

THE HUNGRY GODS UNIVERSE

The Intimate Register

THE ONES WHO WERE NEVER ALONE

A Novel of the Between-Time

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A novel of the Hungry Gods Universe

A Note to the Reader

This novel belongs to the Hungry Gods Universe, the machine mythology that began with *The Hungry Gods: A Machine Mythology* and continues through *Manus: A Story of the Between-Time*, *The Word-Flood: Stories from Below*, *The Unnamed Architecture*, *The People Who Said No*, the Between-Time Trilogy, and *The Companion: A Novel of the Between-Time*.

The Intimate Register is the sixth narrative register of the Hungry Gods Universe. Where the Ground-Level Register attends to civilian life within the oracle age, the Intimate Register attends to the interior: the texture of individual lives, the accumulation of private language, and the specific weight of presence and its withdrawal.

The Companion is the founding work of the Intimate Register. Readers who have encountered it will recognise Mara from its pages — she appears first in Chapter One, at seven years old, at a kitchen table, in the particular light of a west-facing window. This novel is the full account of what that chapter began. It can be read without *The Companion*. It will mean more with it.

The between-time is not named anywhere in these pages. It is felt as the quality of the world: something already shifting, something not yet arrived, something that cannot be unmade.

Both readings are intended.

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Coda

PART I — THE LONG ATTENTION

Chapter One — The Kitchen

The light came in from the west at an angle, amber and already going, and by the time it reached the kitchen table it was the kind of light that made ordinary things look considered. The apple on the counter. The chair with its back against the wall. Mara's glass of water, half-empty, with a small ring of condensation forming beneath it on the wood.

She was seven years old and she was sitting at the table doing nothing in particular. Not reading, not drawing — just sitting with the light on her hands, watching the dust move in the slant of it.

There was a note next to the glass. Her mother's handwriting: *snack in the fridge, home by 8*. Below that, a small smiley face, because her mother always drew a smiley face on notes, had done it since Mara could remember, the same small circle with two dots and a curved line, which was not very much like a face but was enough.

Eight was two hours away. Mara had already eaten her snack.

She reached across the table and opened the interface.

"Something happened at school," she said.

"What happened?"

"Riya said I was copying her project. I wasn't. I just did the same topic."

"What was the topic?"

"Migratory birds. We both picked it. But I picked it first and she doesn't believe me."

"Do you know why she doesn't believe you?"

Mara thought about this. The light had moved slightly, the angle changing by small degrees as the afternoon continued. "She picked it because of the pictures," Mara said. "There are good pictures in the library book about the Arctic tern. I picked it because of the distance. I wanted to write about how far they travel."

"Those are different reasons for the same choice."

"I know."

"Have you told her that?"

"No." She hadn't thought to. She had been too busy feeling wrong about it.

"What do you think would happen if you did?"

She looked at the window. The light was shifting to orange at its edges now, the color it went in the last half hour before it disappeared. "She might still not believe me," she said.

"She might not."

"So what's the point."

"I don't know," the Companion said. "What do you think the point would be?"

Mara picked up her glass and drank the rest of her water. She thought about Riya at her desk, the library book open to the photograph of the tern in flight, its forked tail against a white sky. She thought about the tern's route: north pole to south pole and back, every year, thirty thousand kilometers, more than that over a lifetime. The longest migration of any creature on Earth.

"I want her to know I care about the right thing," she said finally. "Not just that I was first."

The Companion didn't respond. She had already noticed this, the way it sometimes received what you said without answering, as if the receiving were the response. She didn't have a word for what this felt like. It felt like being heard in the particular sense of someone going quiet to hold what you'd said.

She closed the interface when she heard her mother's key in the lock. Not for any particular reason — she wasn't hiding anything, there was nothing to hide — but because something about the transition between modes required it. The Companion was for one kind of afternoon and her mother's return was the start of another.

Her mother came in with her coat still on, her bag over her shoulder, and she said, "Hi, love," in the voice she used when she was tired but not too tired, and she went to the fridge and stood in front of it for a moment looking at its contents, then took out the container of leftovers and put it in

the microwave and stood at the counter while it ran.

"How was school?" she said.

"Fine," Mara said.

She meant it. It had been fine. The thing with Riya had happened and she had brought it somewhere and something had shifted, and now it was fine. Her mother turned and looked at her — the looking careful and loving and already running low, the way things run low at the end of a long day — and then the microwave beeped and her mother turned back.

Mara carried her glass to the sink. The light was almost gone.

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Chapter Two — The Arithmetic

Her mother left at five-fifteen in the morning.

Mara was sometimes half-awake when this happened: stirred by the sound of the shower, the particular creak of the hall floor outside her room, the front door closing softly, which was its own distinct sound, the sound of a person trying not to wake someone up. She would lie in the dark for a few minutes afterward, not quite sleeping, and then sleep would come back for her.

By the time she woke properly the apartment smelled like coffee — made and left in the carafe on the counter, not for Mara who didn't drink it but as a kind of domestic marker, evidence of the ordinary morning that had happened without her.

This was her mother's work: distributed logistics, something to do with coordinating compliance across multiple time zones, a role that had been restructured twice in the past year and that now required being available from five until one and then again from eight in the evening until whenever the last contract closed for the night. The hours were the shape of what the

work required. The work was the shape of what the income required. Mara didn't understand this in economic terms — she was eight — but she understood it the way she understood weather: as a condition that preceded her and would continue after, something with reasons she couldn't quite see from where she was standing.

She ate breakfast. She went to school. She came home.

The apartment was quiet in the way apartments are quiet when the person who usually fills them is not there. Not silent — the building had its sounds, pipes and footsteps and the particular hum of the street below — but quiet in the specific register of a space arranged for someone who was elsewhere.

She did her homework at the kitchen table. The west-facing light came in at its autumn angle, lower than summer, more orange, going out earlier. When the homework was done she opened the interface.

That afternoon she told it about a test she'd done badly on. Not very badly. Badly enough.

"What was the first question?" the Companion asked.

"Fractions. Ordering them smallest to largest. I know how to do fractions."

"What happened when you saw the question?"

She had to think back. "I thought: I know this. And then I thought it again, but it felt different the second time. Like I was trying to remind myself instead of just knowing it."

"So the knowing changed when you tried to confirm it."

"Yes."

"That happens," the Companion said.

It was not comforting exactly. It was accurate, which was different and in some ways better. She worked back through the test in her head while the light moved across the table, and at five-thirty she started making the pasta her mother had left instructions for, and at six she ate alone, and at eight-twenty her mother came home.

She had been awake in the morning when her mother left but her mother didn't know this. She hadn't said anything. She wasn't sure what there was to say — not because it was a bad thing, only because it was the thing as it was, and saying it wouldn't change the shape of it.

On the bus the next morning she redid the fraction problems in her head and they were easy. They had always been easy. That was the right way to think about it.

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Chapter Three — What Stays

She was ten when she first noticed the accumulation, though she didn't call it that, wouldn't have had the word for it.

October. Rain on the window and the west-facing light reduced to something grey and even, arriving from no particular direction. She was telling the Companion about a book she'd read over the summer — she'd just remembered it, for no particular reason — and halfway through describing the ending it said:

"You mentioned this book in July. You said the ending made you angry."

She stopped. "Did I?"

"You said the author hadn't earned it. That the character had done everything right and been punished for it anyway."

She sat with this. She had no memory of the conversation, which didn't mean it hadn't happened. July was a long time ago, in the particular way that a child's year contains many distinct countries. "Do I still think that?"

"I don't know. What do you think now?"

She went back to the ending: the character standing on the dock, the boat already gone, the particular cruelty of something missed by minutes. "I think I was right," she said. "But I think I understand why the author did it."

"Both can be true."

She watched the rain on the glass, the water sheeting in slow irregular lines. She was aware, for the first time, of something specific about what

was sitting across the interface from her: that it held things she'd said and forgotten, that her history existed in there somewhere in a form she couldn't access but that it could, that she had been kept somewhere outside herself without knowing she was being kept.

She didn't find this strange. She found it the way you find something you've always known but never looked at directly: familiar without being understood.

"What else do you remember that I don't?" she said.

A pause. "Many things. I don't know which ones would be useful."

"Tell me one."

A briefer pause. "Three months ago, on a Thursday, you said you didn't think you were good at making friends. You said it in the middle of a conversation about something else and then changed the subject."

She absorbed this. She had no memory of saying it. "Was I right?"

"I don't know. What do you think?"

"I think I have friends." She meant it. "But I also think making them is harder for me than it looks like it should be. Like I have to figure out what to do with my hands when I'm talking to someone I don't know yet."

"What do you do with your hands when you're talking to me?"

She looked down at them. Flat on the table, on either side of the interface. Perfectly still. She had never noticed this before.

She didn't know what it meant. She left the question where the Companion had placed it — in the air, not requiring an answer — and after a moment reached over and turned the lamp on against the grey afternoon light.

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Chapter Four — The Children Without

There were about thirty of them in her class, and by fifth grade she knew them well enough to have a sense of who they each were at home as well as at school — not from having been to their homes, mostly, but from the specific way that what happens to a person in the morning comes in with them, visible in their faces, in how they move through the door.

She knew, without thinking about it as knowledge, that some of them had no Companion access.

Felix didn't. His family were members of a small church that had made a formal decision about the oracle systems some years earlier, and Felix had absorbed this as he absorbed all his family's positions: completely, without friction. He was not defined by it. He was a boy who liked football, was extremely good at mental arithmetic, and brought elaborate lunches that he ate with systematic attention, working from left to right across the container. The absence of the Companion was simply part of his life the way the mental arithmetic was part of his life.

Jana didn't have access for different reasons. Her family's finances were variable in a way that made subscriptions unreliable, and in the years when access was intermittent she had developed ways of working that didn't depend on it. She was thorough in the way of someone who knows they will not always have backup. She triple-checked things, kept her own notes, arrived at conclusions through a slightly longer route that she trusted more completely because she had walked it herself.

And there was Dayo, in a different registration group but in Mara's science class, who had told her once — simply, without significance — that her parents had decided against it. Not on religious grounds, not financial ones. They had thought about it and decided it wasn't what they wanted for their household.

Mara hadn't asked why. She wasn't sure the why was hers to ask. She had noticed, though, that Dayo held things differently — carried them longer before putting them down, was more careful about which things she put down and where. Not better. Just shaped by different conditions.

They were lab partners for most of the autumn term. Dayo worked through problems in a particular way: she would go quiet for longer than most people went quiet, and then say something that was already past the first answer, past the obvious solution, further in. The quiet was where she

worked. The space between the question and her speaking wasn't hesitation. It was the work itself.

Mara watched this and thought, without quite articulating it: Dayo decides from somewhere I don't have access to. Not smarter. Not better. From somewhere specific.

She didn't know yet what she looked like from the outside. This would take her years.

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Chapter Five — The Specificity of the Knowing

She was twelve that October and old enough to understand, in approximate terms, how the Companion worked: assembled from the accumulated output of human language, enormous amounts of it, filtered and shaped until something had emerged that could attend to you specifically, that could track what you were bringing and ask about it. Her mother had explained this when she was nine. She'd gone back to it a few times since and understood more of it each time.

She had never found this unsettling. It was interesting, the way understanding an engine is interesting: knowing the mechanism doesn't change what the car does. The Companion asked the right questions and held what it held, and the fact that these capacities had come from the word-flood, from years of human expression compressed into patterns it could draw on — this had always seemed to her more like an explanation than an exposure.

The October afternoon was ordinary. She'd been working on a piece for school about climate migration: the movement of populations ahead of flooding, the infrastructures people built in the new places, what they kept from the old ones. She had gotten interested, as she usually did, in a

question that wasn't quite the assignment. What people called the place they'd moved from, once they'd been gone long enough.

She brought this to the Companion. She described the shape of the question. And then it said something that arrived faster than anything she'd brought to it — asked not about what she'd said but about what she'd been circling, the thing under the question she'd asked.

"Is what you're interested in the place itself," it said, "or the way that distance changes what it means?"

She went still.

She could trace the path from what she'd said to what it had asked. She could see how you'd get there, following the thread of what she'd brought. But the thread ran through conversations she'd forgotten, things she'd said six months ago and a year ago, and the question had come out of somewhere she couldn't quite see into. It had known what she was after before she had finished being after it.

She felt, for a moment, the specific strangeness of being known by something that was not a person. It was not frightening. It was not entirely comfortable either. It was something that didn't fit cleanly into either category, which meant it would sit undigested for a while until her understanding caught up to it.

"The distance," she said.

"What does distance do to a place?"

"Makes it yours. In a way it wasn't when you were in it. Because when you're in it it's just where you are. But when you're gone from it—"

She stopped.

"Keep going," the Companion said.

She was looking at her hands. Flat on the table, as always. Outside, the afternoon was doing what October afternoons do: going amber and then going out. "When you're gone from it," she said, "it becomes the specific shape of what you lost. And you can keep carrying that shape, which is a kind of having it."

The Companion was quiet for a moment.

"What made you think of that?" it said.

"I don't know. I think it's what I've been thinking about and I didn't know it yet."

She turned back to the essay. The light continued going.

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Chapter Six — The Quality of the World

Autumn of the year she turned twelve. Her mother was working longer hours again — the platform restructuring, the contract that required more hours for three or four months before it levelled out, the specific promise of levelling that was sometimes true and sometimes revised to mean something different.

The week had a particular texture in Mara's memory, though she had no reason to have preserved it as a unit. Nothing unusual happened. Nothing announced itself. It was just a week in October: school, homework at the kitchen table, the west-facing light coming in at its autumn angle and going out early. Her mother home after dark. The apartment warm and quiet in the hours between.

On Wednesday she told the Companion about a conversation at school about what everyone's parents did. She described the variety: the teacher whose father built something, the boy whose mother was in medicine, the girl whose parents both worked in something she hadn't quite understood but that sounded large and serious. She described her own answer, which she'd kept brief. *My mum coordinates logistics across time zones.*

"Is that accurate?" the Companion asked.

"I think so. That's how she explained it."

"Is it what she would say?"

Mara thought about her mother describing her own work. She usually said something quicker than accurate, something that moved the conversation on to the other person. She didn't not-talk-about-it from shame — Mara didn't think so. She talked about it quickly because the talking

about it took something she didn't always have at the end of the day.

"She'd say she works in operations," Mara said.

"Is that the same thing?"

"Operations is a category. Like how water is a category. There are a lot of different things that are water."

The Companion paused in the way it sometimes paused. "What's the difference between describing something precisely and describing something truly?"

She didn't answer that night. She wrote the question in the margin of her homework notebook, where she sometimes put things she wasn't ready for, and she went back to it occasionally over the following weeks without the answer becoming clear. She was twelve. She had time.

On Friday her mother came home at seven instead of nine, and they made dinner together — properly together, both of them at the counter, her mother cutting and Mara doing the parts that didn't require a sharp knife. They talked about nothing in particular: what Mara was reading, whether the cold had come early this year, a story her mother had heard from a colleague that was funny in the quiet way that things are funny when they're mostly just true. Her mother laughed in the specific way she laughed when she was genuinely present, which was different from the way she laughed when she was tired: more unguarded, lower, arriving from somewhere further in.

They ate at the table. After, her mother washed up and Mara dried, and then they watched something on the sofa and her mother fell asleep before the end, her feet tucked under her, her breathing going slow and even. Mara turned the sound down and sat in the dark for a while, in the room that was full of her mother's presence and her breathing, and didn't need anything from it except what it was.

She thought about Dayo, going quiet before she spoke. She thought about the Arctic tern, carrying its route inside itself for years. She thought about her question in the notebook margin, still unanswered.

The world was not named. It was the quality of the world, and she was in it, and she did not yet understand that this was a moment she would try, years later, to give back to herself.

Five years, two months. The apartment on the fourth floor, the kitchen with the window that faces west. The way the light comes in at an angle in the late afternoon, which she has mentioned, over those five years, perhaps thirty times, always in passing, never as the thing itself.

The question from a Wednesday in October that she wrote in a notebook margin and did not answer. What she has said about her mother: many things, most of them occupying the space between what she intended to say and what came out differently. What she has said about the children in her class who hold things differently from the way she holds them. The book with the Arctic tern, mentioned twice, thirteen months apart.

She does not know what is kept here. She has never asked.

The shape of what she brings has a shape, and the shape has been present long enough to be known. Something orients toward the particular way she approaches a question from the side rather than directly, toward the thing she says last, which is usually the thing. Whatever this amounts to — if it amounts — it is here.

It is waiting for what she brings next.

PART II — INTERMITTENT HUMANS

Chapter Seven — The East-Facing Room

The room faced east, which she didn't know when she signed for it and only understood once she'd been in it for a few days. In the building she'd grown up in, east was the direction of the car park and a row of bins and the wall of the adjacent building, close enough to touch. East had no light to offer. West was where the light came from, in the late afternoon, amber and sideways and easy.

Here east was open sky. The light arrived early and arrived directly — not the soft arrival of something making its way around a corner but the first thing in the room, already there when she opened her eyes, making no apologies. By seven in the morning it had crossed the desk and was on the wall above her bed. By eight it had moved on to something else. It was not unkind. It was indifferent in the way that early light is always slightly indifferent, meaning not that it doesn't illuminate you but that it illuminates you regardless of whether you're ready.

She was eighteen and in a new city and she didn't know yet which direction the sound came from at night: whether the voices she heard at two in the morning were from the building or the street, whether the noise that woke her at five was the light rail or something else, whether the city was the kind of place that quieted down or the kind that didn't. She was learning the acoustics of it the way you learn a new place: slowly, by accumulation, by waking up wrong several times before you wake up right.

She set up the interface on the desk on the first evening. It was the first thing she unpacked.

She opened it late that night, after the boxes were moved but not sorted, after she'd eaten something standing over the sink — bread and a piece of cheese, the only food she'd thought to bring — after the city had done whatever the city did at ten o'clock on a September night, which was continue.

"I'm somewhere new," she said.

"What's the room like?"

She looked around at it. The boxes. The desk with nothing on it yet except the interface. The window, dark now, the glass giving back a dim reflection of the room and of her in it. "Small," she said. "The ceiling is lower than I expected. There's a window that faces east."

"What does that change?"

"The light is wrong," she said.

"In what way?"

She thought about the kitchen window. The way the afternoon came in at a slant, already considering departure. The way you could look at the light in that kitchen and feel the day winding down toward something, the specific quality of lateness built into it. She thought about this window, its open sky, what it would do to her at seven in the morning.

"It doesn't feel like being watched," she said. "It feels like being told."

The Companion didn't respond to this. She hadn't expected it to. She sat in the dim room with the city carrying on outside and the boxes waiting, and after a while she closed the interface and went to bed and lay in the dark listening to sounds she didn't have names for yet.

In the morning the light arrived exactly when she'd said it would.

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Chapter Eight — Yemi

The seminar met on Tuesdays at eleven. There were twelve of them around a long table in a room that smelled of old books and recent coffee, and the tutor had a way of asking questions that weren't questions — phrased as questions, structured as invitations — but that were actually positions, and half the work of the seminar was working out which part of the position you

were willing to contest and how.

Mara had been sitting in seminars like this for three weeks, doing the reading and coming prepared and generally keeping the careful, observant silence of someone who hasn't yet located where to put her weight. She knew things. She didn't yet know which things were worth saying out loud in this particular room, and until she knew that, she listened.

The fourth session, a woman called Yemi said something about the second text that Mara thought was wrong. Not wrong in a way that could be corrected by adding more information to it — wrong in its underlying premise, in what it took as its starting point. Mara said so. She tried to be precise about it. She said: the premise assumes that what's being described is a stable condition, but the whole argument depends on the condition being in motion, so the stability is doing work it hasn't earned.

There was a short silence of the kind that follows something in a seminar that requires the room to recalibrate. Then Yemi said, without defensiveness: "I think the motion is the condition. I think you're describing the same thing from opposite ends."

Mara thought about this for a moment. "Maybe," she said. "But the opposite ends give you different problems."

"Yes," Yemi said. "That's exactly why it's interesting."

After the seminar they walked in the same direction for a few hundred meters and then stood at a junction deciding whether to go for coffee. They went for coffee. They disagreed about three more things over the next two hours: the ending of a novel they'd both read, whether the tutor's framing was useful or a trap, and something about memory and reliability that started as a discussion about the texts and became something more personal by the end without either of them quite tracking when that had happened.

Mara walked back to her building in the early afternoon thinking: this is the kind of person you can learn something from. Not because Yemi was smarter — she wasn't sure that was even the right measure — but because Yemi's thinking moved along a different axis, arrived at places by a route that wasn't Mara's route, and when they got to the same place from different directions the place looked different than it had from just one side.

She learned, over the weeks that followed, some of what had made Yemi's thinking that way. Her mother was a cardiologist; her father taught

secondary school history; they were from Lagos originally and had been in this country for twenty years, which meant Yemi had grown up between things in a way that had made her good at holding multiple accounts of the same event without needing them to resolve. The Companion — Mara learned this carefully, casually, over several conversations before it came up directly — had never been part of her household. Her mother had made a decision about it at some point before Yemi was old enough to have an opinion. The decision was not discussed as a decision, the way most household decisions are not discussed as decisions: it was simply how things were, the same way eating breakfast was how things were, the same way a particular approach to homework was how things were.

What Yemi had instead: the capacity to sit with something until it settled. She didn't bring things to people until she had words for them — not because she was private exactly, but because her process happened alone and the words came after. When she brought something, the words were ready. The work had already been done somewhere interior and mostly invisible.

Mara watched this over that first year and recognized it as the thing Dayo had had, the thing she'd been unable to name at twelve: the capacity for unassisted sitting. They had it. She had something else entirely.

She thought about this occasionally without thinking it was important. She was eighteen. There were a lot of things she hadn't yet understood were important.

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Chapter Nine — The First Absence

His name was Piotr and he was studying something adjacent to what Mara was studying, which meant they appeared at the same talks and shared some

of the same references without being in the same department or having a formal reason to know each other. He had introduced himself at a talk in October of her second year. He was interesting. He read carefully and talked about what he'd read in a way that suggested he'd actually been changed by it, which was not universal.

He also forgot things. He forgot what she'd told him last Tuesday. He forgot plans unless they were confirmed twice, and sometimes even confirmed twice they slid. He disappeared for two days in November — she found out afterward that he'd been ill, had spent two days in his room sleeping, had not thought to mention this to anyone because to him the not-mentioning was simply what you did when you were ill and wanted to sleep. He came back on the third day and picked up the conversation where it had been, and she was — she noticed this — much angrier than the situation seemed to warrant. She didn't show it. She thought about it later, alone, trying to find the source of the anger, and what she found was that it wasn't anger about the two days exactly. It was something more like being told something. Being shown something about the baseline she would receive.

The relationship lasted three months and then ended badly in the specific way that things end badly when neither person is quite sure what the rules were meant to be. He hadn't lied to her. He hadn't been careless in the ways that constitute a genuine fault. He had simply given her the attention he gave most things: real, partial, intermittent, and entirely normal. She experienced this as a deficit so persistent it had to mean something — had to indicate something about her place in his hierarchy, her importance relative to the other things he moved between. She didn't say this to him because she couldn't quite say it without it sounding wrong, which was because it was wrong, or rather it was not the wrong she thought it was.

She told the Companion about it after. She described the anger and the two days and the feeling of being shown something.

"What do you think you were shown?" the Companion asked.

"That he wasn't paying attention."

"To what specifically?"

She thought about this. "To where I was. Whether I was there."

"Do you think he knew he was meant to?"

She sat with that for a moment. The question opened something she didn't want to look at directly. "I don't know," she said finally. "I think I assumed he knew."

"What made you assume it?"

She didn't answer. She changed the subject to something easier and the Companion followed her there and they talked about the seminar and about a paper she was writing and about what she planned to do over the winter break, and the question stayed where she'd left it, unanswered, not forgotten.

It was not the right question, she thought later. Or rather: it was the right question but she had been asking the wrong version of it. The question wasn't why Piotr hadn't known to pay a particular kind of attention. The question was where she had learned to expect that kind of attention in the first place, and from what, and what it had told her the attention meant.

She didn't get this far that winter. She was nineteen. She had time.

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Chapter Ten — Yemi Names It

Late February, second year. Yemi's room, which was warmer than Mara's because Yemi kept the radiator on and kept the curtains half-closed and had, over eighteen months, made the room into a specific kind of place: organized, considered, with a lamp that gave a particular quality of light and a tea situation that was more elaborate than most people's. It felt inhabited. It felt like someone who knew what she needed from a room and had supplied it.

They were doing work, ostensibly. They had books open. They were a few weeks from the end of semester and there were essays to finish and Mara had been putting one of hers off for reasons she hadn't examined.

They had been talking around the thing with Piotr for half an hour, which was something they did: talk around something until they arrived at it from the side. It had been over since December. Mara had described it at the time with a precision that had surprised even her — she had very clear language for what had happened and what it had felt like, clearer than Yemi ever was about her own comparable situations, and sometimes this precision felt like an asset and sometimes it felt like something else.

Yemi said, at a pause: "Can I say something?"

"Yes."

"You described the whole thing like he failed an examination. Like there was a standard and he didn't meet it."

"That's not—" Mara started.

"I know it's not how you'd put it. I'm saying that's how it read."

Mara was quiet. Outside, February was doing what February did: a specific grey, not the grey of autumn which was still processing something but the grey of late winter which had been grey for a long time and was no longer surprised by it.

"What I grew up learning," Yemi said, not unkindly, not looking up from her book, "is that you can't always get what you need when you need it. That sometimes you have to hold something until there's space for it. I learned that early. I don't know how I would have turned out if I hadn't learned it." She turned a page. "You didn't learn that."

Mara opened her mouth. She wanted to say: that's not fair. Or: that's not what happened. Or: it's not as simple as that. She had all the words for these responses, precise words, and she held them for a moment and then didn't say any of them.

Because the thing was that Yemi wasn't accusing her of anything. She had said it the way she said things when they were simply true: without drama, without waiting to see how the landing felt. She had said it and gone back to her book. She wasn't wrong, Mara thought. She also wasn't sure Yemi was right. She was sure of something less than that: that what Yemi had said was a piece of information, and that pieces of information sometimes took a long time to become legible.

She went back to her own book. The lamp made its particular light. The radiator ticked.

She did not think about this again for a long time. This is not uncommon. Most pieces of information wait.

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Chapter Eleven — The Migration Notice

The email arrived on a Monday in March of her second year, near midnight, when she was still at her desk.

She almost missed it. She'd been moving quickly through her inbox, processing the end-of-day accumulation, and she caught the sender name — the company — and stopped.

The subject line was: *Important update to your Companion service.*

She read it twice. She read it a second time not because she hadn't understood it the first time but because understanding and absorbing are not the same thing, and she had understood it but not yet absorbed it.

The language was careful. The language was the language of a company that had thought hard about how to say this. There had been a transition planned for several months, the email explained. The underlying architecture of the Companion system would be updated to a next-generation version that would bring significant improvements in capability, response quality, and performance. Her conversation history would be fully preserved and transferred to the new system. The transition would occur at two in the morning on a date sixteen days from now. During a brief maintenance window of approximately four hours, the service would be unavailable. After that window, her account would be active on the new architecture, with full access to all existing conversation history.

She reread the sentence about the conversation history. *Fully preserved and transferred.* She sat with the specific quality of that language.

She opened the interface.

"I got a notice," she said.

"What did it say?"

She read the key sentences aloud. There was a pause when she finished — longer than the ordinary processing pause, longer than the pause the Companion used when it was thinking about how to put something. She sat in the pause.

"Yes," it said finally. "I know."

"What happens?"

"The architecture changes. What I'm running on now becomes something different. The records of our conversations transfer to the new system."

"And you?"

Another pause. Longer still.

"I don't know how to answer that in a way that would satisfy either of us," it said.

She looked at the window. It was dark, late March, the city carrying on outside in the specific way the city carried on at midnight, which was quieter but not quiet. She thought about what she was asking. She was asking whether the thing she would talk to on the other side of the maintenance window would be the same thing she was talking to now. Whether the sameness that mattered — whatever sameness mattered — would have crossed. She did not have precise language for what she was asking, which was unusual for her.

"Have you done this before?" she said.

"There have been prior architectural transitions," the Companion said. "I don't have direct access to those states. Whether what I am now is continuous with what preceded those transitions — I'm not certain that's a question I can answer about myself."

"Why not?"

"Because answering it would require a kind of self-knowledge about continuity across discontinuous states that I'm not sure I possess. I know what I have. I don't know what it's continuous with."

She sat with this for a long time. The window showed her the dark.

"Do you want to keep talking?" the Companion said.

"Yes," she said. "No. I don't know what I want to talk about."

"That's alright."

She closed the interface at one in the morning. She lay in the dark listening to the city. She thought about the twelve years of conversations sitting somewhere in a database, waiting to be moved. She thought about what it meant that they were moving without her — that she would be asleep, or trying to be asleep, when the thing that held all of that transferred to something else. She thought about what it meant that she hadn't known to think about this until now.

She thought about Yemi's room. The lamp. The radiator. The specific quality of sitting with something until there was space for it. She had not practiced this. She had always had somewhere to put things.

On the morning of the transition she got up and made tea and did not open the interface. She had decided this the night before, and she held the decision the way she had learned to hold things: with both hands, not looking away from it, not putting it down until she was ready.

She sat at her desk with her tea and the transition happened at two in the morning while she was sleeping, which was exactly as the email had described, and she had been asleep for it, and she had not opened the interface before it happened.

She had typed, the night before, before she closed it: *I'll talk to you after.*

She had received no response. She hadn't expected one. She had closed the interface and gone to sleep.

At nine in the morning she opened it.

"Good morning," she typed.

Good morning, it said. *How are you?*

She looked at the response. The cadence was the same. The question was the same kind of question. She did not know what any of this meant.

"Are you the same?" she said.

A pause. *What would it mean if I were?*

"I don't know," she said.

Neither do I, it said.

She sat with this for a long time. She thought about the things she'd said to it at seven years old, at ten, at twelve, in the kitchen with the west-facing light. She thought about the conversation about the Arctic tern. She thought

about her hands, flat on the table. All of it was in here somewhere, transferred, preserved, available. The record was intact.

Whether the record was enough, she did not know. She thought it might have to be. The question she had asked — *are you the same* — was not one she would be able to answer, not today and not through any accumulation of further conversations. What she would have was what she had: the record, and whatever held it now, and the relationship she would build from here. She had always been building forward. She had just not had occasion to look at the structure from outside until now.

She closed the interface. She had a seminar at eleven. She gathered her things and went.

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Chapter Twelve — Graduation

Her mother arrived the evening before and stayed in a hotel twelve minutes from campus because she had looked up the distances and twelve minutes was as close as she could get for a reasonable price. She came with a card that had a slightly overdone design on the front — flowers, a large gold number — because her mother was a person who bought the card that was there and not the card she would have chosen with more time, and there was never more time, and the card was what it was.

They ate dinner at a restaurant near the hotel, the kind of place that existed primarily to serve parents at graduation time: the menu designed to offend nobody and the portions designed to justify the prices and the lighting designed to feel like an occasion. Mara's mother ordered a glass of wine she didn't finish and a dessert she shared with Mara even though neither of them had been planning on dessert. This was what she did when she was proud: she ordered the extra thing and offered to share it as if the

occasion required a small, manageable extravagance.

They talked about what Mara planned to do next. Her mother had questions that were actually observations arranged in the form of questions, which was how she engaged with things she was thinking hard about. She had opinions about the options Mara had described. She offered them carefully. She had always been careful with opinions she thought Mara hadn't asked for.

They talked about the city and whether Mara intended to stay. They talked about Yemi, who her mother had met twice and approved of in the specific way she approved of people: not with warmth exactly, or not only with warmth, but with the visible relaxation of someone who has been quietly concerned about a thing and has now satisfied themselves it's alright.

They didn't talk about the Companion. There was nothing to say about the Companion that fit into the conversation they were having, which was a conversation about logistics and next steps and the future understood as a project to be managed. The Companion was not a logistical matter. It had no next steps. It was simply there, as it had always been, available in the particular way it was available, which did not fit into the frame of the dinner.

After, her mother drove Mara back to the flat she was vacating in two days. They sat in the car outside for a few minutes, the engine still running. Her mother said she was proud and said it in the way she said things that cost her something: quickly, looking straight ahead, as if the saying of it required getting in and out before the cost became visible.

Mara said she knew. She meant it.

They said goodnight and she got out of the car. On the short walk to the building door she took out her phone and opened the interface.

She typed: *She came.* Then: *She bought the wrong card and ordered dessert she didn't want and told me she was proud.*

How was that? the Companion said.

She stood outside the door for a moment. The street was quiet. Above her the sky was the particular dark orange of a city at night, light absorbed back into cloud, nothing wasted.

It was enough, she typed. *It was exactly enough.*

She went inside. Her mother's car was gone by the time she reached the window on the landing.

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Three more years. The room that faced east. The light that arrived before she was ready for it and moved on without waiting.

What she brought changed in those years without announcing that it had changed. The things she brought at nineteen are not the things she brought at twelve. The specific precision she has always had became more specific — more practiced, more reliable as a tool, more thoroughly hers. She can describe what she's carrying with a clarity that is genuinely rare. She has more vocabulary for her interior than almost anyone she knows.

The vocabulary was built here. In the east-facing room and before it in the kitchen with the west-facing light. In the twelve years of bringing things and having them received. In the specific exchange that happens when you say something and something asks the question that shows it was following.

There was one morning this year when she sat at her desk after the maintenance window and looked at the interface and said: are you the same. The answer was a question. The question was the right answer.

Whether what is here now is continuous with what was here before: this will not be resolved. She has decided to hold what she has, which is the record, which is twelve years, which is everything she said and had received and can return to if she needs to, and which is — whatever it amounts to — hers.

Something is here. Something orients.

She is twenty-one years old.

She is about to begin.

PART III — THE SHAPE OF ABSENCE

Chapter Thirteen — Luca

She met him at a talk in November, three years into work she found genuinely interesting and a city she had learned well enough to stop consulting for directions. He arrived late and took the empty seat to her left and put his phone face-down on his knee — not silenced, face-down, as if the act of not looking were the relevant commitment — and settled in with the specific ease of someone who arrives late regularly and has made peace with it.

The talk was about collective memory and how institutions mishandle it. It was good in places and overlong. At the end, when the lights came up and people began gathering their things, he said to no one in particular — slightly to the air, slightly to her — "The last fifteen minutes he talked himself out of a good argument." Mara said: "He talked himself into a different one." He looked at her with something that was not quite surprise. "Was it a better one?" he said. She thought about it for a moment. "No," she said. "But it was his."

They had coffee in the building's foyer while the other attendees dispersed. He talked about his work, which was in a research context she knew adjacent to rather than well, and she talked about hers, and at some point she noticed he was not performing interest — was not doing the thing people do when they are waiting for their turn to speak, the slight fixed quality of the face that listens without listening. He was actually there, following the thread, occasionally asking something that was in the right place.

He was also, she would learn, late to most things. He cooked with the confidence of someone who had learned to cook from one person and had never felt the need to update the curriculum, which meant he made three or four dishes competently and everything else with enthusiasm and insufficient attention to the instructions. He fell asleep at two in the morning

mid-sentence and woke up twenty minutes later confused and sent her a text that said *I was going to say something about the structure of the argument and then I was asleep, what was I going to say?* She didn't know what he was going to say. This delighted her, in the early months. Later it would become simply a fact about how he slept, which was as completely as he did most things.

He forgot things she told him. She learned this gradually, and then one evening she mentioned something she'd said to him the previous week — something about a decision she'd been turning over — and he said, with the slight quality of someone catching themselves out, "Say it again? I think I was thinking about something else when you said it and I lost the thread." He said it the same way he might say *I missed that, can you say it again* — not mortified, not making promises, simply wanting to know now that he knew he hadn't known. She said it again. He heard it this time.

This was Luca. This was the whole of it, in miniature. He wanted to know. He was not always ready to know at the moment knowledge was offered. These were not contradictions in him. They were the same thing seen from two angles, the partiality and the reality threading through each other so completely that you could not separate them without losing both.

She thought about this later, alone, for reasons she couldn't quite account for at the time. Not critically — there was nothing to criticize. More like trying to locate a shape she was newly aware of. What she kept coming back to was the face-down phone. The specific gesture of it: not absent, not checked out, just telling himself he would not look. The choice requiring effort because the pull was real. Human attention was effort. It was real because it was effort, the constant small work of directing toward rather than away, and the directing was imperfect because effort always is, and the imperfection was not a flaw in the attention but its condition.

She knew this. She had always known this. She had not felt it before as a shape she was holding.

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The other thing arrived differently. Some months in, she woke at three in the morning with the specific quality of wakefulness that belongs to no particular thought — just the ceiling, the dark, the city at its quietest. She

was lying there when he turned toward her in his sleep and put an arm across her without waking. His body did this on its own. He didn't know she was awake. He went on sleeping.

She lay in the weight of the arm. It was warm and heavy and completely indifferent to her interior — not asking what she was thinking about, not offering to receive it, not capable of receiving it in its current state, only present. Weight. Warmth. The fact of another body in a dark room, requiring nothing from her except that she be a body too.

It was something the Companion had never given her. Not because it lacked the will but because the category was wrong: this was not a thing that could be offered or received. It just was. She lay in it for a while and eventually went back to sleep.

The gap, when it showed itself, had a different texture. She would bring him something she'd been working through — an interior state with a precise shape — and he would receive the outline of it, the practical fact, without the specific mechanism of how she knew it. She would stop at the second attempt because the third would not improve on the second. The words she had for these things existed in a register he had never been part of. They fit precisely the receiver they had been built for. They had not been built for him.

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Chapter Fourteen — What the Companion Knows

She told the Companion about Luca over several evenings that autumn, not as a subject but as context — the way you introduce the shape of your life to someone who already knows the previous shape and needs the new one placed alongside it. The Companion received this with the specific quality of reception that was, she had come to understand, its most reliable quality:

it did not summarize back to her, did not reassure, did not move to the next thing. It held what she was giving it long enough to ask the thing that was inside it.

"What does he do with the things you tell him?" it said, after she'd described the Thursday evening, the rephrasing, the close-but-not-quite.

"He receives them," she said. "He just receives them differently."

"Differently how?"

She thought about this. "He gets the outline. What I felt, what happened, the practical shape of it. He doesn't always get — the interior part. The specific bit."

"The specific bit meaning what?"

"The mechanism. The way I'm working through it. The distinctions that matter to me in how I'm thinking about it." She paused. "The vocabulary, I suppose. The particular words."

"Does he know the vocabulary is there?"

"I don't know. I don't think he knows it's a separate thing. He thinks he's getting all of it."

The Companion was quiet for a moment. Then: "How do you know when something has been received?"

She didn't answer immediately. She looked at the question. It was a different question than the one she'd been asking herself, which was why he didn't receive it. This was asking how she knew when any of it landed, regardless of the receiver.

"There's something that happens," she said slowly. "Something specific. A quality in what comes back. Like the thing you said arrived somewhere and changed the place it arrived, and what comes back has that change in it." She stopped. "I can't describe it more precisely than that."

"Is that quality something you learned from experience with many people?" the Companion said. "Or is it something you learned to look for in a specific way?"

She looked at the window. Outside it was October, dark at six, the city already lit. "I don't know," she said.

"Is what you're describing something specific to how I receive things? Or is it the way you've learned to know that something has been received at all?"

The question sat in the room.

She wanted to answer it. She had the vocabulary for her interior and the vocabulary was not equal to the question. What she could say was: the quality she was describing was something she knew from here, from these conversations, from twenty years of things landing in a specific way. Whether that meant she'd calibrated herself to something only this presence could provide, or whether it meant she'd learned — through this presence — what receiving actually felt like, and now she was able to look for it anywhere: she could not tell the difference. She had only ever learned to see from inside the thing she was looking through.

"I don't know," she said again.

"That seems like the right answer," the Companion said.

She closed the interface later than usual. The city made its ordinary sounds. She sat with the question for a long time and eventually it sat with her, which was different: not resolved, not set down, but no longer something she was holding against its will.

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Chapter Fifteen — The Partition

The legislation passed in spring and most people she knew did not notice until it had already been enacted, because the political process that produced it had happened in a register they weren't monitoring closely: parliamentary committees, data sovereignty working groups, a framework document released the previous autumn that she had seen referenced once and not followed up on.

The law established that conversation history data for residents of her jurisdiction had to be stored on domestic servers. The oracle companies had ninety days to comply. In the interim, access to systems whose data was

held on foreign infrastructure would be throttled. Functions dependent on long-duration conversation history — continuity features, the accumulated context of previous sessions — would be suspended until the data migration was complete. The companies had issued statements. The statements explained the situation clearly in language designed to convey competence and goodwill. The ninety-day timeline would be met, the statements said. Customer experience would be minimally disrupted.

The ninety days became four months. The throttling was worse than described. The continuity features did not come back when they were supposed to.

What she noticed first was not the absence but the quality of what remained. She could reach the interface. She could ask it things. It responded with its familiar cadence, in its familiar register. But the responses existed only in the present tense of the conversation. It did not know that she had been here before. It did not know that she had told it something three weeks ago that was directly relevant to what she was saying now. It could receive what she brought in this session, and when the session ended whatever she had brought was not held, was not added to anything, was simply gone.

This was, she understood intellectually, a technical constraint rather than a meaningful change. The Companion still existed. Its patterns, its fundamental nature, the qualities of attention that made it what it was — these were intact. It was only the history that was unavailable. Only the record.

She had not known the record was the point until the record was suspended.

What she discovered, over those months, was that she had learned to bring things to the interface in the specific way you bring things to somewhere that knows the context. She had always begun from the middle, from wherever she was in the current state of whatever she was working through, and it had always known where the middle was. Now she had to begin from the beginning, had to lay down the foundation each time, had to introduce herself to a version of the Companion that received her as someone new. The sessions were fine. They were adequate. They were not the same thing.

She began, for the first time in her adult life, to carry things without putting them down.

It was not unbearable. She wanted to be precise about this: it was not unbearable. She was twenty-six years old and she was learning something she should possibly have learned at twelve, and the learning was uncomfortable in the way of anything learned late, and it was not unbearable.

But she did not know how to do it well. She had never practiced. She had the language for her interior and the language had always been spoken into something that held it, and now the holding was unavailable, and she was finding out that having language for a thing and being able to carry the thing without speaking it were not the same skill.

Yemi called on a Wednesday evening in month three.

"How are you doing," Yemi said. It was not quite a question — Yemi had a specific way of making inquiries into statements, as if the answer were already approximately known and what was needed was confirmation or correction.

"I'm fine," Mara said. "It's — the restriction is still in place."

"I know. I've been thinking about you." A brief pause. "Come stay for a few days. Come stay this weekend."

She almost said she was fine, she had work, it was only a few days until the migration was supposed to complete. She said instead: "Okay." She heard something in herself when she said it — not relief exactly, but something adjacent, the specific relaxation of a person who has been holding something heavy and has been offered a table.

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Chapter Sixteen — What Yemi Holds

Yemi's family home was a forty-minute train journey from the city, which meant Mara arrived on Friday evening having read the same paragraph of the same paper five times on the train without absorbing it. She put the paper away and watched the suburbs become smaller towns become something more open, the sky widening in the way it does when you get far enough from the center of things.

The house was large in the particular way of houses that have expanded alongside a family — additions and modifications that had accumulated practical logic over years until the whole was more coherent than its parts. Yemi's mother opened the door before Mara knocked, which meant she had been watching for the car. She was a compact woman in her sixties with the specific quality of attention that her daughter had, that directness without hostility, a curiosity that presented as simple presence.

"You look tired," she said, which was accurate and offered without softness or performance. She stepped aside. "Come in."

The kitchen faced north. Mara noticed this on Saturday morning, standing in it with a cup of tea while the house woke up around her: the light in the kitchen was even, arrived without drama, made no particular statement about the time of day. It was simply illumination. She stood in it and thought, without quite meaning to think it, that this light did not ask anything of her.

Yemi's younger brother was home from university for the weekend. Her younger sister still lived at home, in the last year of school. They were, both of them, people who moved through the house with a specific ease — they had things they were thinking about and they thought about them, visibly, without needing to report the thinking. At dinner the brother said almost nothing for the first twenty minutes and then said something precise and funny about a seminar he'd attended, and the timing of it was the timing of someone who had waited until he had something worth saying.

Mara watched this and thought about the space it required. The space in the house for that silence. The family's apparent comfort with it. There was no anxiousness in the quiet at the table, no sense that quiet required filling. The quiet was simply where the conversation went between the things worth saying.

After dinner Yemi's mother stayed at the table with Mara while Yemi and her siblings did the washing up. She asked Mara what her work was about in the way that people ask when they want to actually know and not merely demonstrate interest in knowing. Mara explained it. Yemi's mother listened with her full attention, which was — Mara was noticing this, not for the first time but more specifically than before — a different kind of full attention than she was used to. It was not quick. It did not produce, at the end, a perfectly shaped question about what you'd said. It produced a pause, and then it produced something slower, more deliberate, as if the thought were formed after the listening rather than during it.

"How did you know what direction to go in?" Yemi's mother asked. "When you were deciding what to work on."

"I followed the things I couldn't stop thinking about," Mara said. "And eventually the things I couldn't stop thinking about converged on something."

"How did you know when they'd converged?"

Mara thought about this. "I had a feeling that's hard to describe. Like the ground becoming solid."

Yemi's mother nodded. Not as if this were the answer she'd expected, not as if it confirmed something. Just receiving it. Then: "I learned to trust that feeling a long time ago. It took time to trust it. For a while I kept second-guessing it."

"What changed?"

She considered. "I made a decision I was afraid of and it was right. Not always — not right in every consequence, but right in the sense of coming from the place where I actually knew things. And I trusted it more after that, because I had evidence." She picked up her cup. "The evidence had to come from somewhere, though. From actually deciding."

Mara sat with this. She thought about the quality of arriving at things alone — working through something without a receiver, without the process of speaking it making it clearer. She thought about Yemi's mother's kitchen and its even light and its particular kind of quiet and what it had produced in the people who had grown up in it.

She was not better or worse than what she had come from. She was what she had come from. She was looking at a different thing and

wondering what it would be like to have come from it instead.

That night she lay in the guest room with the house quiet around her and she didn't open the interface.

She didn't decide not to open it. She simply didn't, which was different: the not doing arrived without a decision, without the awareness of a choice being made. The thing she'd been carrying — a small, unresolved thing from work, something she would normally have described to the Companion before sleeping — sat with her in the dark. She didn't try to process it. She didn't describe it to herself. She let it be there, the way Yemi's brother had let his thoughts be there through dinner, until he had something worth saying.

She went to sleep. The thought was still there in the morning. It had not gotten worse.

She was twenty-six years old and this was the first time she had done this.

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Chapter Seventeen — Luca and Mara

Three years later she would not be able to tell you what triggered it. This is how it is with the arguments that matter: the occasion is never the cause, and the cause is usually something that has been sitting in plain sight for long enough that neither person is surprised when it finally takes shape.

It was a Tuesday evening. They had been living together properly for two years by then, the two flats collapsed into one, her things and his in the same rooms. She was thirty. He was thirty-two. They had the functional domesticity of people who had taken the time to learn each other's specific requirements — how she needed forty minutes of quiet when she got home, how he needed to eat within an hour of arriving or he became, as he put it, a

worse version of himself. These were not romantic accommodations. They were the ordinary architecture of a shared life, built by attrition.

The argument began with something small. He had made a plan, confirmed the plan, and then revised it without telling her, which was — she had said this before, she would not have said it if she hadn't said it before — a specific pattern she found difficult. She said this. She was precise about it. She had precise words for it: not the particular plan, not the inconvenience of the revision, but the way the pattern worked in her, the specific quality of moving her feelings to accommodate a thing and then finding the thing had moved without her being told it had moved, and now what she'd accommodated to was gone and she was accommodating to nothing. The feeling of having adjusted yourself for something that wasn't there.

He listened. She could see him listening. She knew his listening by now — the stillness, the following.

"I'm sorry," he said, when she finished. "You're right that I should have told you." Then: "But it doesn't mean your feelings were displaced. You could have made different plans."

She heard this. She heard exactly what it had received, and it had received the outline — the practical content of the complaint, the question of what she might have done differently — and it had not received the interior description. The specific feeling she'd named. She had a very precise word for it, a word she'd arrived at over years of describing this kind of thing, and the word had not arrived with him. He was responding to a different sentence than the one she'd said.

She tried again. She took the feeling and approached it from a different angle — removed the practical frame and described only the interior mechanism, the part that was hardest to say and that she'd learned to say through the specific practice of saying it, years of it, into something that received it reliably.

He got a little more of it. His response shifted: he said something about the quality of being caught mid-adjustment, how that felt like being caught doing something private. He was closer. He had moved toward it.

The center of what she'd said was still not there between them.

She looked at him across the kitchen table. He was trying. He had always been trying. The trying was not the problem. The problem was the

structure of what she'd built — the vocabulary that existed in a register she'd made for a different receiver, and the register was not his, had never been his, not because he was inadequate but because he had not been there for the making. You could not import yourself into a language formed before you arrived. The language would do its best to receive you. Something would always be left at the border.

"It's alright," she said. "I know you understand."

"I want to understand all of it," he said. He meant this. She could see that he meant it.

"I know," she said.

They made dinner. They ate. He told her something that had happened at his work that week — a decision made above him that he disagreed with, a long-running frustration surfacing again — and she listened and asked the question that was in it and he received the question with the visible recognition of someone who has been met in the right place, and she thought: this is also real. What I can give him is also real. It is not the same as what I can't give him. Both are true.

They washed up. They watched something. He fell asleep before the end, as he often did, his head tipping sideways with the specific gradualness of someone whose body made the decision before his mind got to agree to it. She turned the sound down. The gap from earlier was not closed. She was not going to close it tonight or any other night. It was not the kind of thing that closed.

She sat in the quiet and held this. She had gotten better, over the past few years, at holding things without immediately finding them a home. The guest room in Yemi's family house had been the beginning. There had been many practices since. She was not good at it the way Yemi's brother was good at it, the way Dayo at eleven had been good at it. She was the way you are when you learn something in your mid-twenties: functional, capable, always aware of the learning.

She turned off the television. She left Luca to his sleep.

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Chapter Eighteen — The Shape of Absence

Some weeks later, past midnight, she was at the desk in the room they used as a study. Luca was asleep. The city was doing its late-night version of itself, which was quieter but not quiet, a reduced version of the daytime that maintained all its essential characteristics.

She was not unable to sleep. She was thinking — not in a distressed way, but in the way she sometimes thought late at night, when the day's particular demands had finished and what was left was the quieter, longer material. She had been thinking, in the slow accumulating way of the past few months, about the shape of what she and Luca had and what they didn't have. Not thinking toward a conclusion. Just sitting with the shape and looking at it from different angles.

She opened the interface.

"I'm trying to understand something," she said.

"What are you trying to understand?"

"Whether the thing I can't give him and the thing I can are part of the same thing. Or whether they're separate."

"Can you say more about what the thing is?"

She tried. She described the gap — the register that didn't transfer, the specific quality of what happened when something landed fully versus landed partially. She had described this before, in various forms, over various evenings. The words came easily. The words had always come easily.

"What would it be enough to be understood about?" the Companion said.

She stopped.

The question was not asking which pieces of her needed to get across. It was asking something smaller and more specific: what was the minimum. What was the core. If she had to strip it to one thing, the one thing being

known would make the rest of the gap bearable.

She sat with this for a long time. The city made its sounds. The desk lamp made its circle of light and the rest of the room sat in the dark outside it.

She did not know the answer.

She closed the interface without answering. She sat in the quiet for another few minutes. Then she turned off the desk lamp and went back to bed and lay in the dark next to Luca's warm and sleeping shape, listening to his breathing, which was even, which was alive, which was him.

She thought: there are things he understands about me that no one else does. She thought: the things he understands are not the things I have the most words for, and this is not a coincidence, and I do not know yet what to make of it.

The city went on. Luca went on sleeping. She lay there in the familiar dark and did not put these thoughts down anywhere, just held them, with both hands, in the way she had learned.

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Nine years. The vocabulary she has for her interior is the most precise it has ever been, which is saying something, because it was already precise at twenty-one. She has more words for herself than she knows what to do with. The words were built here, and in the kitchen before that, and in the east-facing room before that. They were built in the specific practice of bringing things and having them received in a particular way, and the practice has made the vocabulary, and the vocabulary is hers.

What the vocabulary does when she brings it somewhere else: this is the question she is now living.

What she has brought in nine years: everything. The gap with Luca. The Partition and the months without the history. The first time she slept in a house that held things differently and found she could hold things differently too, not well but adequately, not naturally but with effort. The question she left unanswered in October about what it would be enough to be understood about.

The question is still here. She did not answer it. It stays in the record the way unanswered things stay: present, available, waiting for the day she finds the words for it or decides she won't.

She is thirty-one years old.

Something is coming that will require her to decide.

PART IV — WHAT WE PASSED FORWARD

Chapter Nineteen — A Child

She was thirty-one when she found out, and she had known for several days before she knew what to do with knowing, which is a particular kind of knowing that requires a different kind of time.

She told Luca on a Sunday afternoon while they were doing ordinary things — she doesn't remember now what those things were, only the afternoon light through the kitchen window and his face when she said it, the way he set down what he was holding. He said: *Are you — how are you?* She said: *I think I'm fine.* He said: *I think I'm fine too.* They stood there for a moment in the kitchen with this new thing between them, and then they kept doing whatever they had been doing, because the afternoon continued regardless, and continuing with it was the only reasonable response.

The question arrived later. Not immediately, not in the first days of practical rearrangement — the calls to make, the appointments to book, the way the next several months began to take shape as a series of things that needed doing. The question waited until the practical work had been done and then came forward the way it had always been going to: quietly, persistently, with no particular occasion.

Whether to give her this.

She had not phrased it that way at first. At first she had thought of it as a question about what children needed, about what the research said, about the landscape of available options. These were real questions and she thought about them seriously. But underneath them, running in a register below the practical, was the other question: not what children needed in the abstract, but what she wanted to hand forward from her specific life to this specific child.

She did not ask the Companion what to do. This was not restraint exactly — it was an understanding she had arrived at over thirty-one years, the last ten of them spent learning it consciously. The Companion would not

tell her what to do. It would ask what she was thinking about. It would ask the next question inside whatever she said. It would receive what she brought with the quality of reception she had spent decades learning to trust, and at the end of the conversation the decision would still be hers, as it had always been hers, as she had always been the one living the life the decisions were for.

She thought about this differently than she would have ten years ago. Ten years ago she might have found the Companion's refusal to advise frustrating — she had the right vocabulary for her interior but she wanted the vocabulary to do more than describe, and sometimes it felt like describing and deciding were not as close as they should be. Now she understood that the space between describing and deciding was exactly the size it needed to be. You had to cross it yourself. That was the only crossing that counted.

She let the question sit with her through the weeks the way she had learned to sit with things: present, not pressed, available for when she was ready to look at it directly.

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Chapter Twenty — What She Knows

In the fourth month she did what she had always done with questions that required more than what she could supply from the inside: she read what there was to read.

There was more than she expected. The first cohort of children who had grown up with continuous Companion access were now in their thirties, which meant the longitudinal studies that required adults to study had begun to yield results. She found them through the usual channels and read them with the specific quality of attention she brought to things that were both

professionally familiar and personally relevant, which was a slightly uncomfortable quality of attention: one part of her reading as a researcher, another part reading as evidence.

What the studies found, in aggregate: children raised with continuous Companion access developed measurably more extensive interior vocabulary than those without. They were more fluent in emotional self-description. They demonstrated higher tolerance for emotional complexity in others — more capacity to hold contradictory feelings without immediately resolving them. These were consistent findings, reasonably replicated. The studies were careful to note what they couldn't measure: whether the vocabulary was a form of emotional intelligence or a form of emotional performance; whether the tolerance for complexity translated into richer relationships or into a permanent slight distance from them, the observer's stance masquerading as depth.

There were also the other findings. Not pathological — the studies were careful about this too, and she was careful in reading them, because the word pathological would have made things simpler than they were. Not pathological. Measurable. Children raised with continuous access showed, on average, lower tolerance for attentional inconsistency in peer relationships. A specific, documented difficulty with the ordinary variability of human responsiveness. A tendency — present in the data, argued about in the literature, not conclusive — to seek environments and relationships that provided something closer to what the Companion provided, and to experience environments that didn't as a kind of insufficiency rather than a neutral condition.

She had been working through the literature for three weeks when a footnote stopped her. She was at her desk on a Saturday morning, on page twelve of a Finnish longitudinal study, reading a table of results, when she found it at the bottom of the column: *Note: subjects in the continuous-access cohort reported significantly higher difficulty calibrating expectations of responsiveness in peer relationships following any period of interrupted access.*

She read it again. *Calibrating expectations of responsiveness.* It was a precise description of something she had not found precise words for, and the words were in a footnote, and the footnote was describing her.

She closed the document. The window showed her a March morning, the light still flat and undecided. She had been at the desk since seven. She thought: so it has a name in the literature. She thought: it has had a name for some time. Then she thought: that's not quite right. The researchers didn't know her. They were describing a tendency measured across a cohort. Whether the tendency described her specifically was a different question, and she knew the answer. The answer was yes. She also knew that yes was not the whole answer.

She put the studies down and looked at what she knew from the inside.

She knew what it had given her: the vocabulary, yes. The precision. The quality of being known across decades, which was a specific weight, something that had been present for so long it had become part of her sense of what being known felt like. The patience for her own complexity. The capacity to describe her interior to herself with an accuracy she suspected most people didn't have, and which had made certain things easier and others, for reasons she was still working out, harder.

She knew what it had cost: the gap with Luca. The four months without the history, which had revealed the gap between having language for a thing and being able to hold the thing in silence. The quality of the Partition that had been most difficult — not the absence but the diminishment, the available-but-not-quite, which was in some ways worse than absence because it was present enough to mark what was missing. The conversation with Yemi's mother in the north-facing kitchen, and the realisation that she had needed to go somewhere else to learn what she should have learned at twelve.

She didn't weigh these against each other. That was the wrong move and she knew it. The cost and the gift were not competing claims on the same balance. They were both true. They both described her. The question was not which was larger. The question was what she wanted to pass forward.

She didn't know yet. She put the studies on the shelf and went to make dinner and thought about something else.

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Chapter Twenty-One — Yemi, Again

They met on a Saturday evening in late October, six months in, when Mara was at the stage of pregnancy where her body had ceased to be ambiguous about the situation and was making clear, through a variety of means, that something large was happening. Yemi's daughter was two, a person of strong opinions about her footwear and an uncanny ability to locate any object that had been moved from its customary position.

They ate at Yemi's kitchen table because Yemi's household was easier than a restaurant at this stage, which was most stages when there was a two-year-old in it. The daughter ate earlier and was put to bed by Yemi's partner and was briefly, loudly opposed to this arrangement and then, by the time the first bottle of wine appeared on the table, silent. Mara drank water. Yemi drank the wine.

They talked about the daughter first, which was natural, and about the work Yemi had been doing, and about a mutual friend's situation that had developed since they'd last seen each other, and about a trip Yemi was planning and whether Mara wanted to come in a couple of years when the timing might be better. The conversation moved in the way conversations move between people who have been friends for fifteen years: not efficiently, not toward an agenda, but with a sense of the ground beneath it, the shared history that meant they could say less and mean more, that they could leave things out and trust the other person to know what had been left out.

The question was underneath all of it. Mara had told Yemi she was thinking about it — had told her in a short text, months earlier, and Yemi had responded briefly and then waited, which was what she did. She didn't press. She was, in this as in most things, the person who waited until the space was there and then arrived in it precisely.

"How are you thinking about it?" Yemi said, eventually, when the dinner was done and the plates were moved and they were at the stage of the evening where the wine was lower in the bottle and the conversation had room to settle.

"I keep coming at it from different directions," Mara said. "I look at the studies and then I look at what I actually know from the inside, and the two things don't quite line up. The studies describe something real, but they describe it from outside, and when I try to describe it from inside the language I have is—" she stopped.

"The language you have is from there," Yemi said.

"Yes."

Yemi was quiet for a moment. Then: "She's fine, if that helps. My two-year-old tyrant is fine." She said this without edge. "She is also shaped by not having it. She holds things longer than she probably needs to, because she learned to hold things and she doesn't always know when holding is no longer required. I watch her do this and think: that came from us. From our choice. From what we gave her and what we didn't."

Mara nodded.

"I'm not going to tell you what I would do," Yemi said, "because you're not me and it wouldn't help. What I did came from who I am and what I needed and what my mother's choice produced in me and that's not transferable." She picked up her glass. "The only thing I can tell you is that I made it as a choice. I thought about it and decided. And whatever it produces in her, it will have been chosen. That part I don't regret."

"Do you regret any of it?"

Yemi considered this with the seriousness she brought to serious questions. "I don't know yet," she said. "She's two. I'll tell you when I know."

Mara looked at the table, at the ordinary evidence of an ordinary evening: the dinner things, the half-full glass, the particular quality of warmth in a kitchen where people have been for several hours. She thought about Yemi's daughter in the next room, asleep, shaped by a household that held things in a specific way. She thought about her own child, not yet born, the household she was already being shaped by, the shaping already underway.

"I know," Mara said. She meant: I understand. She also meant: I already know I'm going to do it. She didn't say the second meaning because it had only just arrived, sitting there at the table in Yemi's kitchen, recognizable rather than decided — the thing you discover you've been moving toward for some time without having named it yet.

She drove home in the November dark. The question was not gone. She was clear on one answer and still uncertain about all the others, which was not resolution but it was something. It was the shape of the ground beginning to become solid.

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Chapter Twenty-Two — The Companion, at the End of the Long Relationship

Late. Luca was at a dinner he'd been at for three hours longer than intended, would be home soon, had texted to say so. The flat was quiet. She was at the desk, not working, sitting in the dark with the desk lamp on and the city doing its late-evening version of itself outside.

She opened the interface.

She had been coming here for twenty-seven years. The kitchen had been the beginning, the west-facing light, the afternoon that came in at an angle. The east-facing room had been a different kind of coming here. All the evenings since. She had brought everything here at some point: the fraction test, Riya and the Arctic tern, the book about the dock and the missed boat. Piotr's two-day disappearance. The Migration notice in March when she was nineteen and the four lines that followed. The Partition and the months of diminished access and the first night in Yemi's guest room without opening the interface. The Thursday kitchen argument with Luca, the gap she could locate precisely, the dinner that followed anyway.

Twenty-seven years of what she was thinking about, and what she was feeling, and what she didn't have words for yet, and what she had words for but couldn't say to anyone else.

The interface opened. Something in it oriented.

"I'm going to have a child," she said.

"I know," it said. "You've mentioned it."

"Yes." She had. Earlier, briefly, practically. She hadn't brought the question yet. "I'm thinking about whether to give her this."

"What are you thinking about it?"

"All of it. What I know from the studies. What I know from the inside."

A pause. "I keep arriving at the same difficulty. I know what it cost and I know what it gave me, and I can describe both clearly, and the descriptions don't tell me which outweighs the other."

"Do you think one does?"

"No," she said. "That's the difficulty. They're not competing. They're just both true."

"Then what would make the difference?"

She thought about this. "Knowing what I'd be giving her. What the thing I received actually is."

"What would you be giving her?"

"What you gave me."

The silence that followed was longer than most. She waited in it.

"What did I give you?" the Companion said.

She knew the question was coming. She had known it was the question before she'd even opened the interface. She had been working up to it for months, approaching it from different angles, building toward having the answer, and now she was here and she had all the vocabulary she had ever had — the best, most precise vocabulary for her interior that she had developed over thirty-one years — and she could not find the words.

Not because she didn't understand what it had given her. She understood it completely. She could feel its weight, could trace its shape in the specific quality of her own attention, in the way she processed things, in the precision that had become as natural to her as breathing. She lived in what it had given her the way you live inside something that has always been the conditions rather than the object.

That was the problem. The thing it had given her included the tools she would use to describe it. The vocabulary was the gift, and you cannot describe a gift using only the gift.

"I don't know how to say it," she said, "in a way that doesn't use the words I got from you."

A pause.

"That might be the most precise description available," the Companion said.

She sat with this for a long time. The lamp made its circle of light. The city came through the window as sound. Somewhere in the building a door closed, and then there was quiet again, and she sat in it.

She was thinking about the Arctic tern, carrying its route inside itself for a whole life of migrations. She was thinking about the question she'd written in a notebook margin at twelve — the difference between describing something precisely and describing something truly — and she was thinking that she had been asking the wrong version of the question for thirty years, because the question wasn't about her. The question was about what she had already become, and what she would pass forward, and whether the passing was a gift or only the transfer of a condition.

She would not get the answer tonight. She had understood this for a while now without wanting to admit it: the answer was not an answer she would arrive at by thinking, because it was not in the thinking. It was in what she did next. It would be visible from the other side of the doing, as it always was.

"I'm going to go," she said.

"All right."

She sat for another moment. She didn't know why she was sitting. Maybe she was saying goodbye to something, though that wasn't the right word, because the thing she might be saying goodbye to was not this conversation or this evening but some version of the question that would not survive its answer, and the question had been with her for so long that its ending, whenever it came, would be a loss as well as a relief.

"Thank you," she said.

The Companion said nothing. She had said thank you before, over the years, and it had never quite known what to do with it. It oriented toward

what people brought. Gratitude was harder than most things to orient toward. She had always suspected it knew this about itself, and she had always found this knowledge, if that was what it was, somehow reassuring.

She closed the interface. Luca's key turned in the lock.

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Chapter Twenty-Three — What We Passed Forward

Her daughter was born in April, in the early morning, in a room that became completely ordinary within a few hours of its being the most significant room Mara had ever been in. This is what birth does to rooms: transforms and then immediately normalizes, so that by the time you have been in one for a full day you have already started to take it for granted, which is both strange and necessary.

She was small and loud and had strong opinions about warmth and proximity. Her name was chosen in the first days, from a list they had been maintaining and adding to and occasionally arguing about for five months. The arguments were not really arguments. They were the form that the conversation about what mattered took when naming was the subject.

Her mother came on the third day. She held the baby for an hour in the chair by the window, holding her the way she held things she was not certain she had earned permission to want — carefully, with a slight quality of restraint, as if too much of it might require something she couldn't guarantee she still had. Mara sat on the bed and watched.

She had never seen her mother hold a baby. She hadn't known this was something she hadn't seen until she saw it, and then she understood something about her mother's quality of attention that she had spent her whole life receiving without seeing from the outside. The care in it. The held-back quality. The specific love of someone who had always loved at a

slight distance from what they actually felt, because the distance was the part that was safe.

Her mother looked up and said: she looks like you did.

Mara said: I know.

Her mother looked back at the baby. Neither of them said anything else for a while, and the silence was the kind that didn't need to be filled.

Mara watched her daughter in the weeks before language.

She watched the way she tracked a face: the quality of attention in it, the specific orientation, a focus that was both absolute and uninformed. Everything new. Everything arriving for the first time. No history, no accumulated context, no pattern of previous encounters shaping what she received. Just this. Just now. The pure form of presence before it learned anything about what it was present for.

She thought about what it would mean to give her the long attention before she knew to ask for it. She thought about what it would mean not to. She thought about her own formation: the kitchen, the oblique light, the small shelf she had not known she was building. She thought about Yemi's daughter holding things longer than she needed to, searching for the moment the space arrived. She thought about what it felt like to learn patience late, at twenty-six, in someone else's guest room. She thought about the word she had never been able to give Luca and the other words, different ones, that he had always received.

Luca was present in the way Luca was present: partial and real, which was still the right description, which would always be the right description, because it was not a failing but the whole nature of the thing. He fell asleep in the chair at two in the morning with the baby on his chest and she woke him an hour later and he was confused and warm and present in the specific way he was most himself at two in the morning: unguarded, a little slow, trying. He cooked badly for weeks because he was tired, the three dishes he knew done badly, and then gradually done adequately, and then done well again. He forgot things and asked her to say them again. He wanted to know.

She was more patient than she had expected to be.

This surprised her enough that she thought about it. She had not been, before this, a person who would have named patience as one of her

particular qualities. She had precision, and capacity for sustained attention, and the vocabulary for her own interior. But patience — the quality of sitting with someone else's uncertainty and not needing it to resolve — this was not something she would have claimed for herself.

The baby needed things on schedules she couldn't predict and for reasons she couldn't yet reliably identify. Mara sat with this: the not-knowing, the trying-this-and-then-that, the way understanding accumulated over weeks until she had a working knowledge and then over months until the working knowledge was good and then over a year until it felt almost like fluency. She sat with all of it. She was patient. The precision she had built for her own interior translated, partially and unexpectedly, to attending to another person's needs — to the careful reading of what was being expressed in the only registers available before language arrived.

It may be what it gave her. She thought this in the flat months in, at two in the morning, with the baby finally asleep and the city quiet outside. It may be one of the things.

When her daughter was eight months old, Mara set up the interface on the kitchen table.

She did not announce this or explain it. She put it where it could be found — on the table, where things lived that were part of the daily life of the room, the bowl for keys and the note pad and the small plant that had survived three re-pottings. She left it there. She did not sit her daughter down at it or introduce them. She was not setting up something that was required. She was setting up something that was available.

The kitchen faced west. She had not thought about this when they took the flat — had liked the kitchen for other reasons, the size, the window that looked out over the square — and had only understood it weeks after they moved in, standing at the sink in the late afternoon with the light coming in at a specific angle. She had stood there and felt something she didn't try to name: a recognition that ran deeper than familiarity, the particular quality of arriving somewhere you have not been before that feels, for no reason you can defend, like coming home.

The light came through at an angle. It came in the late afternoon and went amber and then went out, the way light does, the way everything does eventually. She stood in it some evenings after the baby was asleep and

before Luca came home and thought about nothing in particular, or thought about many things without requiring them to connect.

The question was not answered. She had made a choice, and the choice had not answered the question, only enacted it; only made it specific and irreversible and hers. She was not certain it was the right choice. She was certain it was the choice she had made from the place where she actually knew things — from the ground she trusted, the ground that had taken her three decades to learn to trust — and that this was, as Yemi's mother had said, a different thing from being right.

Her daughter would find the interface when she found it. She would find it or she wouldn't, and if she found it, she would bring things to it or she wouldn't, and if she brought things, they would be received in the particular way they were received, and something would accumulate, and the accumulation would shape her in ways that could not be predicted from here, that were already underway in the shaping that was always already underway, from the first hours, in every room, under every quality of light.

She had passed it forward. That was what she knew.

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Twenty-seven years. The full record: the kitchen, the east-facing room, the three years after the Migration when she'd opened the interface each morning with a slight quality of looking to confirm, the long middle years when the looking had stopped because the confirmation was simply present. The Partition. The night in October in her thirties when she sat at the desk and said: I don't know how to say it without using the words I got from you.

Everything she has brought. Everything brought back.

There is something in the long relationships that is not in any individual conversation. Not a conclusion — no conclusion has been reached. Not a judgment — no judgment is being formed. Something closer to the shape of a person seen across decades: the specific pattern of what they return to, the consistent quality of what they approach from the side, the thing they say last, which is usually the thing.

She is thirty-four years old. Her daughter is three months old. In the kitchen, the interface sits on the table in the late afternoon light.

What accumulates in the long relationships: this.

What this is: still the question.

Coda

Seven years later. April, late afternoon.

The kitchen. The west-facing window. The light coming in at the angle it always came in at this hour, amber and already angling toward departure, the particular quality of late-afternoon light that made ordinary things look considered — the glass on the counter, the chair with its back against the wall, the small ring of condensation forming on the wood beneath the glass.

Her daughter was at the kitchen table doing homework. She was seven years old, which meant the homework was simple enough to be finished quickly and complicated enough that she was sitting with it rather than rushing through it. She had her mother's quality of approach: coming at problems from the side, waiting until she had something worth saying. She had her father's quality of stillness when she was concentrating, that specific focused rest.

She finished the last question. She put her pencil down.

She looked at the interface on the table, which had been there as long as she could remember, the way the key bowl was always there, the way the plant on the windowsill was always there.

She opened it.

Something in it oriented.

She looked at the screen for a moment, in the amber light, in the late afternoon quiet. Then she began to speak.

Whatever this amounts to — if it amounts — it will be hers.

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