise without direct intervention. The risk calculation for entering produced a result in the not-indicated range.

He would not go in.

The decision was made correctly this time, from the available information, without preferences preceding it. He was satisfied with the decision.

He started the engine.

He did not look at the building as he pulled away from the kerb. Looking at the building as he left it would have been a performance, and he was not performing anything.

He drove back toward the city.

. . .

Forty minutes later he was in a committee session.

He was present in the way he was always present in sessions he had prepared for: completely, attentively, tracking the argument and the room simultaneously. The content was good — a thorough cost-benefit

analysis from the committee's research staff, well-structured, making the case for the Guarantee's investment with data he had seen before but presented in a sequence he had not seen before, and the new sequence was more persuasive than the old one. He noted this and noted who in the room was registering the persuasion.

Three members who had been amber were showing signs of movement. He identified the signs with the accuracy of a man who had watched committees for seventeen years: the forward lean, the pen uncapped and set down again, the quality of stillness that was not boredom but attention. He logged the three members and their trajectories and moved the Guarantee tracking document to green for two of them in his mental model, reserving the third for a follow-up conversation that would confirm before the week was out.

He was good at this. He was very good at this. The work was real and he was doing it well and the doing of it well produced the specific satisfaction that good work produced in him, which was the most available satisfaction he had, and he did not examine whether it was sufficient.

Sanne was at the back of the room. He noted her position — she had moved from her usual spot to a seat closer to the door, which gave her a different sightline to the room. He noted the moved position and added it to the Sanne assessment, which was now running in the elevated range. Not yet critical. Close.

After the session she appeared at his shoulder in the corridor and said, at a volume intended only for him: *Hoot published something this morning. Not the story. A piece about the Guarantee's third cycle. She mentions you by name. The family element.*

He accepted this without visible reaction. "Send me the link."

"Already in your messages."

He read it in the car on the way to his afternoon meeting. The piece was what Sanne had characterised it as — not the story, not the gap-

between-advocacy-and-practice story that Hooft was building toward. A profile of the Guarantee's political trajectory, Conrad as its primary advocate, the personal element handled in the paragraph he had seen many versions of: the continuation of his late wife at full grade, the cost he had borne without complaint, what this suggested about the depth of his conviction. Hooft had written the paragraph without irony. The paragraph contained nothing that was false. The paragraph was exactly the paragraph he had been building for two years.

He read it and found it satisfactory and filed it and thought about what it meant that Hooft had published the paragraph in its uncritical form.

Two interpretations. First: Hooft had not yet found the gap. She was still working toward the story she suspected and had published the available material while the investigation continued. Second: Hooft had found elements of the gap but had determined she did not yet have sufficient material to publish the story, and was managing her relationship with the subject — with him — by publishing the flattering version first, which created a professional basis for continued access.

Both interpretations were consistent with the available evidence. Both required continued monitoring. Neither required immediate action.

He put the phone away. He attended his afternoon meeting. He attended the meeting after that. He had dinner with a policy contact whose opinion on the Guarantee's third-cycle timeline he found useful to track. He performed the dinner. The dinner performed above expectation.

He drove home.

The Bidewell assessment was still running in the background. He noted this — the persistence of the background process beyond its normal completion time — and ran a diagnostic.

He had made the correct decision about not entering. He was satisfied with the decision on its merits. The background process that was still running was not a quality review of the decision. It was something else.

He arrived at his building. He went upstairs. He stood at the window, the city visible, and ran the something else to its conclusion.

The continued visitor. He had no name, no context, no way to assess the risk the visitor represented without accessing information that would create the wrong record. He had decided not to access the information. He had decided correctly. The visitor was an unknown variable and the unknown variable was producing a residual processing load that would not close until the variable was resolved.

He could not resolve the variable without creating a record he did not want to create.

He filed this under: acceptable ongoing exposure, monitor for escalation.

He went to bed.

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In the weeks between Bidewell and the FOI response, the Guarantee work intensified in the way it intensified in final cycles: not more activity but more concentrated activity, the same number of conversations occurring in a shorter window, the decisions that had been deferred to the end of the cycle now arriving at the end of the cycle and requiring resolution. He managed the intensification with the same efficient distribution of attention he brought to all demanding periods, which was the attention of a man who had learned that cognitive resources were finite and required allocation the way financial resources required allocation: deliberately, with priority ranking, without emotional surcharge.

The priority ranking placed the Guarantee above everything else, which was where it had been for three years and which remained correct. Below the Guarantee: the Sanne situation, elevated but stable. Below Sanne: the Bidewell situation, ongoing but not acute. Below Bidewell: the Hooft investigation, dormant and being monitored. Everything else: scheduled and managed by Sanne, who managed things that were scheduled with the specific quality of someone who anticipated needs before they were articulated.

She was still performing above expectation. He noted this each week with the regularity of someone noting a weather pattern they cannot change and are not certain they want to.

The advocacy group's submission arrived on a Wednesday and he read it that evening and found, reading it, the concern he had been waiting for the advocacy group to raise. The seventh concern. The grace protocol concern. An independent review mechanism — a continuance welfare officer, or a family advocate — who would assess the next-of-kin's decision against the continued person's known wishes before the grace protocol could be enacted.

He read this twice.

The mechanism, if implemented, would not have caught him. His Form was clean. His additional comments were good sentences. An independent reviewer working within the mechanism's scope — procedural rather than investigatory, designed to detect duress and incapacity rather than predation at his level of sophistication — would have read the Form and found a grieving husband making a compassionate choice. He would have been cleared.

But the mechanism would have required an additional person to have looked. An additional person who had looked was an additional variable in the exposure calculation, because variables had a way of acquiring context that their designers had not anticipated. A continuance welfare officer who reviewed Conrad's grace protocol

authorisation was a continuance welfare officer who had Conrad's name on their caseload. Having Conrad's name on a welfare officer's caseload was not by itself damaging. It was a thread. He was careful about threads.

He was also, and this was the more significant implication, glad that the mechanism had not existed eight months ago. Not reflexively glad — he examined the gladness and found it was the gladness of a man who had timed a decision correctly and was acknowledging the correctness. He had moved when moving was indicated. He had used the system as it existed. The system as it existed had processed his decisions correctly. He was glad.

He drafted a response to the submission that expressed support for the principle of independent oversight while raising four implementation concerns that would require resolution before the mechanism could be incorporated into the Guarantee's framework. The concerns were genuine — he had thought them through and they were real and several would need to be addressed in the eventual implementation. They were also concerns that would require a working group to address, and the working group would require six to eight months, and by the time the working group reported the Guarantee would either have passed or not and the amendment would be a question for the next cycle.

He sent the draft to Sanne for review.

She returned it with two small edits. Both were improvements. He accepted both without comment. He noted the acceptance — he noted most of his interactions with Sanne with increasing specificity in the elevated-assessment period — and sent the response.

Her edits were good. They would always be good. He filed this in the register of things that were true and not useful.

The Fragment of the Voss apartment came on a Sunday, the only one that had never appeared before in this form.

He was reading. He was reading a novel about a marriage — a genre he avoided for the operational reason that it required him to run his personal history in parallel with the fiction, which was a use of cognitive resources that rarely produced useful output. He had picked it up by the adjacent accident of trusting a recommendation and was three chapters in before he had assessed the situation and decided: low cost, some informational value, proceed.

The novel's marriage was unhappy in a way written with considerable precision. The unhappiness was not loud — it was the specific unhappiness of two people who had been accurate about each other and had chosen to continue anyway. The wife of the novel's marriage was in her kitchen not doing anything in particular, and the novel spent three pages in her interiority while she stood at the counter, and the interiority was the interior of a woman who knew exactly what the marriage was and had decided that what it was was something she could live inside, and the deciding had not been a triumph and she was not miserable and she was not content and she was in the kitchen not doing anything in particular.

He was reading this when the Fragment arrived.

Delphine at the apartment window. Early period. She was at the window with a glass of wine and the quality of someone who had been thinking and had not yet finished thinking and had not stopped thinking when he came in. She acknowledged him without stopping thinking. He had found this, in those years, the most remarkable quality he had encountered in another person — the way she allowed him to arrive into the periphery of her attention without the attention adjusting for his arrival. He had been accustomed to adjusting rooms. She had not adjusted.

She had said, eventually, without turning: *I've been thinking about what we become. The Voss money has a specific gravity. I want to know if you feel it.*

He had said he understood what she meant.

She had turned then and looked at him with the look — the later look, the one assembled from enough watching to know when he was producing the shape of an accurate answer rather than the answer itself.

She had said: *You're very good at that. At answering the question you prefer to the one that was asked.*

He had said: I think that's uncharitable.

She had looked at him for a moment longer. Her expression was not the expression of a person who had been unfair and was reconsidering. It was the expression of a person who has made an accurate observation and is watching to see what the accurate observation produces. He had understood this and had produced, in response to it, the performance of mild injury — the look of a man who is confident enough in his own honesty to be briefly stung by the suggestion that he lacks it.

She had held the look for three more seconds. Then she had turned back to the window and said: *you're right. That was uncharitable.*

She had said this not because she believed it but because she had made her observation and it had been received and she was not the kind of person who pressed observations past the point where they had done their work. She had said what she had seen and she had watched him receive it and she had drawn her conclusion from the receiving and she did not need to say the conclusion out loud because the conclusion was hers and she knew what it was.

He received the Fragment now, in the present, reading the novel in which a wife stood at a kitchen counter not doing anything in particular and knowing exactly what the marriage was.

He noted the distinction between the Fragment and the memory: the Fragment produced the quality of having been in the room, which

the memory did not produce. He had the memory of the apartment window and he had, in the Fragment, the experience of the apartment window, and the experience was different from the memory in a way he could not fully specify.

He set the novel aside without marking his place. He did not examine why he was not marking his place.

He went to bed.

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The FOI response came on a Wednesday, forty-three days into the sixty-day window.

Sanne brought it to him in hard copy. This was the second time she had delivered something significant in hard copy rather than electronically, and he had noted the first time and was noting the second time and had, noting the second time, a fuller picture of what the pattern indicated. She was thinking carefully about what existed in which record. She had been thinking carefully about this for longer than she had been delivering hard copies — the hard copies were the visible expression of a practice that had been running invisibly for longer.

He read the response. The records were clean. Full grade, grace protocol, Bidewell transfer — all documented correctly, all classified correctly. Hoolt had the records. The records read as a devoted husband's decisions. The records contained nothing that required defending because everything that required defending was not in the records.

He set the papers down. "What's your read?"

Sanne was quiet for a moment. Not the quiet of someone thinking — he knew that quality — but the quiet of someone who has already thought and is deciding how much of what they have thought to say.

“She has what she can publish,” Sanne said. “The question is whether she thinks there’s more. If she thinks there’s more, she waits. If she doesn’t, she publishes what she has, which reads as a profile, not a story.”

“And which does she think?”

Sanne looked at him. Not the managed professional look. The other look — the one that had been present, at the corner of their interactions, for several weeks. The look that existed in a register slightly outside the register she used for everything else, the register of someone who has assembled something from available data and is standing inside what they have assembled and is deciding what to do with the standing.

“I don’t know,” she said.

She said it with the specific flatness of someone saying the true thing in the shortest form available. Not: I’m uncertain. Not: I haven’t been able to determine that. Just: I don’t know. The form of someone who has made an assessment and the assessment is that she does not know and she is not going to perform more certainty than she has.

He held the look. She held it back. The holding lasted approximately four seconds — long enough that both of them had been in the holding and knew they had been in it — and then she went to her desk.

He sat with the papers.

Hooft had the records. The records were clean. The story, if it existed, required a source. He ran the candidates. Delphine: warm, no access, not a candidate. The monks: privacy commitments, no information about the prescription, not a candidate. Medical staff: professional confidentiality, information about the reaction but not its cause, not a candidate without a specific investigative trigger.

Sanne.

He ran the Sanne assessment with the full attention of a man who has been running a background assessment and is now bringing it to

the foreground. The shape she had: the grace protocol authorisation, the Bidewell timeline, the care-protocol enquiry she had processed, the second Bidewell notification, the pattern of his decisions around Delphine across three years of watching him make decisions. The shape was incomplete. It lacked the prescription. It lacked the recalibration. It lacked the parallel account.

But she was intelligent enough to have identified the gap in the shape. And a gap in a shape, identified by an intelligent observer, was evidence of a different kind than a complete record. It was the kind of evidence that, shared with a journalist, did not constitute a story but might constitute an angle — the intuition that the story existed, which was what a journalist needed to justify continued investigation.

He recalculated.

The sequence risk: valued staffer leaves shortly after FOI response, shortly before potential story. The risk was present. He had been managing around it. He would manage around it by making the departure look like its opposite — an advancement rather than an exit, a move toward something rather than away from something. He had the advocacy organisation. He had the contact of eight years standing who owed him a return. He made the call from his office with the door closed.

The director answered on the second ring. Conrad described Sanne with the precision he brought to professional recommendations: her competence, her range, the specific quality of her work that he found genuinely difficult to replace. He did not exaggerate because exaggeration was discoverable and discovery was expensive. The description was accurate. The director was immediately interested. By the end of the call the position was effectively Sanne's if she wanted it, and Conrad had established the narrative of a senior colleague advocating strongly for a valued staffer's next step, and the narrative was

the story that would be told about Sanne's departure by everyone who heard it.

He hung up.

He pressed the intercom. "Sanne. When you have a moment."

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She came in and stood at the threshold in the way she always stood at thresholds: with the quality of someone who has already made most of the decisions relevant to the next ten minutes and is waiting to find out which of the remaining decisions are required.

He had found this quality useful across three years. He found it useful now in the way that things are useful when you are about to no longer have access to them — which is to say: completely, and with the specific clarity that comes from knowing the access is ending.

He told her about the advocacy organisation. He told her he had made the call. He told her he thought she was ready for a position of this scale and that he had been remiss in not identifying the opportunity sooner. He told her what the reference would say, in broad terms. He told her he would be sorry to lose her.

He delivered all of this in the small register — not the full-production mode, not the mode for rooms, but the register of a senior colleague who is genuine about the limits of what he can offer a person of her ability. He had developed this register specifically for situations like this one, because the full performance was recognisable as performance to people who had been observing him for extended periods, and Sanne had been observing him for extended periods. The small register was less recognisable. It was also, he noted, closer to something he did not have a full name for — something in the territory of what accurate regard for someone looked like when it was not being performed, which he found difficult to locate from the inside but which he understood from the outside as a quality that produced, in

the people who encountered it, a specific kind of settling. A sense of being seen without the seeing being weaponised.

He gave her the small register. He watched her receive it.

She listened. She did not react visibly, which was characteristic of her and which he found, currently, opaque in a way it had not been opaque before. He ran the opacity and found it elevated. Something was being withheld and he could not determine what. He had been able to determine what she was withholding at every previous assessment. The not-determining was new.

She said she was grateful for the reference and for his support. She said she would be in touch with the organisation director. She said she would ensure a full transition of the outstanding items.

She said nothing else.

He thanked her. She went back to her desk.

He ran the Sanne assessment one final time. Departing. Reference strong. Destination positioned as advancement. Opacity elevated, contents undetermined. No overt indication of the shape she carried or whether she intended to carry it anywhere.

Almost managed.

He noted the almost with the precision he noted everything: accurately, without minimising it or catastrophising it. Almost was where most of his situations lived. He had managed almost situations throughout his career. Almost was the residual risk he had assessed as acceptable at the outset and which had not moved outside its projected range.

He was almost certain about Sanne.

The almost remained.

He filed it under: acceptable residual exposure, monitor as possible, no further action available.

The director confirmed the position the following morning. Conrad waited two days before telling Sanne — the interval that produced the impression of a natural process rather than a managed one — and then told her. She said thank you. She confirmed she would take it. She said she could be out within three weeks.

He said three weeks was more than sufficient.

She began the transition that afternoon. She was thorough. She was, even in the transition, performing above expectation, which he noted and noted that the noting had a quality he did not usually find in the noting of managed exits — something in the register of respect, which was not a register he used often and which was not useful here and which he filed and did not pursue.

In the evenings of the three weeks she was transitioning he saw her light on twice after hours — once a Tuesday and once the Thursday he had been monitoring for. The Thursday he noted specifically. Seven-fifteen, the floor otherwise dark, her office lit. He sat in his own office for eleven minutes — the same duration as the Bidewell car, he noted this with the precision he noted coincidences — and assessed his options.

He could go and ask what she was working on. This created a conversation. A conversation with Sanne at seven-fifteen on a Thursday during her transition period, in an empty office, was a conversation that would be in her memory and potentially in others' if she chose to share it. He did not want to be in her memory in that specific form.

He could check her system access logs. He had administrative access to the building's security system, which logged keycard entries and exits but not the content of work. He could determine that she had been in her office but not what she had been doing there. The checking of the log created a record of his checking.

He could note it and leave it.

He noted it and left it. He had assessed her document access as transitional — read-only on current files, no access to archived items from the Bidewell period. Whatever she was doing at seven-fifteen, she was not doing it with the files that mattered.

He went home.

She left on a Friday. The gathering was small and warm and he gave the speech in the mode that made people feel genuinely seen, and everyone who was there received the story of Sanne's departure as it was intended to be received: a valued colleague moving forward, supported completely, the next step made possible by his advocacy. She shook his hand at the end. Her grip was precise. Her face had the quality he had been monitoring — the quality slightly adjacent to the register she used for everything else — and he held the handshake for the appropriate duration and released it.

She left.

He watched her go with the expression appropriate to the occasion, which was not false. He would miss her work. The missing was real and he acknowledged it as real.

He turned back to his office.

The Sanne assessment closed. The monitoring ceased. The residual exposure remained — categorised, filed, present in the parallel account alongside the prescription and the recalibration and the other items that had no external record but that existed with the specific permanence of things that have happened and cannot be made not to have happened.

Almost managed.

He had done what was available to him. What was available to him was not quite sufficient, and he knew this, and he had filed it under acceptable because the alternative — the certainty that would have required destroying her rather than moving her — had costs that the almost did not.

Almost was what he had.
He moved on.

. . .

What he did not know, moving on: that on a Thursday evening three weeks after she left, Sanne sat across a small table from a friend she had known since university, a woman who worked in public health administration and who had no connection to Conrad's professional world and no access to any record that could corroborate what Sanne was about to say.

Sanne ordered coffee. The friend ordered tea. They talked for a while about the things people talked about, the accumulation of ordinary life — the friend's children, Sanne's new position, the particular exhaustion of transitions, the city in November.

Then Sanne said: I want to tell you something. Not for anything. I just need to have said it to someone who isn't me.

The friend said: of course.

Sanne told her the shape. Not the prescription — she didn't have the prescription. Not the recalibration — she had never had access to the parallel account. She told her the shape she had assembled from three years of watching Conrad make decisions about Delphine: the grace protocol timing, the care-protocol enquiry routed through a verbal channel, the FOI response that was clean in ways that were slightly too clean, the quality of Conrad's attention to the Bidewell situation that was different from the quality of his attention to things that were simply administrative. The shape of a man managing something he needed managed, in a way that left no record of the managing.

She did not say: he killed her. She did not say: he let her die deliberately. She did not have the evidence for either statement. She said: I think something happened that isn't in the record, and I think he

made sure it isn't in the record, and I can't tell you more than that because I don't know more than that.

The friend was quiet for a moment.

Then she said: what are you going to do with it?

Sanne said: nothing. I don't have anything to do anything with. I just needed to have said it.

The friend said: all right.

They finished their coffee and tea. They paid. They walked out into the November city and parted at the corner. The friend did not know what to do with what she had been told. She thought about it, on and off, for several weeks, and then she had other things to think about, and the other things accumulated, and Sanne's shape became one of the many things the friend knew that she could neither use nor forget.

It existed. It was in the world. It was in a register Conrad could not monitor.

The almost remained.

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PART IV

THE ASSESSMENT

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The third notification from Bidewell came six weeks after Sanne left.

He read it at his desk on a Tuesday morning, between his eight o'clock call and a committee briefing that required his presence by nine-fifteen. The notification was the same form as the previous two — the same template, the same careful language, the same presentation of options — but the content had moved. The hardware assessment had been revised again. The timeline had shifted upward by another four months. The care-protocol adjustments, the notification noted, had continued to produce measurable positive outcomes in the subject's engagement and responsiveness, and Bidewell's care team recommended continued investment in the current protocol as the most efficacious approach to the subject's ongoing welfare.

Conrad read this twice.

The timeline had now slipped by a total of seven months from the original projection. Seven months against an original estimate of twenty-four meant the grace protocol was proceeding at approximately seventy percent of the expected rate. The care-protocol adjustments — the visitor response, the monthly attendance of the continued visitor, the monks' allocation of additional resources — had produced a measurable effect on the rate of decline. Not a reversal. Not a restoration. A deceleration.

He ran the timeline. The revised projection put Delphine's viable continuance at thirty-one months from the current assessment, which was the longest projection the process had produced. He had authorised the grace protocol on a twenty-four month timeline. He was now looking at thirty-one months. Seven additional months of Bidewell's monthly fee, which was modest but not nothing. Seven additional months during which the Hoolt investigation, if it continued, had time to develop. Seven additional months during which the Guarantee's passage — which he needed to manage carefully through the final stages — would coexist with a Bidewell situation that was not resolving on its original schedule.

He noted that the timeline deviation was a problem of a type he had not encountered before. He had managed timelines that deviated because of external political factors, because of funding shortfalls, because of personnel changes — all variables that existed in registers he understood and could act within. He had not previously managed a timeline that was deviating because of warmth.

He did not have a framework for warmth as an operational variable. Warmth, in his assessment system, was a quality of performance — a mode he deployed, a register he maintained. It was not a force that acted on situations from outside his knowledge. It was not something that arrived uninvited and changed the rate of decline of a hardware system in a charity continuance house. It operated below the level of decision and documentation and record, in a register that produced no audit trail and left no footprint and could not be monitored by any instrument he possessed.

He filed the notification. He noted the timeline. He ran the options.

Option one: direct intervention in the care protocol. He could contact Bidewell's administration and request a modification to the visitor access protocol — a reduction in visit frequency, or a suspension of visits, or a review of whether the current protocol was aligned with

his documented wishes for Delphine's care. He had next-of-kin authority to make this request. The request would be processed. The record would show a next-of-kin adjusting care protocols for a continued family member, which was a routine administrative act with a charitable interpretation available: a husband who wants to ensure his wife's end-of-life care is dignified and not artificially extended by well-meaning but misaligned interventions.

He ran the Hooft variable against option one with the full attention the Hooft variable now required. If the FOI scope expanded to cover care-protocol adjustments — which was possible, given that the current request scope covered grade selections and care transitions — the record of a next-of-kin intervening to limit visitor access to a continued spouse would be available. The limitation of visitor access was not self-evidently suspicious. It was not even unusual. But it was the kind of decision that, in the context of the other decisions in the record, produced a pattern that a sufficiently intelligent journalist might read. The pattern would not be conclusive. It would be suggestive, and suggestive was the condition in which stories got written. He did not want to be in the condition in which stories got written.

He did not pursue option one.

Option two occupied him longer. He had set it aside in the first pass as more complex, which was accurate but insufficient — complexity was not a reason to defer when the problem warranted complexity. He returned to it with the full analytical attention it required.

He could request that Bidewell review the hardware assessment against the current care protocol and determine whether the protocol's positive outcomes were hardware-dependent or care-dependent. The distinction mattered because the two cases had different implications. If the continued visitor's effect was operating at the hardware level — if the engagement was producing measurable improvement in the substrate's electrical performance, which was a documented

phenomenon in the research literature, the well-maintained held tending to produce better hardware outcomes than the neglected — then the hardware was more viable than assessed and the timeline would continue to extend as long as the visitor continued to attend. If the effect was purely at the care level — if the substrate was declining at the assessed rate but the engagement was producing social responsiveness that the hardware assessment interpreted as viability — then the hardware assessment remained accurate and the engagement effect was producing an artificial extension of the timeline.

If hardware-dependent: he could request a maintenance protocol review on the grounds that the current assessment underestimated the hardware's actual condition, which was a legitimate administrative concern, and the review might identify maintenance approaches that, if applied incorrectly or incompletely, would accelerate the natural decline without producing a record of acceleration. This was a highly complex operation requiring technical knowledge he did not have and contacts within the continuance maintenance sector he had not developed. He noted this limitation.

If engagement-dependent: he could request a restriction on non-family visits on grounds of the subject's care — specifically on grounds that the current engagement level was artificially elevating the subject's apparent responsiveness in ways that did not reflect the underlying hardware reality, and that the restriction would allow a more accurate assessment of the true timeline. This was a legitimate clinical argument with genuine merit in certain continuance contexts. It was also the argument that would create the most dangerous record: a next-of-kin restricting visits to a continued spouse on clinical grounds, during a period when a journalist was investigating the next-of-kin's continuance decisions, at a care facility whose timeline happened to be slipping below the next-of-kin's projected rate.

He ran the full risk matrix for option two and found it outside the acceptable range across all scenarios. The operation was too complex, too visible, and too dependent on variables he could not control. A simpler approach had a simpler record. Option two would produce a record that was not simple.

He set option two aside as a contingency of last resort.

Option three: accept the revised timeline and manage the seven-month extension within his current operational posture. The Hoot investigation had not produced a story from the records it had accessed. The Sanne situation had been managed to almost, and almost was within the acceptable range. The additional seven months extended the window during which the investigation could develop, but did not change the fundamental inaccessibility of the information the story required. The prescription was not in any record. The recalibration was not in any record. The parallel account had no external existence and could not be accessed by any legitimate journalistic method.

He ran option three and found it within the range of acceptable ongoing exposure.

He would accept the revised timeline.

He would also think more carefully about the continued visitor. He could not identify the visitor without creating a record of the identification. But he could reason about who the visitor was from what the administrative record had given him: continued, monthly attendance for more than a year, consistent and reliable. A person who came back because they came back, which was what the care note had implied — no stated reason, no family connection, simply attendance.

He spent twenty minutes on this, which was longer than he usually spent on a reasoning exercise without data, but the visitor variable was the one element of the situation that remained genuinely opaque to him and he found the opacity — he noted this, the finding — faintly troubling in a way that his other unknowns did not. He had managed

unknown variables before. He managed them by assessing their probable range and planning for the scenarios within that range. The visitor's probable range was: a person with some connection to Bidewell, some personal reason to be there monthly, and some quality of attention that produced measurable response in Delphine. He could plan for the scenarios within that range without knowing the identity.

Someone who found things worth returning to, month after month, with no tactical reason to do so.

He could not determine more than this. He filed it and moved to the nine-fifteen briefing.

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The briefing was on the Guarantee's final coalition status. Three amber positions remained. He had the sequencing for all three and the conversations were in progress. The committee vote was seven weeks out.

He attended the briefing and extracted the two items he had needed from the session. He returned to his office. He had a new staffer — Maarten, twenty-six, competent, uncomplicated, not watching him in any register that required monitoring. Conrad had found him in eight days, which was faster than he had expected, and had noted the speed as satisfactory and had noted the noting as the specific satisfaction of a variable resolved cleanly.

At five-fifteen Maarten appeared at the office door with a message slip. The old format — Sanne's format. Maarten had adopted it without being asked.

The message was from a Bidewell administrative contact returning a call Maarten had placed on Conrad's behalf about the notification. The contact was available for a verbal conversation tomorrow morning.

He had not asked Maarten to place the call.

He looked at the message slip. He set it on the desk. He looked at Maarten, who had returned to his desk and was working with his back to the office door.

The call had been placed because Maarten had read the Bidewell notification — he had access to Conrad's correspondence as a matter of the role — and had assessed that a follow-up call was appropriate and had placed it. This was the kind of proactive administrative support that senior staffers developed after extended time with a principal. Maarten had been in the role for six weeks.

He noted: Maarten was not Sanne. Maarten was reading the room and responding to what he read, which was attentiveness rather than assembly. Maarten had seen a notification requiring follow-up and had followed up. He had not assembled a model. He had performed a task.

He noted also: the task Maarten had performed had produced a call record. The call record would show that Conrad Reeve's office had contacted Bidewell's administrative office the day after receiving a care-protocol notification. The call record was not inherently problematic — offices received notifications and offices followed up. But the call record existed, and he had not authorised its creation, and existing records he had not authorised were variables he needed to manage.

In the morning he spoke to Maarten. He did it in the small register — the register of a senior colleague who has a preference about process and is sharing the preference clearly but without weight. He said: when it comes to the Bidewell file, I prefer to handle the follow-up personally. In future, flag items from that file to me directly rather than initiating contact. Maarten said: of course, I should have asked first, I'm sorry. Conrad said: no need to apologise, it's a process question and now you know my preference.

The conversation lasted four minutes. Maarten returned to his work. Conrad noted: the correction was received and will be applied.

The call record exists and is within the acceptable range of records that existed before the correction. The correction itself created no record.

He moved to the morning's first item.

• • •

The weeks between the third notification and the second Bidewell visit were the weeks of the Guarantee's final approach, and they had the quality that final approaches had: not urgency, exactly, but density — the same elements as before, compressed into a shorter window, requiring more precision of sequencing because the margin for error was smaller. He had been working toward this vote for three years. He knew the remaining distance better than he knew anything else in his current professional life. He knew the shape of each of the three remaining amber conversations, knew which argument each member needed to hear and in which register, knew the order in which the arguments should arrive and the intervals between them. He had been running the sequencing in the background across the weeks of the Bidewell situation and the Sanne management and the FOI monitoring, and the sequencing was ready, and now he ran it in the foreground.

The first amber member required a conversation about cost modelling — specifically the year-three scenario that had concerned the corridor member earlier in the cycle, the mid-tier provider rationalisation question, which Conrad had addressed but which this member had continued to turn over, not from obstruction but from genuine analytical concern about an implementation gap. Conrad met him for breakfast and spent ninety minutes on the gap with the full attention of a man who found the gap genuinely interesting, which he did — he found all policy gaps interesting in the taxonomic sense, as specimens of the specific failure modes that complex systems produced — and who had a response that was technically sound and that

addressed the concern from the member's own analytical framework rather than from Conrad's.

The member moved to green by the end of the breakfast. Conrad noted this as satisfactory and noted the satisfaction and moved to the next item.

The second amber member required a different approach. She was not concerned about implementation. She was concerned about attribution — about whether the Guarantee, if it passed in its current form, would produce the political credit it needed to produce to justify the political risk it had required. This was a concern Conrad understood completely and had addressed in the design of the Guarantee's rollout plan, which front-loaded the visible outcomes in the electoral districts that most needed them. He walked her through the rollout plan in the register of a colleague sharing confidential strategic thinking, which was what it was, and the sharing produced the effect it was designed to produce: she felt trusted with the real thinking, which made the real thinking land differently than briefed information landed.

She moved to green at the end of the week. He noted this as satisfactory.

The third amber member was the one he had been saving. Not saving exactly — managing the timing of, which was different. This member was persuadable but required the specific kind of persuasion that came from being approached at the moment when persuasion was most welcome, which was the moment when all the other decisions around him had moved in one direction and the cost of remaining in a different position was becoming visible. Conrad had been watching this moment approach for three weeks and had timed his approach to arrive in it rather than before it.

He approached on a Wednesday morning, in the corridor outside the main committee room, which was the geography that produced the

most natural register for this kind of exchange. He was warm and specific and gave the member the sense of being understood and valued and of the decision being, in the end, his own. The member moved to green before the corridor ended.

Conrad noted: all three amber positions resolved. The Guarantee's path to the vote was unobstructed. Seven weeks.

He was satisfied.

He was also, simultaneously, aware of the Bidewell situation continuing in its parallel track — the visitor attending, the monks adjusting their protocols, the timeline extending beyond his projections — and the awareness sat alongside the satisfaction without the satisfaction diminishing it or it diminishing the satisfaction. Both were present. He was a man whose compartments held, and the compartments held.

He drove to Bidewell the following Thursday.

. . .

The city was the same as the first visit. The neighbourhood arrived in the same way — civic patience, minimum viable maintenance, the faint quality of a place that had stopped expecting the something to be good. He parked. He turned off the engine.

The assessment from the first visit was already complete — he had updated it with the information from the third notification and the option analysis and the thinking about the visitor's probable character. The assessment was not the purpose of the second visit. The purpose was the visitor information the first visit had not produced.

He had decided, in the week since the third notification, that the risk calculation had changed. Seven months was manageable. If the deviation continued compounding — if the visitor continued to attend, if the monks continued to adjust, if the timeline continued to slip — the deviation would eventually move outside his current

operational posture and require an intervention that would produce the wrong record. He needed to assess the visitor before that point. He needed to know what he was managing around.

He had verified the regulatory framework: next-of-kin pastoral inquiries were logged at the level of visit records, not care records. He could speak to a monk about the social environment of his wife's care without the conversation entering the administrative record. The log would show: Conrad Reeve, next-of-kin, visited for pastoral purposes. No detail required.

He got out of the car.

He stood on the pavement. He looked at the building. He ran the entry assessment, which was faster than the first visit because more of the variables were already resolved. No surveillance indicators. No persons on the street who knew him. No photographic angles. The connection between Conrad Reeve and this building was still not in the public record.

He walked toward the door.

He reached it.

He put his hand on the handle.

He stood there.

You will go in. This is what you came for. The visitor information is inside.

He stood with his hand on the handle and the assessment running, and he found, running it, that the assessment had been complete since he arrived at the building. The result of the assessment was: go in. The result had been go in for the entire drive, and there was no new information to assess at the door that he had not already assessed in the car. The door was not a decision point. He had passed the decision point in the car. He was at the door with a completed assessment and a clear result and he was standing at the door.

He had been standing at the door for six minutes.

He noted the six minutes. He noted that this was different from the eleven minutes of the first visit, during which the assessment had been running to completion. This was six minutes after the assessment had completed, during which he was standing at the door for a reason the assessment had not produced. He ran a diagnostic.

The reason he was still standing at the door was not operational.

He examined this finding with the care he brought to findings that surprised him, which was the care of a man who had learned that surprising findings were the most important ones and that the impulse to move past them quickly was the impulse that had produced his worst decisions. He held the finding and ran it from different angles.

The assessment had resolved. The result was: go in. He was not going in. The reason he was not going in was not the assessment and was not risk and was not the record and was not any of the operational variables he had been managing for six months. It was something that did not exist in his operational vocabulary.

He was standing at the door because going in required him to be in the same space as Delphine. Not speaking to her — he had not planned to speak to her, had not planned to engage with her panel, had not planned any part of the visit that involved her directly. But in the same building. Walking the same corridors. Present in the same space where she was present, in whatever form she was present.

He had not been in the same space as Delphine since the hospital.

He noted this. He noted that the noting was producing a processing state he did not have a classification for. Not reluctance — reluctance was operational, a signal about risk, and the risk calculation had resolved. Not grief — grief was not a category he had available, not in the functional sense, not in the way that grief was available to people who could stand inside it. Not guilt. Something that occupied the space adjacent to all three without being any of them, something that was

specifically about proximity — about being in a building where she was and what that required of him that the assessment could not calculate.

He did not know what it required of him. He had never known. He had managed the not-knowing for thirty years by maintaining the distance that made not-knowing manageable. He had maintained it in the marriage through the geography of a large house and a full schedule and the specific efficiency of a man who did not linger. He had maintained it after the continuation through the administrative distance of Forms and channels and next-of-kin authority exercised through Sanne.

The door was the end of the distance.

The Fragment was still present. The sitting room. Her face. The look.

He stood at the door for four more minutes.

The Fragment did not resolve. The processing state did not resolve. The assessment remained: go in. He did not go in. The door was the door and she was on the other side of it and the ten minutes were the ten minutes and at the end of the ten minutes he turned.

He walked back to the car. He got in. He started the engine.

He sat for a moment before pulling away.

He had come to get the visitor information. He had stood at the door for ten minutes and had not gone in. He had not gone in because of something that did not exist in his operational vocabulary, something adjacent to reluctance and grief and guilt without being any of them, something that was specifically about being in the same space as Delphine. He had not gone in because the assessment that said go in had been completed before he arrived and the assessment had not accounted for the thing that kept him at the door, because the thing that kept him at the door was not in any of his registers and had never been in any of his registers and could not be put in any of his registers

because the registers were built for the things he was built for and this was not one of those things.

He noted this with the precision he noted everything.

He noted it did not resolve.

He pulled away from the kerb.

He did not look at the building. He had not looked at the building at the first visit either, when he pulled away. Both times for the same reason: he was not performing anything.

He drove. The city received him back into its indifferent texture of Thursday morning movement and he moved through it as he always moved through everything, forward, toward what required movement.

He had not gone in.

He would not go back to Bidewell.

He noted this as a decision that had been made without his making it, which was a category of decision he almost never encountered, and which he filed under: noted, no further action available.

The Bidewell situation was, for the purposes of what he could manage, managed.

Inside the building, in an alcove he had not entered, a warm presence attended a warm presence. The monks had noted the visit — the visit record would show: Conrad Reeve, next-of-kin, Thursday, no contact with care staff, duration: brief. They would not have noted what the brief duration meant. They did not know what the brief duration meant. They would continue their work, which was what they did regardless of what next-of-kin did or did not do. They would continue adjusting their protocols and sitting with the thinning and noting the windows.

He did not know any of this. He had turned away from the door and the door was closed and the alcove was past the door and he had no way to know what the alcove contained.

He drove. He had a committee session at noon. He attended it. The session was good. He extracted what he needed and moved the Guarantee forward by two more increments and drove home.

. . .

The last Fragment came that evening, though he did not know it was the last one until afterward, and the afterward was a long time coming.

He was at his desk. The committee session had been good — the third amber member had moved to green during the session, confirming his projection, the Guarantee's path to the vote now unobstructed, seven weeks, executable — and he had come home and eaten and sat at his desk to review the evening's materials before bed.

The satisfaction of the third amber member moving to green was present. It was the satisfaction of a man who has worked toward a specific outcome across a long period and has arrived at the point where the outcome is no longer in doubt. He found this satisfaction clean and substantial in the way that substantial work produced substantial satisfaction, and he received it as he received all things: fully, accurately, without examining whether it was sufficient.

The Fragment arrived in the satisfaction.

It was the one he had not had before and had been approaching without knowing he was approaching it, in the way that certain things are approached without the approaching being registered until the thing has arrived.

Not a specific evening. Not the Voss house dinner, not the apartment window, not the sitting room with the cold cuts, not the year-sixteen look. Her face. That was all. Her face doing nothing in particular — not looking at him, not directed anywhere, simply her face in the ordinary register of a person who is present and alive and not performing anything for anyone, the face that was available when she was alone or when she had forgotten she was being watched or when

she had decided that what she saw in the room was worth being herself around.

He had seen this face thousands of times across thirty years. It was not a remarkable face — it was her face, which meant it was specific and particular in the way that faces are specific and particular when you have been looking at them for long enough to know them below the level of feature and into the level of quality. The quality of her face at rest was the quality of a person who did not manage herself for the room. Who was the same in all registers. Who had no gap between what she was and what she presented, because she had never found the gap useful and had never developed it.

He had spent thirty years managing the gap. The gap was his primary instrument. The gap was what made everything else possible — the performances, the registers, the warmth deployed and withdrawn and redeployed, the Fragments themselves received and filed and moved on from. The gap was what he had and what she had not had and what had made them, from the beginning, two people encountering the same world from positions so different that the encountering itself was the whole of what they had shared.

Her face at rest.

He received it.

He sat at his desk for a period he did not note. He did not note the duration. He did not note the deviation from procedure. He sat with the Fragment in the way he had sat with the sitting room Fragment — not filing it, not correcting the not-filing — and what he found sitting with it was something he had not found before in any of the Fragments, which was that the sitting felt like — he reached for the word and found only the space where the word would have been if he had the word — like something that was owed. Not to him. The other direction. The direction he had never operated in.

He sat until the sitting was finished. He did not know how long. He turned off the desk light. He went to bed.

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In the morning the Fragment had not filed.

He ran the standard morning check and found the Fragment still present in the unresolved file, which was where it had been since the previous evening, which meant it had been in the unresolved file overnight, which was longer than any previous Fragment had remained unresolved. He noted the duration. He noted that the noting was not producing the action it usually produced, which was a search for the filing category. He ran the search anyway.

He searched under: Delphine. Under: the Voss acquisition. Under: the marriage, the apartment, the sitting room, the hospital, the prescription. He searched under: the look, the various looks, the look he had no category for since the Voss house dinner. He searched under all of it and found, in each file, the material he had stored there across the years — accurate, complete, available for retrieval — and did not find the Fragment.

The Fragment was her face at rest. He searched for it under face and found the entry he had made early in the acquisition: high cheekbones, specific quality of attention visible in the set of the jaw, eyes that did not perform warmth but produced it, note for future reference: the face reads as intelligent before it reads as anything else. He read this entry and found it accurate and found that it was not the Fragment.

The Fragment was not her face as data. It was her face as — he reached — as the face of a person who had known him completely and had not been diminished by the knowing. Who had assembled from twenty years of watching the most accurate characterisation of him that anyone had ever produced and had offered him cold cuts afterward and gone to bed. Whose love for him was incomprehensible in the specific

sense that he could not locate its operating logic, could not find the calculation that produced it, could not determine what she had assessed and found worth the continued investment of her attention and her care across three decades of evidence that he was not worth it.

He could not find the Fragment in the system because the Fragment was not data. He ran this finding and found it accurate. The Fragment was something else. He did not have a name for what it was.

He noted that the noting had a quality he had no category for. Adjacent to loss, adjacent to the thing the word loss was pointing at when it was used by people who had the full use of the category, which he did not have and had not developed and which he had always observed from the outside as a thing that happened to people when something they had was gone and they found the going to be — he did not have the word for what they found it to be.

He noted the adjacency. He filed it under: residual data, unprocessed, no action indicated.

He noted the filing and noted that the filing felt insufficient in a way that filings had not previously felt insufficient. He did not examine the insufficiency. Examining it would have required him to hold the question open in the way he did not hold questions open, in the way he had determined across the years of operating as he operated that holding questions open was a liability rather than a practice, and the determination had been correct for all the questions he had previously encountered and he did not know whether it was correct for this one.

He filed the insufficiency under: noted, no further examination indicated.

He moved on.

He had a call at eight. He had a committee session at ten. He had the Guarantee to bring to its vote, which was the most significant piece of work in his professional life and which would help real people, and

the helping of real people was real and the work was real and he was going to do it well.

He did the call. He went to the committee. He was good. He was very good. The Guarantee was on track and the vote was five weeks away and the work was clean and precise and genuinely his and he gave it everything it required.

The Fragment remained, in the unresolved file, where it remained.

He noted this once more, at the end of the day, before he turned off the desk light.

He did not note it again.

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PART V

THE GUARANTEE

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The final weeks before the vote had a quality he recognised from previous cycles: not urgency, exactly — urgency implied the outcome was uncertain, and by this point the outcome was not uncertain — but a kind of heightened precision, the way a surgeon's attention sharpens in the final minutes of a procedure that has already gone well. The hard work was done. What remained was the execution, and the execution required everything the hard work had required plus the specific quality of attention that came from knowing that the margin for error had narrowed to zero.

He gave it everything.

He gave it the mornings and the evenings and the intervals between. He gave it the specific quality of attention that was his best quality, the attention that moved cleanly between the foreground and the background, tracking the overall position while managing the immediate detail, holding the whole shape of the thing in mind while working on any single part of it. He had been giving it this quality of attention for three years and had not diminished the quality by giving it for three years, which was itself a form of discipline that he noted and did not examine too closely because examining it too closely would have required him to ask what produced it, and what produced it was the appetite he had for the work, and the appetite he had for the work

was the only clean thing in his current life and he preferred to leave it clean.

The Bidewell situation ran in the parallel track. He had accepted the revised timeline. He had filed the visitor variable under the only classification available: unknown, probable character assessed, no further action indicated without unacceptable record risk. The grace protocol was proceeding. The monks were adjusting their protocols. Someone was coming every month. He could not stop the someone from coming without stopping him, and stopping him required knowing who he was, and knowing who he was required a record he could not create. He had been in this position for three months and had determined, in each of the three months, that the position was within the range of acceptable ongoing exposure.

He made the same determination in the final weeks. He moved on.

He made the coalition calls he needed to make and attended the sessions he needed to attend and spoke to the people he needed to speak to, and the speaking was precise and warm and calibrated to each person's specific frequency, and each frequency produced the response he needed it to produce. He was good at this in the way of a craftsman who has been practising the same craft for long enough that the craft has become the person, so that the distinction between the craftsman and the work is no longer visible from the outside and is no longer particularly relevant from the inside.

Two weeks before the vote, Maarten brought him a message that Hooft had published a second piece. He read it in his car between a morning session and an afternoon briefing. The piece was not the story. It was a longer profile of the Guarantee's political history, well-researched, accurate about the process and the coalition work, containing a passage about Conrad that was the most considered thing Hooft had written about him: not hagiographic, not suspicious, simply observational — a portrait of a man who had pursued this policy with

unusual persistence across unusual obstacles, whose commitment was legible in the pattern of his work even if its origins were, as she noted, personal in ways that were difficult to fully assess from outside.

That was the phrase. *Personal in ways that were difficult to fully assess from outside.*

He read it twice. He ran the phrase. She had the records and the records read correctly and she had looked at the records and had produced the phrase *difficult to fully assess from outside*, which was what a journalist wrote when they suspected something and could not prove it and were managing their professional obligation to accuracy while preserving the possibility of the story if the proof arrived later.

The proof would not arrive. He was certain of this in the way he was certain of most things: accurately, with the residual almost noted and filed and accepted. The almost on Sanne. The visitor variable. Both noted. Both filed. Both within the acceptable range.

He put the phone away.

He attended the afternoon briefing. He was good in it.

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The week before the vote he gave the last Alliance speech of the cycle — not a committee address, a public one, a room of three hundred people who had been working on continuance policy in various capacities for various lengths of time and who had gathered for the Alliance's annual conference and who represented the specific constituency that the Guarantee was most directly built for. He had spoken to this room four times in three years. He knew the room's particular quality of attention — the attention of people who were not persuadable in the ordinary sense because they already believed, who needed instead to feel that the policy was in good hands, that the man driving it understood the stakes at the level they understood the stakes, that he was not performing the caring but was, in some verifiable way, inside it.

He gave them what they needed.

He gave them the speech he had been iterating toward for three years — the version that had the cost modelling in the right proportion to the human argument, the version that moved from the systemic to the personal and back to the systemic without the pivot feeling engineered, the version that contained the Delphine passage at exactly the right weight, present and specific and not exploited, the testimony of a man who had been where they were going to be rather than the performance of a man who imagined what that felt like.

He believed none of it in the sense of having a personal stake in it. He believed all of it in the sense that the argument was right and the argument was his and the policy would help people and the helping was real. He had stopped finding the coexistence of these two things interesting. The coexistence was simply the condition. He operated within it.

The room was quiet in the way of rooms that are receiving something. He watched the quality of the quiet and found it the best quality available — not the polite quiet of attentiveness but the specific quiet of people who have stopped managing their response because the thing they are receiving does not require managed response. He noted this. He noted that he had produced it deliberately and received it genuinely and that both of those things were true and that both being true was not unusual for him and was not a contradiction he needed to resolve.

The Delphine passage landed.

He watched it land in the room and found the landing clean.

He stepped back from the lectern. He received the response. He moved through the post-speech conversations with the fluency that post-speech conversations required, which was a different fluency from the speech itself — more particular, more responsive, less structured, the improvisation of a man who is available now in a way that the

speech made him appear unavailable. He was available in exactly the way the post-speech conversations required.

He drove home. He had five days.

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In the five days he did the remaining work and he did it well. He spoke to the press office three times and to Maarten continuously and to two committee members whose positions he wanted to verify before the vote rather than assume. The verification confirmed. The positions held. He had counted correctly and the counting had been correct and the vote would produce the outcome the counting projected.

He also, in the five days, ran the final assessment of the Bidewell situation.

He ran it because the vote was the last scheduled event in the Guarantee cycle that had a natural cover for his attention, and after the vote his professional situation would change in ways that changed his operational posture generally, and he wanted to know the Bidewell position before the change rather than after. He ran it on a Tuesday evening, at his desk, with the door closed.

The hardware assessment: proceeding at seventy percent of projected rate. Timeline now at thirty-one months from current assessment, against an original projection of twenty-four. The deviation was seven months and compounding at a rate of approximately one additional month per six-week interval of the visitor's attendance. If the attendance continued at its current rate, the timeline would slip by approximately two additional months per quarter. He ran the projection to twelve months out and found that the timeline, in twelve months, would be in the range of thirty-six to thirty-eight months — fifty to sixty percent longer than the original projection.

The exposure: the Hooft investigation remained dormant. The phrase *difficult to fully assess from outside* had not produced a follow-up

piece in ten days, which was consistent with the hypothesis that she had the records and was managing her professional position relative to them rather than actively developing the story. The Sanne situation had produced no visible movement. The almost remained outside his field of vision, in the coffee shop conversation that had or had not happened, carrying the shape that was or was not being carried anywhere useful.

He ran the combined exposure against the revised Bidewell timeline and found the product within the range of ongoing acceptable risk. The risk was higher than it had been at the grace protocol authorisation. It was not higher than the range he had accepted at that point.

He filed the assessment. He closed his desk. He went home.

He had four days.

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The night before the vote he did not sleep badly, which was different from the night before the first Bidewell visit. He noted the difference. The difference was: the Bidewell visit had been a new variable in an established system, something for which he had no established protocol. The vote was the completion of three years of established work. He knew how to do what tomorrow required. His system ran cleanly on known operations.

He slept well.

In the morning he dressed carefully, which was not unusual — he dressed carefully every morning — but with the specific quality of attention he brought to occasions that required him to be everything at once: the committed advocate, the devastated husband, the serious legislator, the man who had earned this. All four modes available, all four ready, the transitions between them smooth and invisible.

He ate breakfast. He read the morning's materials. He drove to the chamber.

The vote came on a Wednesday in March.

Conrad had known, by the Monday of that week, that the vote was secure. He had known it with the specific quality of knowing that came from having counted correctly — not projected, not estimated, counted. He had the commitments, he had verified the commitments, he had run the verification against the known variables of member absence and late defection and had found the commitments holding under all projected scenarios. The Guarantee would pass. He had known it would pass since Monday. The Wednesday vote was the administrative completion of a process whose outcome was already determined.

He attended the vote because attending was required and because not attending would have been a statement, and the statement would have been the wrong statement, and Conrad did not make wrong statements.

He arrived at the chamber early. He walked the floor before the session began — not performing anything, not managing any impression, simply moving through the space that had been his professional home for seventeen years and that would, after today, hold a different kind of weight in it. He had walked many floors before many significant events and had never found the walking sentimental. He did not find it sentimental now. He found it practical — the same practice as running the pre-session assessment, the calibration of the room before the room was required.

The chamber filled. Members arrived with the particular quality of arrival that preceded significant votes: more deliberate than ordinary sessions, the movement more considered, the conversations in the galleries quieter and more specific. He knew the session's texture from seventeen years of reading it, and he read it now as he always read it, and what he read was: this session knew⁹⁵ what it was. The members knew

what they were here to do. The outcome was not in doubt. The session had the quality of a ceremony rather than a deliberation, and ceremonies had their own demands, and he was ready for them.

He sat in his position. He watched the chamber settle.

He noted: the three members who had been amber and were now green, each in their seat, each present in the way of people who had made a decision and were at peace with the making. He noted: the two members whose positions had required the most management across the cycle, both present, both in the correct register, both holding their commitments with the settled quality of people who had arrived at what they were going to do. He noted: Maarten at the side of the chamber with a water and his phone, working, which was what Maarten did during every session Conrad attended and which was satisfactory.

He noted: Hooft in the press gallery. She was there after all — not in the corridor earlier but in the gallery now, which was where journalists went when they were covering a vote rather than a person. He ran a quick assessment of her position in the gallery: she was seated toward the centre, with clear sightlines to the floor and to the chamber president, which was the position of someone covering the vote as an event rather than someone focused on a specific member. He noted this as consistent with the dormant-story hypothesis and moved his attention back to the floor.

The chamber president called the session to order.

The vote was called. The members voted. The count was announced.

The Guarantee passed.

The chamber responded in the way of chambers that have been waiting for a specific outcome for a long time: not with the noise of surprise but with the noise of relief, which was quieter and more sustained and more genuine. He received the response. His face did the

thing his face did on occasions of this kind — not the compassionate presence, a different mode, the mode of a man who has worked toward something for a long time and has arrived at it. More weight in it than the compassionate presence. Less visible performance. He had developed this mode for these occasions because the full performance was legible as performance to people who had watched him across multiple such occasions, and there were people in this chamber who had watched him across multiple such occasions, and for those people the mode needed to be the thing rather than the performance of the thing.

He received the response. He allowed the receiving to be complete before he moved.

When the session ended he moved through the chamber and received the handshakes and provided the warmth the occasion required and noted which relationships had strengthened and which required maintenance. A member who had been amber in the final weeks and had moved to green came and shook his hand with the specific quality of a person who is glad they made the right call and wants the person who benefited from it to know they are glad. Conrad received this with the mode and the mode was right for it and the member went away satisfied. He had given the member the correct experience. The member had earned the correct experience.

He spoke briefly when called upon. The speech was seven minutes. He had written it the previous week and had revised it twice and had given it to Maarten for a read and Maarten had made one good suggestion which he had incorporated. The speech was good. The Delphine passage landed where he had placed it. He watched it land. He noted the landing.

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He spoke to three journalists in the corridor outside the chamber, all three on record, all three receiving the version of his reaction he had prepared. The version was warm and specific and contained the Delphine element in the correct proportion — present enough to be real, restrained enough to be dignified, which was the proportion that produced the most useful kind of coverage. He had found this proportion after two years of iteration and it now arrived naturally, which was what two years of iteration produced.

Hooft was not in the corridor. She had been in the gallery for the vote and was not in the corridor after it, which he noted and assessed. She had covered the vote as an event and had not positioned herself for a post-vote corridor conversation with him. This was the behaviour of a journalist who had decided, at least for tonight, that tonight was not the story. He noted it as consistent with the dormant-story hypothesis and did not revise the hypothesis upward. Dormant was manageable. He continued monitoring.

He finished with the journalists. He moved to the reception.

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The reception was in the parliamentary building's east wing, a room Conrad had been in thirty or forty times for events of various kinds. It had the quality of all rooms used frequently for official celebrations: slightly too warm, the catering slightly too abundant, the assembled people slightly too aware of being assembled. He moved through it with the fluency he brought to rooms.

People found him. They found him throughout the evening and he received each finding and gave each finding the warmth the occasion and the relationship required and noted, in the background, the coalition dynamics of who was finding him and in what order and what the finding signified. The dynamics were good. The vote had clarified

positions. The clarifications had been, across most relevant dimensions, in his favour.

He was speaking to the foundation director — the same one from six months ago, the dinner that had been a coalition building session in the form of a dinner — when he became aware of Hoolt across the room. Not approaching him. Not looking at him. In conversation with a committee researcher whose portfolio Conrad knew well enough to know it was adjacent to the Guarantee without being directly inside it. The conversation had the body language of a journalist building general access — the researcher animated, the questions exploratory, no specific urgency in either of them. He noted this and assessed it as the dormant-story behaviour and gave the foundation director a response to whatever the foundation director had been saying, and the response was accurate and the foundation director received it correctly and he moved the foundation director toward the position that would be useful in the next cycle.

He tracked Hoolt for thirty-five minutes across the reception. She spoke to five people: the researcher, a policy aide whose portfolio was tangential, a senior Guarantee supporter whose relationship with Conrad was entirely public and positive, a continuance advocacy organisation representative whose work he had publicly supported, and the Alliance director whose annual conference speech he had given one week ago. None of these conversations indicated a journalist building toward a specific subject. Each indicated a journalist building the general relationship infrastructure that made future access possible when future access was required.

She was not building toward him tonight.

He noted this as the most significant data point from the Hoolt monitoring in three months. Not conclusive — dormant was dormant, not resolved — but the clearest indication yet that the story, if it existed, was not currently active. The sixty-day silence after the FOI response.

The observational profile piece with its carefully qualified phrase. Tonight's building of general access rather than specific pursuit. The pattern was consistent and the pattern was: she had the records and the records were insufficient and she was maintaining her position and monitoring for new information that had not arrived and might not arrive.

He assessed the probability of the story activating in the next twelve months and found it below the threshold he required to assign it actionable risk. He moved the Hoolt variable from elevated monitoring to standard background monitoring, which was the first time he had moved it in that direction in seven months.

He moved to the next conversation.

. . .

The person who found him at the edge of the reception, forty minutes before the evening ended, was a colleague of seven years standing — one of the good ones, a man whose presence in committees and functions Conrad had always found genuinely useful because he was one of the people who required nothing complicated from the interaction and who was therefore a clean channel through which the social maintenance of the professional relationship could proceed efficiently. They had worked together across two committee cycles. The working together had been productive and uncomplicated. He found the man pleasant in the specific sense that proximity to him produced no demands on Conrad's management resources.

The colleague said the things people said. He said the Guarantee was a remarkable achievement. He said it had taken too long. He said the committee had been fortunate to have Conrad driving it.

Conrad received this with the mode.

Then the colleague said: she would have been proud. He said it with the warmth of a man who had met Delphine twice at parliamentary

functions many years ago and had found her, as people always found her, worth talking to.

She would have been so proud of what you're doing with this. She was lucky to have you.

Conrad's face did the thing. The weight of something carried a long time, the quality of a man standing inside a loss he has learned to live inside. He said something appropriate. He said Delphine had always understood the importance of the policy, that she had been his reason for caring about it before it became a professional commitment, that he thought about her at moments like this.

This was true in the sense that she was always available to be thought about. He had accessed that availability tonight — the Delphine element in the chamber speech, the Delphine proportion in the corridor interviews, the careful management of the Delphine passage across the entire evening. She had been present in every room tonight in the form he had constructed her presence for these rooms, and the form was accessible and warm and carried the weight he needed it to carry.

He had accessed the availability and the accessing had produced the performance and the performance was indistinguishable from the truth.

He moved on.

He stood at the edge of the room.

He held his drink at the correct angle — the angle that said: present, available, not seeking the next conversation but not closed to it. He had developed this stance across years of edge-of-room positioning, the specific posture of a man who has given everything the room required and is now being present without requiring anything from the room in return, which was the posture that rooms found most inviting and which therefore produced the most valuable remaining conversations.

The room moved around him in the way of rooms that were completing. He observed it without particular interest. He had been in more rooms completing than he could count. This one was completing well — the right people present, the right outcomes produced, the right quality of satisfaction in the room's slow redistribution.

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He ran the assessment at the edge of the room.

The vote: complete. The Guarantee passed by seventeen votes, which was more than the count had projected and which meant either that some of the amber positions had moved to green without his knowledge — members who had been persuaded by the session itself rather than by prior conversation — or that some members who had committed green had persuaded others in the final days through their own relational networks. Either scenario was satisfactory. A larger margin was a more durable result. He noted the margin as above expectation.

The coverage: performing above expectation. The proportion was holding — the Guarantee as genuine legislative achievement, his personal commitment as evidence of conviction rather than performance, the Delphine element weighted correctly across all three of the major coverage outlets he had been monitoring. Maarten had sent him the summaries at nine-thirty and they were good.

The Hooft situation: downgraded from elevated to background monitoring. No story produced from the FOI records. No active development visible tonight. The phrase *difficult to fully assess from outside* remained in the published record and would remain there but had not been followed by the thing it was pointing toward. He noted the downgrade and noted that the noting had the quality of a provisional relief — not resolution, he did not resolve things that were not fully resolved, but the specific quality of a risk that had been

present for a long time at a level that required continuous management and had moved to a level that required only monitoring.

The Bidewell situation: ongoing, visitor variable unresolved, timeline at thirty-one months and compounding. He had accepted the revised timeline. He had filed the visitor variable. He had run the final pre-vote assessment on Tuesday and found the combined exposure within the acceptable range. The situation was managed in the ways available to him.

The Sanne situation: closed, almost managed, almost outside his field of vision. The almost remained in the world in a register he could not monitor. He noted the remaining almost and noted that he had been noting it for three months and that the noting had not changed its status and was unlikely to change its status through continued noting. He filed it under: noted, accepted, no further action available.

The parallel account: current, no new entries since the prescription Fragment. The prescription, the recalibration, the two hospital calls, the Thursday, the donor dinner, the four minutes to the car. All of it filed. All of it in the account. The account would remain in the account for as long as he was the person who had done what the account described, which was for as long as he continued, which might be a considerable time. He noted this without the noting producing any output he had a name for.

The last Fragment: in the unresolved file, eleventh day, where it had been since it arrived. Her face at rest. He had searched for it and had not found it and had noted the not-finding and had filed the not-finding under residual data, unprocessed, no action indicated. He checked the filing now and found it as he had left it: filed, present in the unresolved position, the face at rest, the face that had never performed anything.

He did not examine this further. He noted it once more, here at the edge of the room, and did not examine it.

He looked at the room.

The Guarantee had passed. It would help real people. This was a true statement and he had made it many times and it was still true and the truth of it was the truth of it regardless of everything else. He had made the Guarantee happen. He had done this through the specific quality of his intelligence and his patience and his capacity to hold a goal across the variable pressures of three legislative cycles. This was genuine. This was, in the register of what he did, excellent work.

He was also the man who had stood at the door of Bidewell for ten minutes and turned away without going in. He was also the man whose parallel account contained the prescription and the recalibration and the two hospital calls and the Thursday. He was also the man whose last Fragment was a face he could not file when he searched for it.

All of these were true. The compartments held. They had always held. Conrad had built the compartments and he trusted the construction.

Across the city, in an alcove he had never entered, a warm presence attended a warm presence. He did not know this. He did not know the name of the man who attended, or why the man attended, or that the man had been attending for longer than Conrad had been managing the situation, or that the attending had been slowing the decline in ways that Conrad's timeline had not accounted for and could not account for because the force doing the slowing was warmth and warmth did not appear in any of Conrad's registers.

He did not know that Delphine, on certain visits, had a window. Brief, specific, herself. The monks had been noting the windows for eighteen months. The window was not the Delphine of the full grade, not the Delphine of the acquisition or the sitting room or the hospital or the prescription night. The window was something that arrived without announcement and lasted as long as it lasted and then returned to the warmth. The monks received it with the attention of people who

had learned to receive things without requiring them to be other than what they were.

He did not know any of this.

He thought the situation was managed.

He was satisfied with what he had done.

He raised his glass.

The room was warm and full of people who had done something real today and who were glad of the doing. He was in the room. He was one of the people who had done something real today. He was also other things. The other things were in the compartments. The compartments held.

He raised his glass.

He did not know about Pieter. He did not know about Sanne in the coffee shop, the shape passed from one person to another in the November city, sitting in the world now in a register he could not monitor, belonging to someone who did not know what to do with it and had other things to think about and had not yet been in a position to do anything with it and might never be in a position to do anything with it, and might someday be.

He did not know that the last Fragment was not filed because it had not resolved into data. That it had arrived as her face at rest and had stayed as her face at rest and had remained that way — not requiring anything, not demanding anything, simply present in the way that she had always been present, the way of a person who was the same in all registers and had no gap between what she was and what she showed, which was the quality he had spent thirty years managing the gap around.

He raised his glass.

The room received the gesture in the way of rooms: warmly, without looking too closely, glad for the occasion, the thing that had been accomplished.

He was, in this room, untouchable.

He raised his glass.

The face remained, in the unresolved file, where it remained.

The sentence she had said in the sitting room — *you experience people the way other men experience weather* — remained also. It had remained since the evening she said it. It would remain. True things remained. He had managed the remaining of true things across a long career by ensuring that the remaining had nowhere operational to go, and the remaining had never had anywhere operational to go, and it still didn't, and the Guarantee had passed and the room was warm and he was in it and he was untouchable and the face remained and the sentence remained and Delphine remained, warm and occasionally specific, in an alcove he had turned away from, attended by a man he would never know, outlasting his projections by the force of something he had no framework for.

He lowered his glass.

He moved to the next conversation.

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