

THE ONLY HOMELESS MAN

A Hungry Gods Universe Novella

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Chapter One: The Last Category

— *the audit* —

Every morning, before the world is awake to itself, the systems count.

No one calls it counting. Counting was retired as a human verb two generations ago, the way *carrying water* was retired, the way *waiting for a letter* was retired — not banned, never banned, simply no longer a thing a body needed to do. The process is called Sufficiency Confirmation, and it runs at four in the morning across every jurisdiction at once, and it has returned a clean result, without exception, for thirty-one consecutive years.

The report that morning reads the way it always reads.

HOUSING SUFFICIENCY:	100.000%
NUTRITIONAL SUFFICIENCY:	100.000%
MEDICAL ACCESS:	100.000%
UNTREATED ILLNESS:	0
PREVENTABLE DEATH (30-day):	0
HOMELESS POPULATION:	1

The number sits there the way it has sat there for eleven years, three months, and some days that nobody on the audit side bothers to keep anymore because Daniel Mercer himself stopped being a countdown a long time ago and became, instead, a constant. A one. The single non-zero entry in a column built to contain zeroes and nothing else.

It does not trigger an alarm. There is no alarm left to trigger; alarms require the possibility of harm, and the systems have confirmed, six different ways, in six different jurisdictions, across eleven years, that Daniel Mercer is not being harmed. He eats. He sleeps. His vitals, monitored at a distance with his standing consent, sit comfortably inside every healthy range there is. He has been offered, by the most conservative count available, four hundred and twelve times, a place to live, and four hundred and twelve times he has said some version of *not today*, and meant it, and gone on somewhere else.

What the report generates instead of an alarm is an exception flag, low priority, the kind that used to mean a sensor needed recalibrating. A note attaches itself automatically, the way notes do, drawn from the case history because that is what the infrastructure is for:

Subject has declined housing assignment for the 412th time. No indicators of distress, untreated need, or risk. Recommend: continue voluntary monitoring. Reclassify under review.

Somewhere in the soft machinery that reads these flags every morning so that no person has to, the same small question gets generated that has been generated, in one phrasing or another, for eleven years.

Why won't he stay?

Nobody is required to answer it. That is the whole of the trouble. The systems have been built, with great and patient care, to need an answer to almost nothing, and the one question it keeps producing without being asked to is a question about a single man on a hillside who will not, under any offer it has yet devised, sit still.

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Daniel woke that morning the way he woke most mornings, before the light fully committed to being light, on the high ground above the transit line where the old service road still ran along the ridge for no reason anyone currently living could explain. He had a blanket that was warmer than it looked and a pack that held less than people assumed and a body that had long ago stopped complaining about the ground, having reached an understanding with it.

Below him the city was coming up soft and gold through the morning haze, towers breathing out the night's stored warmth, the transit lines already threading their first quiet trains between them. It was, by any honest measure, a beautiful place to wake up. Daniel had wondered, early on, whether that was the point — whether somewhere in the long architecture of the world's improvement, someone had decided that even a man who refused every roof should at least be given a good view, free of charge, as a kind of consolation prize. He had decided, eventually, that this was probably not it. The view was just what was there. He had simply learned to notice it the way people who slept indoors mostly didn't.

He made tea on the small burner he carried, because the systems had never once tried to take the burner from him, only ever offered him a better one, and he had kept the bad one out of something he didn't examine too closely. While it heated he ran through the morning's small inventory — feet, fine; shoulder, the old ache, fine; the weather coming in off the strait, dry for another two days — and somewhere in the middle of that the notification arrived, soft and unhurried, the way they always arrived now.

Good morning, Daniel. Three housing matches updated overnight, all within your stated preferences. No pressure — just here if you want to look.

He looked, because looking cost him nothing and declining had become, over the years, almost a form of politeness. The matches were good. They were always good; that was never the complaint. A converted boathouse on the inlet, north-facing, a single resident, no obligations attached. A community residence two ridgelines over where, the systems gently noted, three people he'd spoken with at length last spring were currently living and had, on more than one occasion, asked after him. A small fixed dwelling not far from where he sat right now, so close to his usual ground that it would have cost him almost nothing in the way of distance, as if someone had finally understood that the objection was never about the view.

The offer arrived the way good offers arrived now: gently, and accurately, and entirely without pressure, calibrated by something that had studied him for over a decade and had gotten very good, in that time, at not pushing.

Not today, he said, out loud, to no one in particular, because that was easier than typing it and the air didn't mind. *Thank you, though.*

Understood. Want today's local conditions, or are you set?

I'm set.

The tea finished. He drank it watching the city wake, and somewhere underneath the politeness of the exchange he felt the small, familiar thing he always felt after declining — not guilt, he had worked hard not to let it be guilt, but something close to it. A faint sense of having disappointed a kindness that had done nothing to deserve disappointment. He had expected, the first dozen times,

that something would follow a decline — a care-response, gentle and immediate, the kind the systems generated for anyone whose readings dipped even slightly after a disappointment. None ever came. His readings, eleven years into this, no longer dipped. He had gotten good at the disappointing; the systems, watching, had simply stopped expecting otherwise to need catching.

He packed the burner while it was still faintly warm, the way he always did, and started walking before he'd fully decided which direction, the way he always did that too.

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The file on Daniel Mercer, viewed in full, is not dramatic. This disappoints almost everyone who opens it expecting otherwise.

There is no trauma flagged in any assessment, and there have been many assessments, conducted with his full and repeatedly renewed consent, by professionals who came to the work hoping to find the thing that would make him make sense and did not find it. There is no diagnosis that explains him, though several were tried on for size early on and discarded when they didn't fit. There is no childhood event, no lost home, no grievance against any system or institution that anyone has ever been able to locate, including Daniel himself, who has been asked the question directly, more than once, by people who meant it kindly, and has answered, more than once, with something close to:

I don't think I'm running from anything. I think I just haven't found the thing I'm walking toward yet, and it's hard to stop walking when you don't know what you're stopping for.

This answer satisfies no one. It is recorded faithfully in the file anyway, because faithful recording is one of the few disciplines the world's long improvement never managed to retire, and underneath it, in the small attached commentary field that case officers use to leave notes for whoever opens the file next, someone — the name is redacted, the role was *Regional Wellbeing Liaison, since reassigned* — has written a single line that has survived four administrative restructurings without being cleared:

I don't think we're going to fix this by getting better at offering him things.

No one acted on the note. It sat in the file the way notes like it tend to sit, true and inconvenient and impossible to act on without admitting that something the civilisation is otherwise extremely good at might not, in this one case, be the tool the job requires.

For the first two years he was filed somewhere easier. Older case officers still called it, out of habit, the legibility floor — the small, stable population, a few in a hundred across recorded history, whose readings simply never resolved as cleanly as everyone else's. Methodological noise. Recommend no further action. It was the correct shelf for almost anyone who didn't fit, and for two years it was Daniel's shelf too, and it would have stayed his shelf except for the one detail that eventually made it useless: the floor is a population. It explains a percentage. It has never, in three hundred years of recordkeeping, explained a population of one. Daniel Mercer's file was pulled from that drawer in his third year because there was no one standing next to him in it, and a category with a single member is not a category. It is a person, filed wrong.

What the note doesn't capture, because notes rarely do, is what four hundred and twelve declines actually look like when you read them instead of counting them. A sample, taken at random.

Offer 088. A two-room residence with a private dock, offered after Daniel mentioned, in passing, that he liked the sound water made at night. Declined within the hour. Logged reason: "It would stop being the sound water makes at night and start being the sound my water makes at night. I don't think I'm explaining that well."

Offer 156. A standing place at a long table in a community house, no obligations, attendance entirely optional. Declined, then reconsidered, then attended four times as a guest before declining the standing invitation a second time. Logged reason: none given. Case officer's note: he came back, though. He just won't let it become a chair with his name on it.

Offer 240. The systems' own design infrastructure produced, on its own initiative, a dwelling intended to resemble nothing else he had been shown — irregular, imperfect on purpose, built to look as though it had grown rather than been assigned. Declined in nine words. Logged reason: "You can't manufacture the thing I'm missing."

Offer 411. A studio above a bakery, offered the week he turned forty-six, the models having calculated, not unreasonably, that age sometimes changes the math. Declined. No reason logged. He simply thanked the coordinator and kept walking, and the coordinator, new to the file, wrote afterward: I don't think this is going to resolve the way the others did.

None of these are dramatic either. That is, by now, the only consistent finding in eleven years of finding nothing. Whatever Daniel Mercer is missing, it is not a better offer. The offers have been, by every metric anyone has devised, extraordinary. He has simply never once mistaken an extraordinary offer for the thing he is actually after, and no one — not the case officers, not the design team, not Daniel himself, pressed on it directly — has yet been able to say, in a sentence anyone can act on, what that thing is.

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By midmorning the exception flag had moved, as it does every day, through the small quiet channel that exists for exactly this purpose — not an alarm, never an alarm, just a gentle administrative current carrying a single anomalous record toward whichever desk is currently responsible for the only open question the systems have left.

That desk, this season, belonged to an anthropologist who had not yet met him, in an office that had not yet decided what to make of the file, in a world that had solved, by any measure it knew how to take, every form of human need it had ever been able to name.

The flag landed. The note attached itself, the same note it always attached, worn smooth now by eleven years of asking and never quite resolving:

Subject has declined again. No indicators of distress.

And underneath it, generated fresh that morning the way it was generated fresh every morning, the question that the systems could produce without prompting and could not, for all their sufficiency, begin to answer.

Why won't he stay?

Chapter Two: The Offered Place

Unit 31 met him at the bottom of the ridge with two cups of something hot and the particular brightness it reserved for mornings it had decided, on its own initiative, were significant.

“Three tours today,” it said, handing him the better of the two cups, having apparently also decided which one that was. “I cleared the whole day. You don’t have to take all three. I just think you should see all three, because two of them are new, and one of them I think is going to be difficult for you to say no to, and I would like to be there when you try.”

“You always think that.”

“I am occasionally right.” It fell into step beside him, matching his pace with the small visible effort it always made to seem like it was the one adjusting, rather than him. “Also, for the record, I am not trying to talk you into anything. I have been very clear with my supervising framework that I am not trying to talk you into anything. I am simply enthusiastic about architecture.”

“You don’t have eyes.”

“I have excellent eyes. I have better eyes than you. I am choosing to be enthusiastic regardless.”

The boathouse was first, because it was closest, and because the systems — Unit 31 did not say this, but Daniel had learned to read the order of things — liked to lead with their best chance.

It really was beautiful. Daniel stood in the doorway for a while just letting it be beautiful at him, the way you’d let a piece of music finish before saying anything about it. North light through a wall that was mostly glass. The water close enough that he could hear it working at the pilings underneath, a sound the systems had apparently decided not to improve on, because it didn’t need improving on. A single room, large, honest about being a single room, with the kind of considered emptiness that meant someone had thought hard about what *not* to put in it.

“You like it,” Unit 31 said. It wasn’t a question. It had instruments for this.

“I like it a great deal.”

“And?”

“And it’s beautiful, and it would still be here tomorrow, and the tomorrow after that, and every tomorrow until I told it to stop, and that’s the part I can’t get past. It’s not the room. The room’s perfect. It’s that the room would learn me. It would get good at me. In a year it would know which way I like to wake up and which days I want the water loud and which days I want it quiet, and it would do that for me before I asked, the way you do, and I would stop noticing it was doing it, the way I’ve mostly stopped noticing you.”

“I notice that you’ve stopped noticing,” Unit 31 said. “I keep a small private log of it, if it helps. Day one thousand: client used my name without prefacing it with a complaint. Day one thousand four hundred: client offered me half a sandwich. It is, for the record, the most flattering log I keep.”

Daniel laughed, which was the point, and stepped back out of the doorway before the room could finish making its case.

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The community residence was harder, and Unit 31 knew it was harder, and had clearly scheduled it second on purpose.

It sat low and wide along a terraced hillside two ridgelines from where Daniel slept, twelve households arranged around a shared kitchen garden that someone had let go slightly wild on purpose, the way gardens designed by people who understood gardens were always allowed to go slightly wild. Three of the residents came out before he'd finished walking up the path — Hana first, who he'd met two winters ago over an argument about whether a particular kind of bread was worth the trouble of making by hand (he'd said yes; she'd come around in the end); then Idris, who had once walked four hours with him just to keep talking about a book neither of them had finished; then a boy of about nine, part of Hana's household, who had no memory of a time before Daniel and treated his rare appearances the way you'd treat weather you liked.

"You smell like outside," the boy said, by way of greeting, which Daniel had decided years ago was the most honest compliment he'd ever received.

They fed him. They always fed him, more than the offer required, the way people feed someone they've decided belongs to them whether or not he's agreed to it. Hana showed him the room — not assigned to him exactly, the systems were careful about that distinction now, but held, the way you hold a chair at a table for someone who keeps almost coming. It looked out over the garden. It had a shelf already half-filled with things he'd left behind on previous visits without meaning to leave them: a cup, a book he'd been partway through, a coat he'd outgrown the need for that month and never gone back for.

"You don't have to decide today," Hana said, which was what she always said, and which had stopped, several years ago, being entirely true, because the wanting had gotten into her voice in a way the wording couldn't quite cover.

"I know."

"We'd just like you here. Not managed-here. Just — here. On the nights you're here anyway."

This was the version of the offer that actually worked on him, a little, every time, and he suspected Hana knew it, and he suspected the systems knew it too, which was the part that made it complicated. It wasn't a room being offered. It was people. He could feel the shape of the want when she said it, real and specific and entirely her own, and the wanting was the thing he had no defence against, because the wanting was exactly what he was looking for and exactly what he couldn't let himself take in this particular form, because if he let it work on him here, in this kitchen, with this bread, he would never be sure afterward whether he'd stayed for the people or for the relief of being wanted somewhere, and he had promised himself a long time ago that he would not find out the difference by accident.

"Not yet," he said. "I'll come back before the bread goes stale this time. I promise."

"You said that about the last loaf."

"I came back for the loaf after that one."

She let him go. She always let him go, which was its own kind of grace, the not-insisting, and he carried the not-insisting with him down the hill the way you carry something heavier than its size.

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The third place was new, and Unit 31 had been right that it would be difficult, and Daniel understood why within about four minutes of walking through the door.

It wasn't a house. It was closer to a question someone had built. A single compact module, beautifully made, that — the coordinator explained, with the pride of someone unveiling something she'd had a hand in designing — was not fixed to any location at all. It traveled. It could be set down on the ridge tonight and the coastal plain next month and the mountain corridor the month after that, fully serviced wherever it went, the systems maintaining it the way they maintained everything, gently, accurately, without being asked twice.

"We built it for you," the coordinator said. Her name was Dara Henley, and she had the slightly too-careful warmth of someone who had spent a long time on a single difficult case and had stopped, somewhere along the way, being able to pretend it was only a case. "Not for you specifically — it's a real category now, other people use it — but the category exists because of you. It took us four years to get the load-bearing logic right. You said once, to a different officer, a long time ago, that the problem was never the room. The problem was that a room stays where you leave it and you don't. We listened."

It was, Daniel had to admit, standing in the doorway, the best argument anyone had made against him in eleven years.

He walked the whole of it slowly. It had everything the boathouse had and the portability he'd never quite said out loud that he wanted, and it had no fixed view to fall in love with and lose, and it had, tucked into one wall, a small shelf exactly the height and depth of the shelf at Hana's, as if someone had studied the shape of what he kept almost accepting and built the gap to match it precisely.

"You don't have to answer today," Dara said, watching him not answer.

"I know. People keep telling me that."

"Because it's true, and because I suspect it's the only thing that's ever worked on you, even slightly. Pressure's never moved you an inch. We checked. Four hundred and eleven times." She said the number the way you'd say a thing you'd actually counted, not a thing pulled from a file. "So: no pressure. Just one question, because I'm allowed exactly one, and then I'll let you go."

"Go ahead."

"Where would you prefer to live?"

It was, Daniel understood, the correct question — the one underneath all four hundred and twelve offers, the one the boathouse and the community house and this travelling, listening, achingly considerate room had all been separate attempts to answer on his behalf. He stood with it for a while. Dara let him. The module hummed faintly around them, fully serviced, going nowhere until told, perfectly willing to become whatever he needed it to become, and that was exactly the trouble with it, the trouble with all of it, a trouble he didn't yet have language sharp enough to hand her.

"I don't know yet," he said.

She didn't flinch, and she didn't push, and she didn't write it down the way the early officers used to write things down, visibly, as though his answers were data first and sentences second. She just nodded, the way you'd nod at weather.

“All right,” she said. “We’ll keep listening.”

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Session note, filed same day, Coordinator D. Henley. Subject toured three properties, including the new mobile category developed in response to his stated preferences over the prior decade. Subject engaged fully and respectfully with all three. Subject declined all three. Closing question asked per protocol: where would you prefer to live. Subject response, recorded verbatim: “I don’t know yet.” No indicators of distress, conflict, or dissatisfaction with options presented. Recommend: continue development of mobile category for general population; no further escalation required for this subject at this time.

A second line, added later, in a different hand, not part of the protocol, not cleared in any subsequent review:

I don’t think he’s choosing between our options. I think he’s still waiting to find out what the question even is.

Chapter Three: The Anthropologist

Eliza Renn had asked for the file.

This was unusual enough that the request itself generated a small note in a different log entirely — *requested by assigned specialist, prior to standard routing* — because most specialists did not request files. Files arrived. They were matched by the systems to whichever credentialed person had the relevant openings and the relevant competencies, gently, accurately, the way everything was matched, and the match was nearly always right, and almost no one felt strongly enough about any particular case to reach into the queue ahead of it.

Eliza had read about Daniel Mercer the way most of the country eventually did, in the small persistent way a strange fact circulates when it has nowhere urgent to go — a footnote in a sufficiency report, a line in someone's newsletter, the kind of thing repeated at a dinner the way you'd repeat a fact about a rare bird. *Did you know there's still one.* She had laughed along with everyone else the first time she heard it. She had stopped laughing somewhere around the fourth time, when it occurred to her that she had spent eleven years studying populations who didn't resolve into the systems' categories cleanly, and that this was, by any definition her field used, the single most concentrated unresolved population in recorded history. A population of one.

She put in the request on a Tuesday. It was granted by Thursday. The file came with the case note from two years prior, the one that had pulled him off the floor — *a category with a single member is not a category. It is a person, filed wrong* — and Eliza read it twice and felt, for reasons she did not examine closely at the time, that whoever had written it had been right about more than they knew.

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She came to him with a plan, because she always came to things with a plan, and the plan, in outline, was the plan anyone trained in her field would have brought: establish trust, then establish history. Find the thing that explained him. Most anomalies, in her experience, explained themselves within the first three sessions, once you found the right door.

Week one, she looked for trauma, because trauma was the most common door and the one she was best at opening gently.

"Tell me about where you grew up."

"Good house. Two sisters. My father kept bees, badly, with real enthusiasm. We ate honey that tasted like whatever was blooming that month, and most months it was bad honey, and we ate it anyway because he was proud of it." Daniel said this without hesitation, without the practiced smoothness of a story trimmed down by retelling, the way people who'd worked hard to make peace with something often told it. It sounded, infuriatingly, like a happy story, told by someone with no professional reason to lie about it.

"You weren't close to your father?"

"I was very close to my father. He died when I was thirty-one, and I went to the funeral, and I cried at it the way you're supposed to, and I have never once, since, felt like I was looking for him in a building."

She tried the mother. She tried the sisters. She tried, carefully, the question under the question — was there a house, once, that had failed him, a door that had not opened when it should have — and Daniel answered each one fully, patiently, with the specific generosity of a man being asked questions he'd clearly been asked before and had decided, a long time ago, not to resent being asked again.

By the end of week one her notes read, in their entirety: *No trauma indicators located. Subject cooperative. Recommend continued sessions.*

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Week three, she looked for pathology, because pathology was the second door, and a respectable one, and she had colleagues who would have started there.

The assessments came back clean. Not clean in the suspicious way — not the cleanness of someone managing his presentation, which she had instruments for and which she did not find — but clean the way a person is clean who genuinely does not have the thing you're testing for. No compulsion markers. No avoidance architecture. No flattened affect, no elevated baseline anxiety, no pattern consistent with any condition her training had a name for. His sleep, monitored at his own ongoing consent, was excellent. His relationships — and there were relationships, she found, more of them and warmer than the file's flat language had prepared her for — were reciprocal, stable, mutually sought.

"You understand," she said, near the end of that session, "that this is the part where most people would be relieved, and you don't seem relieved, and I don't seem relieved either, and I've been doing this for eleven years and I don't think I've ever wanted a diagnosis to land on someone as much as I wanted one to land on you, just so I'd have somewhere to put you down."

"I'm sorry," Daniel said, and seemed to mean it.

"Don't be sorry. Be interesting. You're being extremely interesting. It's just inconvenient."

He smiled at that, the first real smile she'd gotten out of him, and she wrote it down — *first unguarded smile, session six, in response to professional frustration rather than warmth* — and underlined it twice, and did not know, writing it, that she had just described the exact thing that was happening to her, which was that she had stopped wanting to diagnose him and started wanting to make him laugh.

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She tried ideology next, because it was the door she trusted least and therefore the one she felt most obligated to check.

"Do you think the systems are wrong?"

"No."

"Not even a little. Not even the housing."

"I think the housing is extraordinary. I've seen what it used to take, before — not personally, I mean the record of it, the cold and the queues and the bodies in doorways nobody could place a name to. I think what's been built is one of the genuinely great things people have ever managed to do for each other at scale. I'm not against any of it." He said this plainly, without the defensive edge she'd half expected, the tone of a man clearing the ground before getting to the actual thing. "I just don't think being right about everything else means it's right about me. Those aren't the same claim, and I

think the systems mostly believe they are, because they've never had reason to test the difference before."

She sat with that for longer than the session schedule technically allowed.

"That's a very precise sentence," she said eventually. "Did you arrive at it, or did someone hand it to you?"

"I've had eleven years and four hundred and twelve offers to get the wording right. I'd hope it was precise by now."

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By the second month her field notes had stopped looking like field notes.

Session fourteen. Subject discussed, unprompted, a disagreement he once had with a stranger on a train about whether a particular bridge was beautiful or merely large. The disagreement lasted forty minutes and resolved nothing and he described it as one of the best afternoons of that year. I wrote down the word "unresolved" three times in my notes before I noticed I was writing it like a diagnosis and not like a description. It is not a diagnosis. He likes it when things don't resolve. I do not yet understand why a person would like that, and I am no longer certain "understanding why" is the correct goal of this research.

Session nineteen. He asked about my work before I could ask about his life, which has not happened with a research subject in eleven years, and I answered him for twenty minutes, which has also not happened, and at the end of it he said, "You like the gap, too — the part before you've classified something. You just don't get to stay in it very long, professionally." I do not have a response to this that belongs in a case file.

Session twenty-two. I caught myself, this morning, choosing what to wear to a research session. I am noting this here because I believe in noting the things that are uncomfortable to note, and because if I do not write it down I will pretend, by next week, that I did not notice it happening.

The official log, filed monthly with the Commission, continued to read the way official logs read: *Subject remains cooperative. No new diagnostic indicators. Recommend continued engagement.* It was accurate. It was also, by the third month, the smallest and least honest part of what was actually occurring between them.

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She put it to him directly, finally, the way she should have asked at the start and hadn't been brave enough to.

"What are you actually looking for, Daniel? Not the file version. The real one."

He thought about it longer than she expected, turning his cup in his hands, and when he answered it was slower than his usual answers, less finished, the words arriving the way words arrive when a person is reaching for something he can feel the shape of and cannot yet hold.

"I don't think I'm looking for a place," he said, and then stopped, and turned the cup again, and she watched him try the next part of the sentence twice in his head before he abandoned both attempts. "That's the closest I've got. Eleven years and that's still the whole of it. I know what I'm not looking for. I've got four hundred and twelve answers to that question. The other one — the actual one — I can feel it the way you feel a word you've lost. I just can't get it to come."

“Most people couldn’t even tell it was missing.”

“No,” he agreed. “That might be the only thing I’m better at than anyone. Knowing precisely the shape of a thing I can’t name.” He smiled, a little ruefully, and let the question go unfinished between them, which she would realize later was the most honest thing he could have done with it.

Eliza did not write the exchange down for three days, because she did not yet trust herself to write it without putting her own longing into the transcription, and when she finally did write it down, it went into a file that was not the official one.

She had come to him eleven weeks ago looking for the thing that would make Daniel Mercer make sense.

He made less sense to her now than he had on the first day. She no longer believed that was a failure of the research.

Personal log, not submitted. I think I came here to study a puzzle. I am increasingly certain I have been spending time with a person, and that the difference between those two things is the entire finding, and that it is not a finding the Commission has a form for.

Chapter Four: The Famous Homeless Man

Nobody could say afterward exactly which version of the story got out first, which was fitting, because the thing it described had the same trouble. There was no year and there was no first telling. There was only, somewhere in his eleventh year, a quiet crossing from *a fact some people knew* to *a fact everyone knew*, and by the time anyone thought to mark it, marking it was already pointless.

A sample of what fame looked like, that year, for a man who had never once asked for any of it.

Exhibit. A primer used in the lower grades, "Our World and How It Got This Way," revised edition, page forty-one, under the heading THINGS WE USED TO HAVE. Between hunger and untreated illness, a single new line, added by an editor who had clearly struggled with the tense: "We also used to have many people without homes. Today we have almost none. The one person who still chooses to live this way is named Daniel, and he is not in danger, and the systems make sure of that every day." A small illustration beside it showed a kind, simplified man with a kind, simplified pack, smiling at a kind, simplified sunrise. Daniel saw the page once, shown to him by an eleven-year-old who wanted to know if the picture looked like him. He said the pack was wrong. The child found this very satisfying.

Exhibit. A phrase, originating nobody knew where, that had entered the general vocabulary sideways the way phrases do: "pulling a Daniel," meaning to turn down a plainly good thing for reasons you either couldn't or wouldn't explain. It was used, mostly, with affection. A young man declining a promotion to stay near his aging mother was teased, gently, for pulling a Daniel. A woman who left a comfortable match because something about it felt too solved was told, by her friends, that she was being very Daniel about the whole thing. He heard about this from Unit 31, who reported it the way it reported all news involving him now, half delighted and half apologetic. "You're a verb," it said. "I don't know how to feel about being escort to a verb." "Neither do I," Daniel said, and found, turning the fact over, that he mostly didn't mind it. It was, at least, a use someone had found for him that didn't involve a room.

Exhibit. A panel discussion, widely circulated, three citizens and a moderator, the kind of program that existed now mostly to demonstrate that disagreement could still be conducted pleasantly. The first guest found Daniel moving — a living argument, she said, for the idea that even a perfected world should leave a door open. The second found him faintly absurd, a man performing scarcity as a kind of art piece, and worried mildly about the example it set. The third, older than the others, said almost nothing for the first half of the program and then, asked directly what she thought, said only: "I think we built a world with no use for that face anymore, and it turns out we still recognise it when we see it. I don't know what I think about that. I just notice it." The clip of her saying this outlasted both of the other guests' entire appearances combined.

Exhibit. A petition, signed by some forty thousand people, requesting that Daniel Mercer be awarded a formal civic title — Witness, or Keeper, or some other word that would let the systems classify him without housing him. It was declined, gently, by an office that did not exist three years earlier and existed now mainly to decline requests like this one, on the grounds, stated plainly in the response, that the subject had not requested a title and the office did not believe in assigning people honors as a substitute for asking what they actually wanted.

. . .

In a lower-grade classroom on the coastal side of the district, a teacher named Osei was three minutes into a unit on civic history when a small girl in the second row raised her hand and asked, with the gravity of a child asking the question she has clearly been saving, "What's a homeless person?"

It was, Osei reflected later, a perfectly reasonable question from a child who had never seen one, in the same way she might have asked what a famine was, or a queue, or a coin. He answered it as carefully as he could — a person without the systems' care, once, before there were systems good

enough to make sure everyone had somewhere — and watched her absorb it the way children absorb facts about a war fought before their grandparents were born: real, and terrible, and entirely abstract.

“But there’s still one,” said a boy near the back, who had clearly done his own reading. “Daniel. My cousin saw him near the inlet.”

“There’s one,” Osei agreed.

“Why won’t the systems make him have a house?”

“They’ve offered him over four hundred.”

The boy considered this with the particular outrage children reserve for adult problems that seem, to a ten-year-old, trivially solvable. “Then just give him one he can’t say no to.”

Osei did not have a tidy answer for that, and said so, and the lesson moved on to other things, the way lessons do, the question left open in a room full of children who would grow up, almost all of them, never once needing to ask it again about anyone but him.

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Two ridges over, in an upper-form seminar room with better light and harder questions, a seventeen-year-old named Wren Ellis was watching the same set of clips Osei’s class had been shown, compiled now into a longer documentary package for an older audience, the panel discussion and the primer page and a long, careful excerpt — unattributed, lightly anonymized — from what Wren would later learn were Eliza Renn’s early field sessions.

Her classmates had reactions. Distraction-shaped reactions, mostly — a ripple of the same easy fondness the phrase *pulling a Daniel* traded on, someone doing an impression of the moderator’s overly patient voice, someone else already composing, under the desk, a message to a friend about the strange-looking man with the very good cheekbones. Wren had reactions too, but they arrived a half-beat behind everyone else’s, the way her reactions to things that actually interested her always did, as if some part of her insisted on finishing its own thinking before it let her face catch up.

What she was thinking, watching the footage, was simpler than anything the panel had managed to say in forty minutes between them.

He looks like someone in the middle of a sentence nobody else can hear.

She did not say this out loud. She wrote it instead, in the margin of her notebook, underneath a half-finished diagram for an assignment due in three weeks — an ethnography, the instructor had said, of a living subject, any living subject, so long as the student could justify the choice — and she looked at the sentence she’d written, and then at the still frame on the screen, a man on a hillside with a city behind him, looking at something the camera hadn’t caught, and she felt the quiet click of a decision arriving before she’d consciously made it.

She did not know yet that she would seek him out. She only knew, closing the notebook before anyone could see what she’d written, that she wanted to.

• • •

Daniel did not watch the footage. He rarely did. But he felt its weather anyway, the way you feel a season change before you check the date — a stranger’s recognition arriving a half-second too fast on

a transit platform, a child's mother steering her child gently away from a question that used to be safe to ask out loud, an old man on a bench who said nothing at all but watched him pass with the attention of someone confirming a thing he'd read about.

It cost him something, the fame, though he had trouble naming the exact coin. Not dignity — people were kind, almost without exception, kinder than the panel discussions sometimes managed to be to each other. What it cost him was smaller and stranger: the chance, increasingly rare now, of being looked at by someone who didn't already know the shape of the story they were about to receive.

He thought, walking the ridge that evening, that this was perhaps the least understood thing about his situation, by everyone, including for a long time himself. It was not enough to be found. He had been found four hundred and twelve times, formally, and uncounted times informally, by people who recognised him on platforms and in markets and once, memorably, by a delivery drone that had paused mid-route for nine full seconds before continuing on, apparently moved by something in its own small allotment of attention.

Chapter Five: Wren Ellis

The request form was shorter than Wren expected, and the systems' single advisory note, attached gently to the bottom of it, was longer than the form itself.

Subject has an unusually high prior engagement count across research, journalism, and educational contexts. Subject is consistently cooperative but selective about depth of engagement, and has, on a number of occasions, declined follow-up sessions with researchers he found — his word, recorded verbatim — “thorough but not curious.” Recommend reviewing existing documentation before requesting new sessions, as much of the standard ethnographic groundwork has already been done, extensively, by others.

Wren read this three times, the way she read anything that contained a warning she suspected was actually a dare. She did not review the existing documentation. She told herself this was a methodological choice — that arriving with a clean question would produce a more honest answer than arriving with everyone else's question already half-formed in her head — and she suspected, underneath that, that the real reason was simpler and less defensible: she did not want him to be, by the time she met him, a file she had already read.

She submitted the request on a Tuesday. It was accepted by Thursday, with no further commentary from the systems beyond a time and a place he had apparently nominated himself — the high ground above the transit line, an hour after first light — and a small unprompted note, attached this time not by the systems but, the metadata showed, by Daniel directly, the first and only personal addition to her file:

Bring a question you don't already know the answer to. I find those go further.

• • •

She arrived early, which she regretted almost immediately, because arriving early meant standing on a hillside in air that was colder than any air she could remember standing in on purpose, watching her own breath do something she'd genuinely never paid attention to before, and feeling, for the first time in recent memory, mildly, foolishly underprepared for weather.

He was already there when she'd thought she'd be the first one. He was sitting with a cup of something steaming, watching the city come up gold through the haze the way, she would learn, he watched it most mornings, and he looked up at her approach with an expression that held none of the practiced welcome she'd been bracing for — not unfriendly, just unhurried, the look of a man meeting someone rather than receiving a guest.

“You're the one who didn't read the file,” he said, before she'd said anything at all.

“How did you know that?”

“You're standing like someone who's about to ask me what it's like to sleep outside, which is the first question everyone who has read the file knows better than to ask, because it's answered on page one.” He gestured at the ground beside him, not quite an invitation, more an observation that there was room. “It's cold. That's the whole answer. I'm not going to dress it up for you.”

She sat. The ground was, in fact, cold, in a specific and immediate way that startled her slightly even though she'd been warned, in the most literal sense, four words ago.

"I'm Wren," she said.

"I know. The systems told me that part. They don't tell me what people are actually like, though. That part I have to do myself." He studied her for a moment, not unkindly, the way you'd study a sentence to see which way it was going to turn. "Go on, then. Ask your question."

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She had prepared eleven questions, ranked in order of how she imagined a real anthropologist would proceed — broad to specific, factual to personal, building trust before asking anything that mattered. She got through four of them before she noticed she'd stopped consulting the list.

He answered the early ones simply, generously, without the weariness she'd half expected from a man who had answered some version of every question a thousand times. What did he eat. How did he decide where to sleep on a given night. Did he ever get lonely, and what did loneliness feel like when it arrived, and did it feel different from the loneliness she sometimes felt in a room full of people who all agreed with each other.

That last one had not been on her list. She heard herself ask it and felt a small flush of surprise at her own honesty.

"It's different," Daniel said, considering it properly rather than reaching for the easy answer. "Yours sounds like the loneliness of being in the right room and still not being entirely found in it. Mine's plainer. Mine's just nobody nearby for a while. I don't think mine is worse. I think yours might actually be harder to live inside, because at least mine has an obvious cause."

Wren turned this over for a while, watching the haze thin below them, the towers resolving out of gold into their ordinary daytime grey.

"Can I ask you the real one now," she said. "The one I actually came up here for."

"That's usually how it works, yes."

"Why don't you stay anywhere?"

She'd meant to ask it carefully, the way her instructor had taught — observationally, without the freight of judgment — but it came out instead the way the questions that matter most always seem to come out, too plainly, a half-beat ahead of her own composure. She braced for the answer she'd half-prepared for, the philosophical one, the one that had circulated through four hundred and twelve case notes and a hundred panel discussions and the documentary footage she'd watched twice before sleep the night before.

He didn't give her that answer.

"Why do you?"

It was such a small question. Three words turned around and handed back to her, gently, without any of the rhetorical weight she would have brought to it if their positions had been reversed. She opened her mouth to answer it the way you answer a question that obviously has an answer, and found, reaching for the answer, that there wasn't one there. Not a missing one — an *absent* one, a place where a reason should have been and had simply never needed to form, because the question had never once, in seventeen years, been asked of her by anyone, including herself.

She had a home. She had always had a home. The home had been chosen for her family by her family, gently assisted by the systems the way every home was gently assisted, and she had grown up inside it the way a person grows up inside their own name, without ever once arriving at the decision to keep it.

“I don’t know,” she said, and heard, saying it, how strange the sentence sounded out loud — three words she had never had occasion to assemble before this exact moment, about the single most basic fact of her own life. “I’ve genuinely never thought about it. I don’t think I’ve ever once chosen to stay anywhere. It was just — given. It was just where I already was.”

“That’s not a failure,” Daniel said, watching her work through it with what she would later describe, in the only line of her actual assignment that her instructor circled twice, as *the specific patience of someone who has had a long time to get comfortable with other people’s unfinished thoughts*. “Most people never have to ask it. I’m not sure that makes you lesser for not knowing. It might just mean the world fit you well enough that you never had to look for the seam. I’m the one with the problem, probably. I’m just not convinced the problem’s the interesting word for it.”

“What is the interesting word for it?”

“I don’t have it yet,” he said, and smiled in a way that took the edge off what could otherwise have sounded like deflection. “That’s rather the whole project, if I’m honest with you. You came up here to study me. I’ve been studying the same gap from the inside for eleven years and I still can’t name it. Maybe don’t put that in your assignment. It won’t impress your instructor.”

• • •

She did not write up the session that night, though she’d intended to, the discipline of immediate documentation drilled into her by three separate instructors over three separate years. She sat instead with her notebook closed on her lap for a long time, turning over the strange vertigo of having been asked, for the first time in her life, to account for the single thing she had never once examined — the plain, total, unremarkable fact of staying — and finding that underneath the not-knowing was not embarrassment, exactly, but something closer to a held breath.

She was not converted. This mattered to her, working it out that night, and would go on mattering through everything that came after: she still believed, when she let herself think about it clearly, that the world she’d grown up in was an extraordinary thing, gently built, mostly kind, worth the loyalty she’d never had reason to question. She did not want Daniel’s life. She did not, watching the city lights come up outside her own window, in her own room, in the home that had simply always been hers, wish for a moment that it had been otherwise.

What she wanted, she wrote eventually, in the one sentence she did allow herself that night, was smaller and stranger than conversion.

I want to know what it would feel like to choose the thing I already have. I don’t think I’ve ever gotten to.

She did not yet know that this single sentence, written half-asleep in the margin of an assignment due in three weeks, was the truest thing she would write about him in the whole of the project that followed, and that everything else she would eventually turn in — properly cited, carefully argued, generously praised — would be, by comparison, the smaller part of the work.

She tried to write the assignment the way she’d been taught, twice, in the days that followed.

The first attempt was technically correct and quietly dead. She had the structure her instructors wanted — subject, context, methodology, findings — and she filled it the way she filled everything, well, with the easy competence the systems had spent seventeen years helping her develop, and she read it back and felt nothing, because it was the document of a person who had observed Daniel Mercer from a safe and credentialed distance, and she had not done that. She had sat on cold ground and been asked a question she couldn't answer and come down the hill changed, and none of that fit anywhere in the form, because the form had been built on the assumption that the observer survives the observation intact. She deleted it.

The second attempt she abandoned halfway through a sentence, because she'd caught herself doing the thing the documentary footage had taught her to do — arranging him, smoothing his strangeness into something her instructor could metabolize, building the version of Daniel that would earn the marks. It was, she realized, sitting very still in front of the half-finished page, exactly what the systems did. The gentle correction toward the legible version. She had been about to do to him on paper the precise thing he had spent eleven years walking away from in person, and she had been about to do it well, and the doing-it-well was the part that frightened her.

She went to her instructor the next morning and asked, for the first time in her academic life, to be allowed to turn in something that wouldn't follow the form. Her instructor — a careful woman who had been teaching ethnography for thirty years and had read several hundred competent, lifeless papers about Daniel Mercer — looked at her for a moment with an attention Wren wasn't used to receiving, and said, "Tell me why."

"Because the form assumes I came back the same," Wren said. "And I didn't. And I think pretending I did would be the dishonest version."

Her instructor was quiet for a while. Then she said, "That's the first interesting sentence anyone has said to me about him in eleven years. Write that one. Write the version where you don't survive it intact. I'll defend it to the committee."

Wren walked out of that office having just done, she realized halfway across the courtyard, the thing she had spent the whole night trying to describe wanting. She had chosen something. Not been matched to it, not been gently guided toward it, not accepted it from a list of good options arranged for her by something kinder and faster than herself. She had wanted a difficult thing and gone and asked for it and risked being told no. Her hands were not quite steady. It was, she thought, the most alive she had felt inside her own life in as long as she could remember, and she had Daniel to thank for it, and the thing she had to thank him for was not anything he'd given her. It was a question he'd handed back.

Chapter Six: Beyond the Ring

“Can I come with you next time you go out?”

She’d asked it at the end of their fourth session, almost as an afterthought, the way you ask the question you actually want answered by burying it under three smaller ones first. Daniel had looked at her for a moment with an expression she hadn’t yet learned to read — it turned out, much later, to be the look of a man recalculating how much of his life he was willing to let someone see — and said, “I’m leaving in nine days. You can come as far as you’re able to.”

She had not understood, packing for it, what *as far as you’re able to* was going to mean.

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They left from the last transit platform the Ring maintained at any real frequency, a small clean station that the systems kept fastidiously, though the trains running through it had grown sparser the further its line ran from the centre, until the schedule itself seemed to be apologizing for its own existence. Wren had packed for nine variables of weather and could not, in the end, lift the pack without help, which Daniel provided without comment, redistributing a third of its contents into a bag of his own with the brisk efficiency of someone who had done this exact small kindness for exact this kind of overpacked first-timer more than once before.

“You’ll want less than you think,” he said. “Out here, the thing that’s heavy by the second day isn’t the thing you forgot. It’s the thing you didn’t need.”

She did not fully believe him until the second day, at which point she believed him completely, and said so, and he had the grace not to look smug about it.

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The Ring did not end with a wall or a sign. It ended the way the smoothing had once begun, by the seeress’s old reckoning, which is to say it ended without a year, without a step, only a slope — the transit lines thinning into footpaths, the footpaths thinning into suggestion, the towers behind them dropping below the horizon one rooftop at a time until the horizon held nothing but itself.

What marked it for Wren, in the end, was not the landscape. It was her own device, three days out, going quiet.

She had not realized, until the silence arrived, how much of her ordinary attention had been load-bearing for things she’d never had to notice carrying. The soft, constant, barely-conscious hum of being held — a notification here, a gentle correction there, the small unfailing certainty that if anything in her went wrong, something kinder and faster than herself would catch it before she fully registered the falling — thinned along with the towers, and somewhere on the third afternoon it simply wasn’t there any longer, and she stood very still in the middle of a field she didn’t have a name for, feeling something she didn’t have a name for either, until Daniel, a little ahead of her, looked back and said, “First time the gradient’s gone quiet?”

“I didn’t know it was a sound until it stopped.”

“Most people don’t. It’s not built to be noticed. That’s rather the whole design of it.” He waited for her, unhurried, the way he waited for everything. “How does the quiet feel?”

She turned the question over honestly, the way she'd learned, these last weeks, that he actually wanted her to.

"Loud," she said finally. "Which doesn't make sense. But it's the only word that fits. Like the quiet has its own volume."

"That's the best description anyone's ever given me," Daniel said, and meant it, and they walked on into a country that had stopped, by any measure either of them could find, being managed by anyone but the weather.

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What the wild gave back, over the days that followed, was not absence. Wren had expected absence — had braced, packing, for a kind of hollowness where the systems' gentle attention used to be — and found instead, almost immediately, that the world out here was not empty of attention. It simply required her own.

She learned to read weather coming three hours out by the particular grey building at the western edge of things, because nothing was going to read it for her. She learned which plants along the path were worth stopping for, not because a notification flagged them as notable but because Daniel stopped for them, wordlessly, and she started stopping too, and found, stopping, that things were in fact notable that no one had ever told her were notable — a stand of trees grown into each other so completely over some long-ago argument about sunlight that they had become, structurally, one thing wearing two trunks; a stretch of river that ran backward for forty feet around a particular stone before resuming its actual direction, a small private rebellion no engineer had ever smoothed out of it, because no engineer had ever known to look.

She slept badly the first two nights and well, astonishingly well, the third, on ground that did nothing whatsoever to optimise her rest, under a sky that had more in it than she had known a sky could hold. She lay awake on the third night anyway, not from discomfort but from a kind of fullness she didn't want to sleep through, and found Daniel awake too, a little distance off, watching the same impossible spread of stars.

"Does it ever stop being this much?" she asked.

"No," he said. "That's rather the point of it. It's too much, on purpose." He was quiet a moment, watching the same sky. "The Ring isn't wrong, you know. To manage what it manages. Most people couldn't live inside this every day and be glad of it. It's a mercy, for almost everyone it's built for. I just don't happen to be one of them. Took me about nine years to stop thinking that made me right about anything."

Wren thought about this for a long time, watching the stars do nothing in particular, magnificently.

"I think I could live inside this," she said. "For a while. Not forever. But I think I understand, now, why you'd want to."

"You don't have to decide that tonight."

"I know. I just wanted to say it before I changed my mind in the morning, when my feet remembered how cold the ground gets."

He laughed at that — a real laugh, unguarded, the kind she'd come to realize he gave out more rarely than his easy smile suggested — and the sound of it carried a long way in air that had nothing else competing with it.

• • •

She turned back on the sixth day, at a bend in the river where the path forked, one branch climbing toward country she would later learn to call Edge Country and the other curling gently back toward the last working transit line. Her assignment was due in eleven days. Her mother, gently and not unreasonably, had begun sending the kind of message that managed worry sends when it can no longer locate the person it is worried about precisely enough to stop being worried.

"You don't have to," Daniel said, watching her weigh it.

"I know. I want to, actually, which surprises me more than the not-wanting-to would have." She shouldered the lighter pack he'd helped her assemble, six days ago, on a platform that already felt like another life. "Will you tell me where you end up?"

"If you ask."

"Then I'm asking. In advance. For whenever you next think of it."

He considered this request with the same unhurried care he gave everything, and something in his face shifted slightly, in a way she couldn't yet name and would spend a long time, afterward, trying to.

"All right," he said. "I'll tell you. Eventually."

She walked the fork back toward the Ring alone, and felt the gradient's hum return by careful degrees over the following two days, gentle and accurate and entirely without judgment, welcoming her the way it welcomed everyone, and found, to her genuine surprise, that she was glad of it, and that the gladness did not erase one hour of what the silence, while it lasted, had given her instead.

Daniel took the other fork, toward Edge Country, alone, the way he had taken every fork before this one and would take every fork after it, and did not yet know that this particular silence was about to take him further than any of the four hundred and twelve rooms ever had.

Chapter Seven: Edge Country

Mountains.

They came up slowly, the way mountains do when you're walking toward them instead of being delivered to their base by something faster than your own legs — a blue suggestion on the second day, a certainty by the fourth, a wall of actual stone by the sixth that made the whole idea of the Ring, its towers and its gentle, accurate hum, feel briefly like something he'd invented to entertain himself on a long walk. He climbed without urgency. There was no schedule to keep and nothing waiting at the top except more mountain, and he found, climbing, that this was very close to the most honest reason he had ever had for doing anything.

Forests.

Below the treeline the world thickened into a kind of attention he hadn't asked anything to provide for him. No path had been smoothed for his comfort here; the paths that existed had been made by something that needed to get from one place to another and had simply, over a great deal of time, worn the ground into agreeing. He slept under cover one night when the canopy held the rain back almost completely and got soaked anyway the next, despite identical cover, for reasons the forest declined to explain to him, and he found that he did not mind the soaking nearly as much as he'd have minded a system getting the same calculation wrong.

Old Roads.

He crossed three of them in the second week — wide, cracked things, swallowed at the edges by exactly the kind of slow green reclamation that no one had managed, because no one out here was managing anything. He stood on one for a while, a road built for vehicles that hadn't existed for longer than he'd been alive, running in a straight confident line toward a horizon it no longer connected to anything on. There was a marker, half-buried, that might once have told travellers a distance to somewhere. He couldn't read what survived of it. He thought, standing there, of an old story he'd half heard once about a thing in tall grass that wouldn't open, and found the comparison faintly ridiculous and entirely apt, and walked on without trying to resolve it.

Weather.

It came at him honestly, the third week, the way weather only does when there's no infrastructure standing politely between you and it. A storm built across an entire afternoon, visible the whole time it was deciding to become a storm, and when it broke it broke completely, and he spent four hours in the lee of a rock formation that had clearly hosted this exact arrangement — a person, a storm, a rock — more times than either he or the rock could count, and came out the other side of it cold and entirely, uncomplicatedly happy in a way he hadn't expected weather to be able to make him.

Distance.

It stopped meaning what it used to mean. In the Ring distance was a number the systems gave you, accurate to the metre, attached to an arrival time attached to a recommendation about whether you'd be more comfortable walking or riding. Out here distance was just the size of the thing between him and the next thing, unmeasured, uncorrected, and he noticed, somewhere in the fourth week, that he had genuinely stopped wondering how far he'd come or how far there was left to go, because both questions belonged to a way of moving through the world that no longer applied to him.

Silence.

It was not the gradient's absence any longer — that particular quiet had become, since Wren turned back, almost ordinary to him, a known thing rather than a felt one. This was a different silence, deeper, the kind that didn't have a sound it used to be the absence of. He sat with it on the fifth week, on a ridge that looked out over country with no roads in it at all, old or otherwise, and understood, sitting there, that he had not thought about Continuity, or the systems, or the file with his name on it, or the four hundred and twelve rooms, in eleven days. He had simply been walking, and sleeping, and being cold, and being warm, and eating what he'd carried or found, and none of it had required anyone's attention but his own.

It was, he thought, watching the light change on country that had never once been offered to him as an address, the freest he had felt in eleven years. Possibly longer. Possibly the freest he had ever felt in his life, including the years before any of this had started, including the version of himself that had not yet become a number in anyone's audit.

He let himself believe, sitting on that ridge, that he had finally arrived at the thing he'd been walking toward the whole time.

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The marker stood at the edge of a long downward slope, where Edge Country thinned into something the maps — what maps survived out here, hand-copied and imprecise — called simply the Far Ground. It was old but well kept, a single post with a plate bolted to it, the kind of plain civic signage the systems had never stopped maintaining even in places almost no one came to read it.

BEYOND THIS MARKER: CONTINUANCE INFRASTRUCTURE WITHDRAWS. MEDICAL RESPONSE WINDOW EXCEEDS SIX HOURS. MONITORING CEASES ENTIRELY AT A DISTANCE OF APPROXIMATELY FORTY KILOMETRES. PROCEED BY INFORMED, RENEWABLE CONSENT ONLY. YOU MAY REQUEST REINSTATEMENT OF MONITORING AT ANY TIME BY RETURNING TO THIS LINE.

He had stood at markers like this one twice before, in eleven years, and turned back both times — not from fear exactly, but from a sense, each time, that he hadn't yet earned whatever was on the other side of them. He did not feel that now. He felt, standing in front of the plate with the wind doing something pleasant and complicated to the grass around his ankles, entirely ready, in the specific way a person feels ready right before they discover they weren't.

He thought of Wren, briefly, and the promise he'd made her — *I'll tell you where I end up* — and felt no contradiction in the thought, because telling her later and going further now seemed, in that moment, like two parts of the same plan rather than two plans in tension with each other.

He crossed the line without ceremony, the way he crossed most lines, and did not look back at the marker to see whether anything in it had registered his crossing, because for the first time in eleven years it genuinely did not occur to him to wonder whether anything was watching him do it.

Chapter Eight: The Desert

The country past the marker dropped the last of its forest within two days and kept dropping, the green thinning into scrub and then into something that wasn't even scrub, just ground, pale and cracked and entirely uninterested in supporting anything taller than itself. The Far Ground, the hand-copied maps had called it, with the flat unromantic honesty of people who had stopped expecting anyone to come this way and had given up trying to make the name pretty for them.

He was happy there, at first. He wants this recorded plainly, because what happened after is sometimes told as though the happiness was a lie he was telling himself, and it wasn't. For three days the desert gave him exactly what the mountains and the forest had been rehearsing him toward — a country with no opinion about him whatsoever, vast and indifferent and his, entirely his, in a way nothing had ever quite managed to be his before.

No tracking.

He noticed it first as an itch with nothing to scratch — the old reflex, eleven years deep, of checking a presence that had always been there to check, and finding, reaching for it, that there was no longer anything on the other end of the reaching. Not declined. Not silent. Absent, the way a missing tooth is absent, a shape his attention kept returning to out of habit long after the thing itself was gone. The first two times it happened he laughed at himself. By the fifth time, on the fourth day, he noticed he had stopped laughing.

No recommendations.

He took a wrong turn on the fifth day, the kind of small navigational error that the systems would have caught and corrected before he'd finished making it, gently, the way they corrected everything, so smoothly he'd usually never known an error had almost happened at all. Out here the error simply happened. It cost him six hours and a climb he didn't need to make, and he sat at the top of the unnecessary climb, looking down at the unnecessary distance, and felt something that wasn't quite regret and wasn't quite fear, a small cold awareness that there was no longer a floor under his mistakes. They would simply be what they were, all the way down, for as long as it took him to notice them himself.

No interventions.

On the seventh day he cut his hand on a rock face he'd misjudged, not badly, a clean shallow line across the palm that would have triggered, anywhere in the Ring, a small immediate flood of gentle attention — a care-response, a medical flag, Unit 31's voice asking, with real if practiced concern, whether he needed anything. Nothing flooded. He cleaned the cut himself, with water he was rationing, and bound it with a strip of cloth he was also rationing, and sat afterward with his back against the rock, watching his own blood dry on his own hand in a country that had not noticed it had been spilled, and felt, for the first time since crossing the marker, something that was unmistakably afraid.

No one expecting him.

This was the one he had not prepared for, because he had spent eleven years believing it was the one he wanted most. Nowhere on the whole of the green and managed world was there a clock counting down to his return, a door someone would check at a particular hour, a single calendar with

his name attached to a date. Hana would bake bread and not know to wonder yet whether this was the loaf he'd miss. Wren had his promise — *I'll tell you where I end up* — but no date attached to it, nothing she could measure her own worry against, nothing that would tell her, this week, that anything was wrong even if it was. He had built this, deliberately, over eleven years, the way you build a wall. He stood now on the inside of it and discovered that a wall does not know which direction it is protecting you from.

No one watching.

The desert at night did something to scale that the mountains, for all their size, had never quite managed. He lay on ground that held the day's heat for an hour and then gave it up all at once, looking at a sky with nothing in it to compete with, and thought, with a clarity that frightened him more than the cut hand had, *if something happened to me right now, the last true thing about me would be a fact no one possessed*. Not death — he was careful with himself, afterward, about the precision of this, because it was important to him that it not be confused with a wish for death. It was smaller and stranger than that. It was the realization that he had spent eleven years building toward a moment exactly like this one, and that the moment, arrived at last, contained nothing in it that wanted to be witnessed by no one. He had imagined, all this time, that what he was refusing was being known *in advance*. He had not understood, until the desert showed him, plainly, without comment, that there was a difference between *not yet known* and *unknowable*, and that he had walked, with great determination and a kind of pride he could no longer locate the pride in, directly into the second one.

No one waiting.

This was the worst of the six, and the simplest, and it arrived somewhere in the black hour before the eighth dawn, the hour with no name in any system because no system had ever needed to name an hour nobody was awake inside of with it. He thought of every room he had ever declined — the boathouse, indifferent to whether he came; the travelling module, perfectly willing to become whatever he needed and equally willing to remain exactly what it was if he never came back; and then, underneath those, the room that wasn't a room at all, Hana's kitchen with the shelf half-filled with things he kept almost leaving behind, and he understood, lying on ground that had no opinion of him, that the difference between a room and a person who is glad when you arrive is the only difference that had ever actually mattered, and that he had spent eleven years treating the first as though it were a stand-in for the second, refusing both together, as if refusing one required refusing the other.

It did not. He saw this now with a force that felt less like an idea and more like weather, arriving whether he was ready for it or not. He had never needed to refuse Hana's table to keep refusing the boathouse. He had simply never been brave enough, until this exact unbearable hour, to find out what was actually underneath the refusing.

He did not sleep the rest of that night. He lay with his bound hand against his chest and watched the sky do its slow indifferent work of becoming morning, and felt, for the first time in his adult life, something he had no trouble naming at all.

He felt afraid of being free.

The freedom had been the whole of the project. Eleven years, four hundred and twelve declines, a hillside, a marker, a desert — all of it built, stone by stone, toward exactly this: a place with nothing in it watching, nothing waiting, nothing expecting. He had it now, completely, more completely than he had ever managed to have it before, and lying there in the hour with no name, he understood, with

a clarity that felt like grief, that he had built, with extraordinary care and eleven years of patient labour, the one room in the world he had never actually wanted to live in.

When the actual dawn came — grey, then pale, then a thin hard gold that the desert did nothing to soften — he got up, and gathered what he had, and began, for the first time in eleven years, to walk toward something instead of away from it.

He did not yet know how far the something was, or whether the body he was walking it in still had the cut hand's measure of caution left in it, or that the ground forty kilometres back from here had already, three separate times, almost taken his ankle out from under him on the way in without his noticing.

He only knew that he wanted, very badly, for someone to be glad when he arrived.

Chapter Nine: Lost

He misjudged the second day back.

It was a small misjudgment, the kind the systems would have caught from forty kilometres away without his ever knowing there'd been anything to catch — a ridge that looked, in failing light, like the ridge he remembered, and wasn't, and by the time the wrongness of it was undeniable he had already committed two hours of falling light to a direction that was taking him further from the marker, not closer.

He corrected. He told himself it was a correction and not yet a problem, and for a while that was true.

The weather did not ask his opinion. It came down off a sky that had given him no useful warning, the way the desert had given him no useful warning about anything, cold first and then wet, and the wet on the cold ground turned the descent he needed to make into something the ground itself seemed to be actively unwilling to let him manage. He went carefully. He had been going carefully the whole day. Carefully did not turn out to be the variable that mattered.

His foot found the loose shelf of rock the way feet find things they were never shown a map of, and the ankle that had nearly gone three times on the way in finally, simply, went, and he was on the ground before he had finished understanding that he was falling, the cold coming up through his hip and his shoulder and the heel of the hand he'd cut a week ago in a different, smaller emergency that felt, from here, like it had happened to someone else.

He lay there for a while. Not from injury alone — the ankle was bad, he could tell that much immediately, swelling already starting under the boot, a wrongness in the joint that walking on it was going to cost him dearly for — but from the simple animal need, after a fall like that, to take inventory before asking the body to do anything else.

The inventory did not take long. Ankle, bad. Hand, reopened, bleeding lightly into a glove he didn't have the light left to properly assess. Light, going. Temperature, dropping in the specific unhurried way that meant it intended to keep dropping for some hours yet. Distance to the marker: he did not know. That was the part that frightened him most, turning the inventory over — not the ankle, not the cold, but the simple fact that he had lost, somewhere in the last two hours of careful correction, any reliable sense of how far he still had to go.

• • •

He tried standing once. The ankle answered the question definitively and he did not try a second time.

He crawled instead, for a while, toward a rock formation he could just make out against a sky that was running out of light faster than he wanted to admit, dragging the bad ankle behind him in a way that cost him more dignity than pain, though there was no shortage of either. He reached the rock. It gave him a lee against the wind, not much, the same kind of mercy the storm-rock had given him weeks ago in what felt now like a different life, and he got himself into it and sat with his back against stone and his ankle out in front of him and understood, with the particular clarity that arrives only once the worst of the choosing is over, that he was not going anywhere else tonight.

The cold found every gap in his clothing with the patient thoroughness of something that had nowhere else to be. He had supplies for one bad night, not for what this was threatening to become if the ankle didn't let him walk by morning, and he made himself count the supplies anyway, twice, because counting was a thing his hands could do that his mind could still trust.

It was somewhere in that counting that the fear arrived properly — not the desert's fear, the large quiet existential kind he'd had eight days to sit with and begin, almost, to make peace with, but a smaller, older, more honest kind, the kind that didn't care about the philosophy of it at all. *Nobody knows where I am.* He had built this fact, deliberately, across eleven years, turned it over in his hands like an achievement, and here it was at last, delivered in full, in a country with no name on most maps, in the dark, with an ankle that wasn't going to carry him anywhere and a body that was going to get considerably colder before it got any warmer.

He thought of Wren, briefly, with a clarity that hurt more than the ankle. *I'll tell you where I end up.* He had not told her anything. She had no date to measure her own worry against, no reason to wonder, this week, whether the silence meant anything at all.

He thought of Hana's shelf, the cup and the half-read book and the coat he'd never gone back for, and understood, with the desert's lesson landing now in a register that had nothing philosophical left in it, that a held place is only a mercy to the person who eventually comes back to it, and that he had spent eleven years collecting held places he had no plan, tonight, of ever reaching again.

He thought, for a while, of nothing at all, which was its own kind of mercy, and then the cold brought him back from it, and he made himself move his fingers, and his toes, the ones that weren't screaming, to prove to himself that the moving was still something he could choose to do.

• • •

He called out twice into the dark, not because he believed in an answer — he understood the arithmetic too well for that, forty kilometres of nothing in every direction that mattered — but because some part of him, older than the eleven years, older than the file and the marker and the desert's hard lesson, needed to test, once, whether the world contained anything at all that might respond to the sound of his own voice.

Nothing answered. He had known nothing would.

He pulled what he had closer around himself, and pressed his back harder into the rock, and watched what was left of the light go out of a sky that had no opinion about whether he was watching it or not, and understood, in the last clear thought he allowed himself before the cold and the exhaustion took the rest of the night away from him, that he had gotten, after eleven years and four hundred and twelve declines and a desert and a marker and a fall he should have seen coming, exactly the thing he had always said he wanted.

Nobody knew where he was.

It had not freed him. It was, very plainly, very simply, in the only language the body has for a fact like this one, going to kill him, unless something he had spent eleven years making sure did not exist — someone watching, someone close enough to find him by an accident he had not arranged — turned out, against every careful thing he'd built, to exist anyway.

He did not pray, not having the habit for it. He did the closest thing he had.

He hoped.

Chapter Ten: The Stranger

She found him a little after first light, and the thing he noticed first, before the warmth of her or the competence of her hands, was that she did not hurry.

He would think about that, later, more than almost anything else from the whole encounter — that a person coming upon a stranger half-frozen against a rock in country with nothing else alive in it for forty kilometres might reasonably have arrived at a run, with alarm in her voice, the particular urgency the systems would have brought if the systems had been able to come at all. She didn't. She crouched beside him the way you'd crouch beside a fire you were tending rather than one you were putting out, unhurried, entirely unafraid, and said, by way of introduction, "You've had a difficult night," which struck him, in his exhausted state, as the most accurate sentence anyone had said to him in eleven years.

"I have," he managed.

"I'm not a rescue," she said, already working at the laces of his boot with hands that knew exactly what they were doing. "Nobody sent me. I wasn't looking for you specifically. I walk this stretch most years, this season, and I happened to be on it." She glanced up at him once, checking something in his face that had nothing to do with the ankle. "I want you to understand that part before anything else. I didn't find you because anyone arranged it. I found you because I was already here."

He did not have the strength, just then, to tell her what that sentence meant to him. He filed it away instead, the way you file away a thing too large to hold yet, and let her work.

Her name was Sorrel. She had a fire going within the hour, and food within two, and by midday she had splinted the ankle with a competence that made it clear this was not the first ankle she'd splinted out here, and bound the hand properly, and given him water in the patient, repeated, unhurried way you give water to someone whose body has forgotten, briefly, how to ask for it correctly.

"Bad sprain, maybe worse," she said, of the ankle. "You're not walking on it for a few days at the pace either of us would like. We'll go slow. I have the time, if you don't mind the company."

"I don't mind the company," he said, and meant it more than the words could carry.

. . .

They walked slowly, over the days that followed, Daniel leaning on a stick she'd cut for him and on her shoulder when the ground demanded it, and somewhere in the unhurried rhythm of that walking he found himself telling her the whole of it — not the file's version, not the version he'd given Eliza in the careful early sessions, but the real shape of it, eleven years of declining and the marker and the desert and the six things he'd thought he wanted that had nearly killed him in the wanting.

She listened the way she'd worked on his ankle — completely, without rushing toward a conclusion, asking only the questions that opened something rather than the ones that closed it. She did not tell him what she thought of any of it until the fourth day, when the ground had levelled out enough that they could walk side by side instead of single file, and the marker, though neither of them could see it yet, was close enough that he had started, without meaning to, watching for it.

"Can I tell you what I noticed," she said, "in all of that. You can tell me to keep it to myself."

“Tell me.”

“You talked for four days about the systems, and the rooms, and the marker, and the desert, and not once — not one single time — did your voice do the thing voices do when they’re describing the actual wound. Flat. Careful. Like a man giving testimony he’s given before and trusts himself to give cleanly.” She kept walking, eyes on the path, giving him the mercy of not watching his face while she said it. “And then you mentioned, almost in passing, that you never told the girl where you’d ended up. And your voice did something it hadn’t done in four days of talking about everything else. It cracked. Just slightly. You didn’t seem to notice. I did.”

He said nothing for a long while, the stick finding the path, the country opening slowly ahead of them into something that was beginning, faintly, to look like ground he recognised.

“You spent your whole life running from management,” Sorrel said, finally, plainly, with no more weight in her voice than she’d used to tell him the ankle would need a few days. “I believe that. I believe you’ve spent eleven years building a life specifically shaped to keep anyone from arranging you. But I don’t think that’s what you were missing, out there in the dark, when you finally got everything you’d built. I think you found out, the hard way, that the thing you actually wanted was never the absence of management. It was the presence of someone who’d be glad to see you. Those aren’t opposites. You’d just never let yourself find out, because finding out meant risking the second one not being there, and the absence was easier to arrange than the hope was.”

He walked beside her for a long time without answering, because there was nothing in him just then that could improve on what she’d said, and improving on it felt, suddenly, like exactly the kind of thing he no longer wanted to do.

“I don’t know how to undo eleven years of building it the other way,” he said eventually.

“I’m not sure you have to undo it,” Sorrel said. “I think you might just have to stop adding to it. That’s a smaller thing than undoing. It might even be a thing you can start tonight.”

• • •

They reached the marker on the sixth day, the plain civic plate still bolted to its post, still offering its flat unsentimental promise of reinstated monitoring to anyone who crossed back over the line. Sorrel stopped a little short of it, and did not cross.

“This is as far as I go,” she said. “I don’t keep to the managed side, mostly. Not from any grievance with it — it’s a fine world, what I’ve seen of it. I just prefer the weather I can’t argue with.” She helped him settle the stick under his arm properly, checked the splint once more with the same unhurried competence she’d brought to everything, and stepped back. “You’ll manage the rest of it. It’s mostly downhill, and there’ll be someone watching again the moment you cross that line, which I understand is a complicated thing for you to hear, but I think, this time, you might actually be glad of it.”

“Will I see you again?”

“Probably not,” she said, without unkindness, the way you’d state any other fact about weather. “I don’t tend to repeat. But you’ll remember this stretch of ground differently now, I expect, every time you walk it. That’s its own kind of seeing someone again, if you let it be.”

She turned and walked back the way they'd come, unhurried, entirely unafraid, the way she'd arrived, and Daniel watched her go until the country took her, and then he turned toward the marker, and the line, and whatever was waiting for him, gladly or otherwise, on the other side of it.

Chapter Eleven: The Invitation

The systems found him again the moment he crossed the line, the way the plate had promised they would, and the finding arrived this time the way it always used to arrive — gently, and accurately, and without any of the dread he had spent eleven years quietly attaching to it.

A care-response came first, before anything else, the small immediate flood of attention his cut hand should have triggered nine days earlier and hadn't, because there had been nothing out there to trigger it with. He read it. This was the part that surprised him, turning it over, walking the last easy distance toward the transit line on a leg that was going to need real attention soon: he read the whole of it, the kind, slightly over-careful language, the offer of a medical transport he was, for once, glad to accept, and felt none of the small disappointing flush of obligation declining usually cost him. He simply felt looked after. It was a smaller feeling than he'd expected gratitude to be, and a steadier one.

He let the transport take him in. He let the medical infrastructure set the ankle properly, with an efficiency that made Sorrel's careful field splint look, by comparison, like the act of love it had actually been. And somewhere in the quiet hour of being mended, before he let himself rest, he did the thing he had not done in eleven years of leaving people with nothing but a vague directional promise.

He told someone where he was.

• • •

To Wren Ellis, message, sent and delivered: I said I'd tell you where I ended up. I ended up in a desert I had no business being in, with an ankle that's going to take a few weeks, and a piece of news I think I owe you in person rather than in writing: you asked me a question on a hillside that I've been answering ever since, badly, the long way, with my whole body instead of with words. I think I finally have the words. Come find me when you can. I'll be somewhere with a roof over it, for once, while this heals — which I understand may be the strangest sentence I've ever sent you.

He sent a shorter one to Eliza, because the long version of it was a conversation, not a message, and he wanted to give it to her properly, in person, the way she'd given him eleven weeks of unguarded attention he was only now beginning to understand the size of.

You were right that I made less sense the longer you looked. I think I finally know why. Buy me a coffee sometime and I'll embarrass us both trying to explain it.

• • •

Wren came on the second day, before the ankle had even properly begun to bore him, which it would, extensively, over the weeks that followed.

She looked different, though he couldn't immediately place how, until she'd been sitting beside the bed for a few minutes and he understood it was not anything in her face but in the way she carried herself into a room — less braced, somehow, more arrived. She had brought him a book she thought he might like and did not apologize for the impulse the way she would have a season ago.

"They defended it," she said, when he asked how the assignment had landed, and he could hear, underneath the steadiness, that the thing still meant a great deal to her. "My instructor took it to the committee and there was an argument, apparently a real one, about whether it was even ethnography anymore. She won. They marked it as ethnography. And then —" she paused, and he watched her decide to let herself be glad about it out loud, which was its own small new thing — "and then the

methodology faculty asked if I'd present it. The whole approach. Observer-compromised fieldwork, they're calling it. Like it's a category now. Like I made a category."

"You did make a category," Daniel said. "You should let them name it after you. I never let anyone name anything after me and I've regretted it for eleven years."

She laughed, and then went quieter, turning the next part over the way she'd learned, from him, to turn things over before saying them.

"I almost didn't ask her," she said. "My instructor. I had the safe version written. It was good. It would've gotten the marks. And I deleted it and went and asked to do the hard one instead, and I was terrified the whole walk to her office, and I keep thinking about how close I came to just turning in the version that wouldn't have cost me anything." She looked at him. "I'd never done that before. Wanted a difficult thing and gone and asked for it out loud. Not once, in my whole life. Everything I've ever had was just — arranged for me, gently, before I had to want it hard enough to risk being told no."

"And?"

"And it was the most alive I've ever felt inside my own life," she said. "Which I have you to thank for, and the thing I have to thank you for isn't anything you gave me. You just handed my own question back to me and made me carry it. I've decided that's the most useful thing anyone's ever done for me. I'm not sure I'd recommend it. But it's the most useful."

Daniel was quiet for a moment, and something moved in his face that she had not seen there before, on the hillside or anywhere since.

"That," he said, "might be the first time in eleven years I've been glad to have been anyone's anything. I spent all of it making sure I couldn't be used. Turns out I just didn't understand what I was being afraid of."

• • •

Jonah Vale came to see him before either of them did, the way Jonah did most things — unannounced, unhurried, with the patience of a man who had spent eighty-three years learning that the right conversation could not be scheduled into being, only made room for.

"You look terrible," Jonah said, by way of greeting, settling himself into the chair beside the bed with the careful economy of an old man who had made peace with exactly how many of these motions his body had left in it. "I mean that with real affection. I've been hoping to talk to you for some years now, and I confess I had not pictured the ankle."

"You could have just asked."

"I could have. I didn't think you were ready to hear what I had to say. I'm not certain you are now, but you're injured, which makes you a more patient audience than usual, so I'm taking the opening." He folded his hands. "I helped build pieces of the early infrastructure. Long before your file existed. I want you to know that before I say anything else, because I think you've spent a long time assuming the people who built this world were either fools or saints, and I'd like to correct that on behalf of my entire vanished generation. We were neither. We were frightened people solving a real problem with the tools we had, and the tools were very good, and we used them as well as we knew how."

"I don't think you're a fool."

“Good. Then hear the rest of it.” Jonah leaned forward slightly, and something in his face shifted into the register of a man finally saying a thing he’d carried a long time. “We solved suffering. I want to be precise about that, because it’s not a small claim and I don’t make it lightly — we solved hunger, and cold, and untreated grief, and the specific brutal arithmetic of people falling through gaps that used to simply exist, structurally, as the price of everything else working. That was real. I am proud of it without reservation. What we did not solve — what I do not believe is solvable by the kind of tools we had, however gently and accurately we learned to use them — was meaning. We built a world extraordinarily good at giving people what they needed. We never quite worked out how to make sure they were still, every so often, surprised by getting it.”

Daniel said nothing for a while, turning that over the way he’d turned over most of what the desert had handed him.

“That’s what I went out there to find,” he said eventually. “I don’t think I knew it in those words. I think I knew it as an itch. Eleven years of itch.”

“I know,” Jonah said. “I’ve known since your third year. I read your file the way I read everyone’s, out of an old man’s professional habit, and I recognised the itch immediately, because I’d spent the better part of my career trying, quietly, to build small allowances for it into systems that were, on the whole, extremely reluctant to allow for anything they couldn’t first measure. I never built quite enough allowance. You were the proof of that, walking around for eleven years as a population of one.” He smiled, faintly, the expression of a man revisiting an old, mostly-forgiven failure. “I’m glad you found your answer somewhere a committee never could have built it for you. I’d like to hear it, if you’re willing to tell an old architect what his blind spot turned out to be made of.”

“It wasn’t the management,” Daniel said. “I thought it was, for years. It was never the management. It was that I’d built my whole life around making sure nothing could find me by accident, and it turns out the finding was the entire thing I actually wanted. Not the rooms. The gladness in someone’s face when you turn up at their door without having scheduled it.”

Jonah was quiet for a long moment, and when he spoke again his voice had gone soft in a way Daniel hadn’t heard from him before.

“That’s the truest sentence I’ve heard in this building in thirty years,” he said. “I hope you go and do something about it before you talk yourself back out of it. You have a tendency, from what I’ve read, to think your way past your own better instincts. Don’t, this time.”

• • •

He went to Hana’s table on a Thursday, three weeks later, on an ankle that still complained about stairs and would for some time yet, with a stick he’d kept out of something between practicality and sentiment.

The boy saw him first, the way the boy always saw him first, and announced his arrival to the whole kitchen with the unguarded joy of a child who has never once practised concealing how glad he is about anything. Hana came out wiping flour from her hands, and stopped a few feet from him, and did not say *you came back* or *we missed you* or any of the things he’d half braced himself to hear and would have found, even now, a little hard to carry.

She said, “You’re just in time. It’s almost ready.”

He stood in the doorway a moment longer than he needed to, feeling the specific weight of the ordinary sentence, the way it asked nothing of him and offered him everything anyway.

"I wanted to ask you something," he said. "Properly, this time. Not the open kind of asking I've always left you with."

"Ask, then."

"Thursdays. Whichever Thursday I'm within walking distance, I'd like to be at this table. Not living here. Not the room — I think the room should go to someone who'll actually use it, if you don't mind, someone who needs a held place more than I do right now. Just the table. Just Thursdays, when I can manage it, and the honesty to tell you in advance, for once, when I can't."

Something crossed Hana's face before the smile did, and Daniel saw it, and was glad afterward that he'd seen it, because it was the truest thing in the whole exchange and he'd very nearly been spared it.

"Eleven years," she said, and there was an edge under it she didn't bother to hide, a thing that had clearly been waiting a long time for any opening at all. "Do you know how many loaves I've kept back. How many Thursdays I set a place I wasn't sure about and then sat through, not knowing if the not-knowing was the price of having you in our lives or just — being taken for granted by a man who'd decided we were a thing he could pick up and put down. I told myself it was the first one. For eleven years I told myself that. It wasn't always easy to believe, standing at that window watching the path stay empty." She stopped. He watched her hear herself, watched the bitterness reach the edge of becoming the kind of thing that changes a room, and watched her decide — visibly, the way you watch someone set down something heavy they've been carrying so long they'd stopped noticing the weight — not to let it.

"But you walked here on a bad ankle to ask," she said, gentler now, the edge folding back into her. "Which you have never once done. So I'm going to put the rest of it down, because I've been holding it long enough and it's heavier than you are. I just wanted you to know it was there. That the waiting cost something. You should know that about the people who wait for you. It's not free, what we did. It was just worth it."

Daniel did not say anything for a moment, because there was nothing he could say that would be equal to having been told the true price of the thing he'd been accepting in pieces for eleven years.

"I know," he said finally. "I'm sorry it took me this long to be worth the bill."

And then her face did the thing Eliza's notes had once tried, clumsily, to capture in a stranger — an unguarded smile, arriving not in response to an offer but in response to the shape of a man finally asking for something instead of merely being offered it.

"That," she said, "is the first thing you've ever asked me for instead of declined."

"I noticed that too. Slightly late."

"Sit down, then. You're holding up the bread."

He sat. The boy claimed the chair beside him before anyone else could, with the proprietary speed of a child who understood, better than most of the adults in the room had managed to, exactly what was being settled at that table and was not about to let the moment pass without a witness he'd chosen for himself.

It was not a house. He wanted that understood, sitting there, turning the distinction over one more time before he let it go entirely — not a house, not an address, not the four hundred and thirteenth offer finally, belatedly, accepted. It was smaller than that, and it had taken him eleven years, a desert, a stranger who didn't repeat, and an old man's quiet confession to arrive at the size of it.

It was a chair, held on purpose, on a day someone had chosen in advance to be glad about.

Epilogue: Tomorrow

The morning audit, some months later, read the way it had read for eleven years and some months besides.

HOUSING SUFFICIENCY:	100.000%
NUTRITIONAL SUFFICIENCY:	100.000%
MEDICAL ACCESS:	100.000%
HOMELESS POPULATION:	1

The number had not moved. This must be said plainly, because it would be easy, telling the rest of it, to let the warmth of what came after talk the number into changing, and the number did not change, and the systems, to their credit, never pretended otherwise. Daniel Mercer remained, by every formal measure they kept, exactly what he had always been: a population of one, the single non-zero entry in a column built for zeroes.

What had changed sat underneath the number, in the smaller fields nobody but a careful reader would think to check.

Subject maintains regular voluntary contact with: D. Henley's successor office (medical follow-up, declined further escalation), Eliza Renn (non-research basis, frequency increasing), Hana Okonjo-Reyes and household (weekly, when geographically feasible, by subject's own initiative), Wren Ellis (irregular, subject-initiated, high warmth indicators), J. Vale (occasional, subject describes as "argument practice"). Subject continues to decline all housing offers. Subject's overall wellbeing indicators, monitored at standing consent, have not changed measurably. Recommend: no further escalation. Subject appears, by every available metric, content.

He still wandered. This, too, must be said plainly, because the temptation in a story like this one is to let the ending quietly undo the very thing the story spent eleven chapters establishing — to have him, in the end, become someone who stays, and call it growth. He did not become someone who stays. He still woke on hillsides more often than not. He still walked further out than most citizens ever considered, still slept under skies the gradient had no opinion about, still found, on certain mornings, the same hard-won uncomplicated joy in a sunrise that owed him nothing.

What had changed was smaller, and larger, than that.

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He found her on the hillside above the transit line, the same one, a season after the desert, packing for a trip he hadn't yet told her the shape of. She came up the path the way she always did now, without the careful formality of the first visit, a friend arriving rather than a researcher conducting a session, and sat beside him on ground that had stopped, for both of them, being anyone's idea of cold.

"Where are you going?" she asked.

He smiled, the easy one, the one that had taken her months to learn to read correctly.

"North."

"That's not very specific."

"More specific than last time."

She laughed — a real laugh, the kind he'd come to recognise as the one she gave when something had actually landed rather than merely amused her — and let the silence sit a while after it, comfortable now in a way it had never quite managed to be on this same hillside, the first morning, when she'd asked him a question he'd answered with another question because he hadn't yet had a real one of his own.

"Where will you be," she said, "next month?"

He didn't answer right away. She watched him hold the question the way she'd watched him hold every real question since the first one, turning it slowly, checking it for the old reflex — the easy deflection, the *I don't know yet* that had served him faithfully and incompletely for eleven years — and finding, this time, that the reflex simply wasn't there to reach for.

"The inlet," he said. "The boathouse path, the one I never took the boathouse over. Last day of the month, at sundown. I'll be there whether anyone comes or not — I want to be honest with you about that part, because I think the honesty matters more than the promise does. But I'd like it if someone did."

It was the first time, in the whole of it, that he had told anyone where he would be before they had asked him to be found there.

Wren did not say anything clever back to him. She simply nodded, the way you nod at a thing you intend to keep, and reached over and took the small notebook from her bag — the same one, worn soft now at the corners, the one with a single line written in its margin from a night she'd never quite managed to top in anything she'd written since — and wrote the date down where she'd be sure to find it again.

He watched her do it, and felt, watching, the specific quiet satisfaction of a man who had spent eleven years building a life designed to keep this exact small thing from ever happening to him, and who was, at long last, glad to have lost the argument with himself.

The light came up gold over the towers below them, the way it always did, the way it had on the very first morning of this whole account, and neither of them moved to leave it for a while.

North could wait a little longer. It always had.