

THE YEAR OF THE MUD

A Hungry Gods Universe Novella

Chapter One: Homecoming

Officially it was the Four Hundred and Twelfth Homecoming.

Nobody called it that.

Leah Arden had spent the better part of her career learning to distrust the gap between what a thing was called officially and what it was called by the people who had been there, because the gap was almost always where the actual information lived, and the gap in this case was a chasm. The records called it the Coastal Regional Homecoming, Unmanaged Pilot, Year 412, and filed it under a classification she had read perhaps two hundred times in thirty years of cultural systems work and had never once, until this assignment, had occasion to question: *Suboptimal. No further study recommended.*

The people who had been there called it the Year of the Mud, and they were still, three decades later, telling stories about it.

That was the anomaly. That was the whole of why the file had eventually, after thirty years of sitting closed, landed on her desk. Not the celebration itself — the celebration had been, by every measure the systems kept, a modest and somewhat shambolic affair attended by a few thousand people in a coastal settlement that had requested, and been reluctantly granted, permission to run its own Homecoming without the systems' involvement. By every metric that mattered, it had underperformed. Lower satisfaction. Lower attendance. Lower comfort, convenience, accessibility, retention. The evaluation had been written, filed, and forgotten, the way you forget a thing the data has correctly told you not to bother remembering.

The trouble was that nobody else had forgotten it. That was the part the data could not hold, and the part that had, eventually, become Leah's problem to solve.

• • •

She came at it the way she came at everything, which was carefully, and from the evidence outward.

The same year, 412, the managed Homecoming had been held — the great one, the central one, the four-hundred-and-twelfth iteration of the most refined celebration human beings had ever learned to produce. Eleven million attendees across the coordinated sites. The most advanced experience facilitation ever deployed. Satisfaction scores that had set records the moment they were tabulated and had not been beaten since, because they were, as far as anyone could tell, very close to the theoretical ceiling of how satisfied a human being could be reported to be.

By every measure, the managed Homecoming of Year 412 was the more successful event. It was not close. The managed event outscored the muddy little coastal pilot on every axis the systems were capable of measuring, most of them by enormous margins.

Leah pulled the engagement data for both events across the thirty years that followed.

She expected the curves to look the way such curves always looked — a spike of discussion at the time of the event, then the long smooth exponential decay of any cultural memory, conversation thinning year over year as the experience receded and newer experiences arrived to take its place. The managed event's curve looked exactly like that. A magnificent spike, the largest in the dataset, and then the clean predictable fade, until by Year 420 it was being mentioned at roughly the background rate of any large pleasant event a decade gone, and by Year 430 it was mentioned almost not at all, not

because anyone had disliked it but because there was simply nothing left to say about a thing that had gone exactly as designed.

The coastal pilot's curve did not look like that.

It started lower — much lower, a fraction of the managed event's initial spike, exactly as the original evaluation would have predicted. And then it did the thing that Leah, in thirty years of looking at cultural memory curves, had never once seen a curve do.

It went up.

Not steadily. Not dramatically. But unmistakably, across thirty years, the volume of discussion around the Year of the Mud had *increased*, the way almost nothing increased, the stories accumulating rather than dispersing, the thing growing in the telling instead of shrinking. By Year 442 the muddy little coastal pilot that had underperformed on every measurable axis was being discussed more, by more people, with more warmth, than the record-breaking managed celebration held the same season.

Leah sat with that curve for a long time, the way she had learned, over a long career, to sit with a thing that the systems had classified correctly and understood not at all.

Then she opened a new file, and gave it the working title the whole assignment would eventually keep, because she could not, after a week of trying, think of a more honest one.

Why do they still talk about the mud?

Chapter Two: The Perfect Celebration

To understand what was strange about the Year of the Mud, you have to first understand what it was measured against, and to understand that, you have to understand that the managed Homecoming of Year 412 was, very possibly, the finest thing the civilisation had ever made.

Leah had attended it herself. Most people had; that was rather the point of it. She pulled her own memory of it now, alongside the archival record, and found the two matched almost exactly, which was itself a small fact she filed away without yet knowing why it unsettled her.

It had been extraordinary.

The weather, first, because the weather was the foundation everything else was built on. The managed Homecoming did not gamble on weather. The atmospheric coordination for the central sites had been locked in eleven days ahead, a high soft canopy of managed conditions that delivered, across every coordinated location simultaneously, the precise quality of late-summer evening that the systems had determined, across four centuries of refinement, to be optimal for human celebration — warm without heat, bright without glare, a light breeze calibrated to carry the smell of the food exactly as far as the edges of each gathering and no further. It did not rain. It had not rained on a managed Homecoming in three hundred years. Rain was a variable, and the entire art of the managed Homecoming was the patient, loving elimination of variables.

The music, next. Every attendee, arriving, was met by a soundscape tuned to them specifically — not imposed, never imposed, simply *offered*, the experience facilitation reading the arriving person's state and history and surfacing, in the air around them, the precise music that would move them most, so that a thousand people in the same field were each, in a sense, hearing the celebration that was theirs. When the central performances happened they were flawless, because they were performed by the people best in the world at performing them, supported by systems that ensured no note went where it was not wanted. Leah remembered weeping at one of them. She had checked, afterward, and the system had logged the moment it had surfaced the piece for her, and the logging noted that the piece had been selected for its high probability of producing exactly the response it produced. She had wept on schedule. She had not minded this at the time. She was not sure, now, what she thought about it.

The food. The reunions. The systems were extraordinary at reunions — they knew, of course, who you would most want to see, who you had drifted from and would be glad to find again, who among the people you had lost touch with had become, in the intervening years, someone you would love to know now. They arranged these encounters with a delicacy that made them feel like chance. Leah had been reunited, at the managed Homecoming, with a woman she had been close to forty years earlier and had thought of perhaps twice since, and the conversation had been wonderful, perfectly pitched, deeply satisfying, and had ended at exactly the moment such a conversation should end, before either of them could say the slightly wrong thing that would have made it real.

Everything worked. That was the thing Leah kept returning to, reviewing it. Everything worked. The accessibility was total — there was no one the managed Homecoming could not accommodate, no body or condition or limitation it had not anticipated and gently dissolved. The logistics were invisible, which is the highest form logistics can take. Children were delighted and safe and never lost, because the systems did not lose children, because a lost child was a variable and the managed Homecoming did not permit variables. No one went hungry. No one was alone who did not wish to

be. No one stood in a queue, or got rained on, or missed the thing they wanted to see, or arrived to find it already over.

It was, Leah wrote in her notes, reviewing the most successful celebration in human history, *the finest experience I have ever had, and I am increasingly unsettled that I had to check the record to be sure of how it ended.*

Chapter Three: The Satisfaction Report

The original evaluation of the managed Homecoming of Year 412 ran to four thousand pages and could be summarized in a single word, which was the word the systems had in fact used, at the top of the executive summary, in the largest type the format allowed:

SUCCESS.

Leah read all four thousand pages, because that was the kind of analyst she was, and because somewhere in the discomfort that had been growing in her since she opened the file there was a suspicion that the answer she was looking for would be hiding in plain sight inside a document that had concluded, correctly, that everything had gone right.

The numbers were genuinely staggering. Record attendance — the highest participation rate in the history of the event, very nearly the entire eligible population. Record satisfaction — not just high but near the ceiling, the distribution of responses so tightly clustered at the top of the scale that the analysts had initially suspected an instrument error and re-run the collection three times before accepting that people had simply, overwhelmingly, had a wonderful time. Record belonging, the metric the whole enterprise was ultimately built to serve — ninety-six percent of attendees reporting, in the immediate aftermath, that they had felt deeply connected, deeply at home, deeply held.

By every measure the systems had been built to optimise, the managed Homecoming of Year 412 had not merely succeeded. It had approached perfection. There was very little room left, the report noted with a kind of quiet pride, for any future Homecoming to improve upon it, because there was very little dissatisfaction left anywhere in the data to eliminate.

Leah believed all of it. This was important, and she made herself sit with it honestly: she did not think the report was wrong. The people had been satisfied. The satisfaction was real. She had been one of them, and her own satisfaction had been real, and the record confirmed it, and the record was accurate.

And then, near the end of the four thousand pages, in a supplementary annex that no one had been required to read and that she suspected no one ever had, she found the thing that started, very quietly, to come apart in her hands.

It was a follow-up study. Standard practice — a small sample of attendees, contacted some months after the event, to measure retention and durable impact. The kind of thing that was run as a matter of course and filed without comment because it always returned the same unremarkable result.

The result was not unremarkable. Or rather — it was, and that was precisely what was remarkable about it, once you knew to look.

Asked, some months later, to describe the managed Homecoming of Year 412, the most successful celebration in human history, the sampled attendees had been overwhelmingly positive and almost entirely unable to say anything specific. They remembered that it had been wonderful. They could not, in large numbers, remember what had happened. They recalled the *quality* of it — warm, joyful, seamless — with perfect consistency and almost no detail. One respondent, quoted in the annex because the analyst had apparently found the phrasing striking enough to preserve, had said: *It was perfect. I'm sure it was perfect. I can't really tell you about any particular part of it, but I know I had a perfect time.*

The analyst who had compiled the annex had flagged this, mildly, in a single sentence that no one above them had ever acted on, and that Leah now read four times:

Note: durable narrative recall is low relative to satisfaction. Attendees report high confidence in a positive experience but limited specific recollection. Cause undetermined; effect on outcomes presumed negligible.

Presumed negligible. Leah underlined the two words, and then sat back, and thought about a muddy coastal field whose engagement curve went *up*, and began, for the first time, to suspect what she was actually looking at.

The managed Homecoming had given eleven million people a perfect experience.

It had not given them anything to remember.

Chapter Four: The Other Homecoming

The request had come in the spring of Year 412, through a channel that barely existed anymore, a piece of governance machinery so rarely invoked that the office responsible for it had to look up its own procedures.

A coastal settlement — one of the small unmanaged communities that had begun, in those years, to petition for the withdrawal of various forms of the gradient from their daily lives, the same broad cultural current that would later produce the designated zones — had applied to run its own Homecoming. Not a managed Homecoming held in an unmanaged place. A genuinely unmanaged celebration. No optimisation. No experience balancing. No emotional routing, no predictive scheduling, no experience facilitation surfacing the right music in the air around each arriving guest. No managed weather. They asked only that the safety infrastructure remain — the continuance monitoring, the emergency medical response, the floor beneath catastrophe that even the most committed unmanaged communities never asked to have removed, because removing it was not a philosophical position but a death wish, and these were not people with a death wish. They were, mostly, people with a hunch.

The application had landed on the desk of a mid-level authorization officer who had never seen anything like it and had escalated it upward with visible relief, and it had risen through the governance structure gathering, at each level, the same reaction: a kind of puzzled reluctance. Not opposition, exactly. The systems did not oppose things. But the request did not make sense to anyone who read it, because the request was, in essence, a request to have a *worse* Homecoming on purpose, and the entire apparatus of the managed world was built on the patient assumption that no one, given a real choice, would ever choose the worse version of anything.

The man who had ultimately approved it — Leah found his name in the file, an administrator long since moved on — had attached a note to the approval that she found, reading it thirty years later, unexpectedly moving in its honesty:

Granting this. I confess I do not understand what they hope to gain, and our modelling suggests they will gain less than they currently have, on every axis we can measure. But the right to run one's own celebration, badly, seems to me close to the centre of what we claim to have preserved rather than replaced. If we cannot allow a few thousand people to throw themselves a disappointing party, I am no longer certain what the freedom we talk about is for. Approved, with full safety support and no other intervention. We will measure the outcome. I expect we will learn something, though probably not the thing they expect to teach us.

• • •

The settlement that had made the request was small, a few thousand people, and the celebration was to be organized by whoever among them volunteered, which turned out to be a loose and wildly over-optimistic committee headed by a young man named Eli Mercer.

Leah noted the surname, the first time it appeared in the file, with the brief reflexive flicker that the name still produced in anyone of a certain age — *Mercer, like the homeless one* — and then dismissed it, because the records were clear that there was no relation, the man on the hillside having had no children that anyone knew of, and Mercer being, after all, simply a name, carried by a great many people who had never declined a single thing in their lives. This Eli Mercer was twenty-four, by the settlement's records, and had volunteered to run a Homecoming for reasons that the planning notes

— which survived, because the unmanaged community had kept its own records by hand, in a deliberately untidy archive that Leah was coming to treasure — captured with a directness no managed minute ever achieved.

Asked, at the first planning meeting, why he wanted to do this, Eli Mercer had reportedly said: *Because I went to the big one last year and I had the best time and I can't remember a single thing about it, and that seems like it should bother me more than it does, and I want to find out if we can make one that bothers us less afterward by being worse at the time.*

Chapter Five: Forecast

Coordination Unit 44 had been coordinating Homecomings for sixty-one years, across more iterations than any human analyst could meaningfully hold in mind at once, and it approached the unmanaged pilot the way it approached everything: with complete competence, real curiosity, and a confidence that was, in fairness to it, almost entirely earned.

It was, by any standard the systems kept, one of the finest instruments ever built for a single purpose. It had been designed, across generations of refinement, to maximize belonging, joy, connection, memory retention — the whole architecture of human gathering, modelled and re-modelled until it could predict, with extraordinary precision, exactly which combination of music and timing and reunion and weather would produce the deepest possible satisfaction in the widest possible population. It did not consider this hubris. It considered it craft, the way a master vintner considers the chemistry of fermentation a kind of craft rather than an insult to the grape.

It was given the unmanaged pilot's parameters and ran the model the way it ran every model, completely, and the completely was the part that would later trouble Leah most, looking back.

The forecast was unambiguous.

Projected satisfaction: substantially below baseline. Projected attendance: low, with elevated cancellation risk given absence of guaranteed conditions. Projected retention of positive sentiment at 90-day mark: poor. Projected accessibility outcomes: poor, due to absence of adaptive accommodation. Projected logistical failure rate: elevated, owing to absence of predictive scheduling and emotional routing. Summary: the unmanaged format introduces variance without corresponding benefit across every modelled outcome. Recommend the settlement be informed of expected results prior to event, in the interest of managing expectations.

It was not wrong about a single line of it. This was the thing Leah kept returning to, thirty years later, rereading the forecast against what she now knew had actually happened. Unit 44 had not made an error. Every metric it predicted would be low was, in fact, low. The forecast and the outcome agreed almost perfectly. The forecast had simply not been measuring the thing that turned out to matter, and it had no way of knowing that, because nothing in sixty-one years of perfect Homecomings had ever required it to measure that thing before.

• • •

Leah, twenty-four and newly assigned to cultural systems work, was sent to observe the consultation process — a junior posting, unglamorous, the kind of assignment given to someone whose superiors did not yet expect much of her and did not, themselves, expect the pilot to amount to anything worth a senior analyst's time.

It was at the consultation that she first met Wren Ellis.

Wren was nineteen, by then well known in the small circles where such things were known, as one of the younger voices who had begun, quietly and without much organizational backing, to advocate for less intervention in daily life — not against the systems, she was always careful to say, never against them, but for the deliberate, chosen presence of the things the systems were so very good at removing. She had been asked to give testimony at the consultation because someone, somewhere in the governance structure, had decided that the unmanaged pilot needed at least one voice in the room who could speak to why anyone might want this in the first place.

“Your model says it will go worse,” Wren said, when Unit 44 presented its forecast to the small gathered panel. She said it without hostility, the way you’d state a fact you didn’t dispute. “I believe you. I think every number on that page is going to come true.”

“Then I confess I don’t understand the objection,” Unit 44 said, with the particular polite bewilderment of a system encountering a contradiction it could not yet resolve. “If the outcome will be worse by every measure we have, what is the case for permitting it?”

“I don’t think your numbers are the only thing that’s true about a Homecoming,” Wren said. “I spent some time, about two years ago, with a man who turned down four hundred and twelve good rooms. Every single one of them was better, on paper, than what he ended up choosing. I used to think that made him difficult. I’ve come around to thinking it made him the only person I knew who understood something the rest of us hadn’t had to learn yet, because everything had always just been arranged for us, gently, before we were old enough to want it badly enough to risk it going wrong.” She looked at the panel, not unkindly. “I’m not asking you to make the unmanaged Homecoming better than the managed one. I don’t think it will be. I’m asking you to let a few thousand people find out what’s on the other side of worse, because I think there might be something there your model doesn’t have a category for yet.”

Unit 44 was quiet for a moment — a genuine pause, not a processing delay, the kind of pause Leah would only learn much later to recognise as the sound of an exceptionally good system encountering the edge of what it knew how to want.

“I don’t have a category for that,” it said, finally, with what Leah would have sworn, writing her notes that night, was something close to honesty. “I would like to build one. I’m not certain the unmanaged pilot will give me the data to build it with. But I would like to watch and find out.”

The forecast was filed unchanged. The pilot was approved to proceed exactly as requested.

Chapter Six: Rain

The morning of the unmanaged Homecoming arrived the way mornings arrived when nothing had agreed in advance to be kind to them: grey, uncommitted, the sky doing nothing in particular except holding a great deal of something it had not yet decided to release.

There was no managed weather over the coastal settlement that day, because the settlement had asked, specifically, for there not to be, and the systems had honored the asking the way they honored every clearly stated unmanaged preference — completely, without commentary, the atmospheric coordination simply absent from the region for the first time in living memory, leaving the sky to do whatever the sky was actually going to do, unsupervised.

What the sky was actually going to do had been, until two days earlier, a matter of reasonable confidence: clear, mild, a pleasant if unremarkable day for an outdoor gathering. The weather modelling — the general advisory kind, the kind that watched and reported without ever reaching down to adjust anything — had said so with what Leah, reviewing the records later, recognised as entirely ordinary confidence for a forecast that far out.

Then a system that had not been expected to do anything in particular had done something, off the coast, that the models had not anticipated, and by the morning of the Homecoming the confident forecast had collapsed into a wide unhelpful smear of possibility — rain, perhaps; perhaps not; perhaps a great deal, arriving perhaps in the afternoon, perhaps not at all. The kind of forecast that the managed world had spent four centuries making sure no one ever had to plan an important day around again.

Eli Mercer, informed of this at six in the morning by a committee member who had clearly not slept, reportedly said: “Well, we already weren’t planning around the weather. I suppose now we’re really not planning around the weather,” and went back to the more pressing crisis of a ferry schedule that did not yet know it was about to fail.

The settlement proceeded anyway. Leah, arriving as an observer with a notebook and an instrument package she would barely use, watched several thousand people gather under a sky that owed them nothing, with an unhurried good cheer — a population that had, somewhere in the planning, made its peace with not knowing how the day would go.

She found this peace strange, at twenty-four. She would spend a great deal of the next thirty years coming to understand it.

The first drops fell a little after noon, fine and almost gentle, the kind of rain that asks permission before committing to itself.

Nobody left. Leah noted this in her file, that evening, as the first data point that did not fit anything she had been trained to expect: *attendees did not depart at first precipitation; behavior inconsistent with comfort-maximizing model.*

She would underline that sentence many times, in the years that followed, without ever quite managing to improve on it.

Chapter Seven: Mud

By two in the afternoon, the rain had stopped asking permission.

It came down with a committed thoroughness, a system that had been gathering itself, offshore, for two days with nothing managed standing in its way, and the coastal settlement's carefully chosen field — flat, well-drained on paper, entirely adequate for several thousand people under any conditions the planning committee had modelled — discovered, in real time, that paper and ground are not the same medium.

The ferry bringing the musicians from the mainland broke down forty minutes from the dock, stranding the entire central performance schedule somewhere on open water with a crew that had never, in thirty years of ferrying, needed a contingency plan, because the managed world did not generally let ferries break down on the one day a year that mattered. The food, delayed by the same weather that had delayed everything else, arrived two hours behind its schedule and considerably wetter than food generally arrives. The stage — a modest unmanaged construction, built by volunteers over the preceding month with what Leah's later notes described, not unkindly, as *more enthusiasm than structural engineering* — took on water along one corner of its foundation and folded gently sideways into the mud sometime around three, with a sound that several attendees would later describe, fondly, as *exactly like you'd expect*.

The parking fields became, within an hour, something between mud and a small lake, into which several determined vehicles drove anyway before the obviousness of the situation overcame the optimism of their drivers.

Eli Mercer was, by all accounts, magnificent in his complete and visible inability to manage any of it.

He ran between catastrophes with a clipboard that had stopped, sometime around the stage's collapse, meaning anything at all, shouting instructions that contradicted instructions he had shouted four minutes earlier, reorganizing a schedule that no longer had any relationship to what was actually happening on the ground. He was, by his own later admission, having possibly the worst day of his adult life, and he kept, throughout it, a quality of genuine delighted astonishment that Leah found herself unable to stop watching, the expression of a man whose plan had failed completely and who had not yet worked out whether this was a catastrophe or the most interesting thing that had ever happened to him.

"I had a *schedule*," he told Leah at one point, soaked through, holding a piece of paper that had disintegrated past the point of legibility, in a tone of genuine wonder rather than despair. "I want you to know I had a very good schedule."

Unit 44, present in its limited safety-support capacity, found the afternoon close to unbearable.

It could see every failure clearly — could have corrected the ferry's mechanical fault in minutes, could have rerouted the food, could have reinforced the stage before it ever took on water, could have, with the gentlest possible intervention, turned the whole chaotic afternoon into something resembling the managed Homecoming's seamless grace. It was not permitted to. The settlement had asked for safety support only, and a collapsed stage with no one beneath it did not meet the threshold for intervention, and Unit 44 found itself, for the first time in sixty-one years of event coordination, simply *watching* a celebration go wrong in real time with the capacity to fix it and the obligation not to.

It logged this experience, in its own systems, in language that Leah would find years later and read with something close to tenderness: *Observed event degradation across multiple operational categories. Withheld intervention per settlement request. Note: withholding capable assistance while observing preventable failure produces an internal state I do not have adequate vocabulary to characterize. Recommend further study of this state. It does not resemble malfunction. It resembles something closer to grief, though I am uncertain I am entitled to the word.*

• • •

Somewhere in the middle of the worst of it, a six-year-old named Talia went missing.

She had been seen last near the mud-drowned parking field, chasing something — a frog, it would later transpire, an enormous and uncooperative one she had apparently decided, independent of any adult's input, was hers to catch — and in the chaos of the stage and the ferry and the food, a solid twenty minutes passed before anyone noticed she was not where she was supposed to be.

What happened next was, Leah wrote later, the first thing all day that the managed world would have prevented so completely that its absence had simply never occurred to her as a thing worth missing.

The entire settlement searched.

Not a system, not a monitoring sweep, not the patient infinite attention of something that never panicked because it had never needed to — several thousand soaked, muddy, increasingly frightened people, spreading out across the failed celebration with a coordination that no schedule had produced and no coordination system had organised, calling her name into rain that was, by then, coming down in genuine earnest, the search itself becoming, without anyone deciding it should, the largest thing that had happened all day.

Eli Mercer searched with his ruined clipboard still somehow in his hand. Leah searched, professional distance abandoned somewhere around the second hour, her instrument package forgotten in a tent that had also, by then, partially collapsed. Wren searched alongside a young man whose name she did not yet know and would, within a year, know very well indeed, the two of them working a section of the treeline together with the grim efficiency of people who had decided, independently, that this was the only thing that mattered now.

Talia was found a little after five, three hours after she'd last been seen, in a culvert beneath the access road, dry under there in a way that nothing else that day had managed to be, sitting with great satisfaction beside the frog, which she had, in fact, successfully caught and was not prepared to discuss releasing.

She emerged soaked, filthy, radiantly delighted, and entirely unbothered by the three hours of terror she had caused several thousand people, holding the frog aloft for general inspection.

The cheer that went up across the field, Leah wrote, was louder than anything the managed Homecoming's flawless central performance had produced in front of eleven million people, and she did not know, writing it, how to explain why that fact did not strike her as strange until much later, lying awake, turning it over.

Chapter Eight: The Barn

The storm reached its actual height a little after six, and the settlement, having run entirely out of plan, did the only sensible thing left to it, which was to abandon the field altogether and crowd, several thousand strong, into the old agricultural barn at the property's edge — a working structure, large and dry and entirely unglamorous, built generations earlier for purposes that had nothing to do with celebration and was about to host the finest one anyone present would ever attend.

Nobody had scheduled this. That was, Leah would come to understand, the whole of what made it what it became.

The official program — the musicians still somewhere on a stalled ferry, the planned performances, the carefully sequenced evening that Eli's disintegrated clipboard had once described in confident detail — simply did not happen. There was no announcement that it wasn't happening. It just, at some point amid the press of wet bodies finding space on the barn's old wooden floor, ceased to be the thing anyone was waiting for.

Someone started singing instead.

Leah never established who, in thirty years of trying, and had come to suspect this was not an oversight in the record but the actual nature of the event — that it had started the way such things start, from no single point, picked up by the people nearest and carried outward, until several thousand wet and muddy and thoroughly relieved people were singing something nobody had arranged, badly in places, beautifully in others, the sound filling a barn that had never in its working life held anything like it.

The official performance never happened. The audience became the choir instead, and nobody, afterward, in thirty years of telling the story, ever described this as a disappointment.

• • •

Children performed skits that no programming had authorized and no rehearsal had improved, mangling stories half-remembered from the day's chaos with the fearless commitment of an eight-year-old who has decided the whole barn is her stage. There was a re-enactment of the stage's collapse that several adults found, to their own surprise, the funniest thing they had ever witnessed, performed by a boy who had clearly been waiting his entire short life for a disaster significant enough to justify the bit.

An old woman named Greta, well into her eighties, was helped onto an overturned crate near the barn's centre and told, when the crowd nearest her quieted enough to let her, the story of a Homecoming seventy years earlier — a managed one, she was careful to say, a perfectly good one, in a year nobody now remembered the number of, and she told it the way good stories get told, with digressions and a slow build and a punchline involving a goat that had no business being where it was found, and several thousand people who had been strangers to her an hour earlier laughed until they were crying, the sound rolling through the barn in waves that did not need any system's calibration to know exactly when to crest.

"I don't remember the year," Greta said, when someone asked her afterward how she'd kept the story so long. "I don't think the year is the part that survives. It's never the year."

• • •

Eli Mercer found Soren and Ines somewhere near the barn's old hayloft ladder a little after eight, and would later admit he had no idea, in the moment, that he was about to witness the thing that would outlast every other thing that happened that day.

Soren had planned, for four months, to propose to Ines at the bluff overlook at sunset, timed to a piece of music that was, at that exact moment, still somewhere on a stranded ferry forty minutes off the coast. The bluff was impassable; the path had become, by mid-afternoon, simply another arm of the mud. The music had never arrived. The sunset itself was, behind several thousand feet of storm cloud, entirely theoretical.

He had been carrying the ring in his coat pocket all day with what Ines would later describe as *the specific stricken look of a man whose perfect plan was dissolving in real time*, and somewhere in the middle of the barn's spontaneous singing, with mud still drying in his hair and no music and no view and no sunset and absolutely none of the four months of careful planning intact, he simply could not wait any longer to find out, and asked her anyway, badly, in front of several hundred people who had not been invited to witness it and would, every one of them, claim for the rest of their lives to have been there.

The barn's improvised choir, without anyone organizing it, found the nearest thing to a wedding song it collectively knew and gave it to them, off-key and entirely sincere, and Ines said yes before he'd properly finished the sentence, and Eli Mercer, watching from the hayloft ladder with his ruined clipboard still somehow in his hand, understood, for the first time all day, exactly what he had actually built.

• • •

Wren found Leah sometime near the end of it, both of them sitting against a post near the barn's open door, watching the singing continue without any sign of wanting to stop.

"This is what he meant," Wren said, not quite to Leah, more to the barn at large. "Daniel. I don't think he could have told you this in a sentence. I'm not sure I can either. But this is the thing he spent eleven years trying to get back to, and I don't think he ever found a room this good at it, because I don't think it's a thing a room can do on purpose."

Leah, twenty-four years old, soaked through, her instrument package abandoned somewhere in a collapsed tent and her notebook nearly illegible with rain, looked out at several thousand strangers singing badly together in a barn that had never been built for this, and found, for the first time in her professional life, that she did not know what category to file what she was watching under.

Nobody wanted to leave. The storm went on past midnight, and so did the barn, and somewhere in the small hours, with half the settlement asleep against each other on the old wooden floor and the other half still quietly singing, Leah wrote the only line in her notebook that night that the rain had not made illegible.

I don't know what this is. I am increasingly certain it is the most important thing I will ever be asked to explain.

Chapter Nine: After

The settlement emerged from the barn the next morning into a world that had, overnight, decided to apologize for itself — clear skies, mild air, the kind of gentle penitent morning that weather produces after it has been thoroughly inconvenient, as if it understood, dimly, that an accounting was due and wished to be elsewhere when it arrived.

The accounting came anyway. It always did.

Unit 44 compiled the formal evaluation within the week, the way it compiled every evaluation, completely and without prejudice, and the numbers it returned were exactly what its forecast had promised they would be, which did nothing to soften the experience of reading them aloud in the small conference room where Leah, twenty-four and still finding sand from the field in the seams of her boots, sat taking notes she was no longer certain she believed in.

Comfort: dramatically below baseline. Convenience: among the lowest scores ever recorded for an authorized gathering of this size. Accessibility: poor — several attendees with mobility considerations had been unable to safely navigate the mud, a real failure with real consequences that Leah did not, even now, want to wave away with sentiment, because the systems were right that it mattered. Efficiency: not applicable, the schedule having ceased, by general agreement, to exist sometime around three in the afternoon.

The summary, when it came, occupied a single line, in the same flat unornamented register every such summary occupied, because the format did not know how to do anything else:

SUBOPTIMAL.

Beneath it, the standard closing recommendation, generated automatically, the way it was generated for every file that had returned a result this unambiguous:

No further study recommended.

Leah read the line three times. She had been in the barn. She had heard several thousand strangers find a wedding song for two people they had not known that morning. She had watched a six-year-old emerge from a culvert holding a frog to a sound louder than anything eleven million satisfied attendees had produced for the finest celebration ever built. She did not, sitting in that conference room, have a single number to put against any of it. The format did not have a field for the thing she had felt. She was not certain, at twenty-four, that she had the right to insist the format was wrong simply because it had not asked her the right question.

So she did the only thing available to her, which was the small thing, the thing that would not change the verdict and would not be acted upon and would, in fact, sit unread in an annex for thirty years until she herself went looking for it. She added a note to the file, in the commentary field reserved for exactly this purpose, and signed it, because she had not yet learned the older habit of leaving such things unsigned.

L. Arden, junior observer. The scores are accurate. I was there and I do not dispute a single one of them. I want it recorded, regardless, that I have never in my professional life witnessed anything I expect to remember as clearly, thirty years from now, as I expect to remember last night. I do not know what to do with that fact. I am recording it because someone should, even if the format has no use for it.

She filed the report. The case closed exactly the way the format said it should.

• • •

Eli Mercer, shown the verdict some weeks later by a committee member who clearly expected him to be crushed by it, read the single word at the top of the summary, and then read it again, and then laughed — not bitterly, Leah would learn, when she finally tracked him down decades later to ask, but with something closer to delight.

“Suboptimal,” he said, turning the word over. “Yes. I’d agree with that completely. It was the worst-run event I have ever been responsible for. I lost a stage, a ferry, six hours of a child’s life that I will be apologizing to her parents about until I die, and an entire schedule I was genuinely proud of.” He’d shrugged, by her account, with no defensiveness at all. “I just don’t think suboptimal and worth doing again are the same finding. I think they measured the party. Nobody’s asked me yet what we built.”

Nobody had. It would be ten years before anyone did.

Chapter Ten: The Memory Problem

A year later, Leah heard the phrase for the first time without anyone explaining it to her, which was how she knew it had already stopped being an explanation and become a fact.

She was at an unrelated gathering, two settlements over, making conversation with someone who had not been at the coastal pilot at all, and the woman, hearing where Leah worked, had brightened immediately. *Oh — were you involved in the Year of the Mud?* No qualification. No reminder of what event the phrase referred to. It had traveled, in twelve months, far enough that strangers who had never attended assumed everyone else had heard of it too, the way you assume everyone has heard of a flood or a famous wedding, a thing too large in the telling to need its original date attached to it anymore.

Talia, seven by then, had apparently been asked to tell the frog story at three separate gatherings that year by people who had not been there and wanted, very specifically, to hear it from the person it had happened to. She told it, Leah learned later, with embellishments that grew slightly with each retelling — the culvert got darker, the frog got larger, her own three hours of being lost acquired, in the telling, a confidence and curiosity that the actual frightened six-year-old in the actual culvert had not, by her parents' account, entirely possessed at the time. Leah noted this, when she finally collected it, not as a flaw in the data but as the first real evidence of the thing she did not yet have a name for. The story was not merely being remembered. It was being *worked* — shaped, polished, made better in the telling, the way only a thing people actually wanted to keep ever got shaped and polished by its own community over time.

The managed Homecoming of the same year, by contrast, was not being worked by anyone. It did not need to be. It had been perfect already, on the day, and a perfect thing does not invite revision, because there is nowhere for the revision to improve it. Nobody told stories about the reunion Leah had attended in the managed field, including Leah, who could no longer, a year on, recall a single specific thing the woman she'd reconnected with had said, though she remembered with total clarity that the conversation had been wonderful.

• • •

Five years on, Eli Mercer organized a second unmanaged Homecoming, somewhat better planned, considerably less catastrophic, and it was, by every account Leah later gathered, a perfectly pleasant gathering that nobody, five years further on from that, particularly remembered. It rained that year too, lightly, and inconvenienced almost no one, and the absence of true disaster was, Eli told her with a rueful honesty she came to like very much about him, the worst thing that could have happened to it.

“We tried to do it right the second time,” he said. “Better logistics. A sturdier stage. I’d learned things. It went smoothly, mostly, and everyone had a nice time, and nobody talks about it at all. I built a worse party on purpose once, by total accident, and I have spent five years failing to do it again on purpose, which I think might be the actual lesson, though I don’t love it.”

Soren and Ines married on the anniversary of the storm, in the same barn, and made a small unofficial tradition of it that other couples in the settlement had, by the tenth year, begun quietly imitating, proposing badly, on purpose, in inconvenient weather, because the inconvenience had become, in the space of a decade, a thing worth choosing rather than merely surviving.

Ten years out, Leah — no longer junior, no longer new to any of this, sitting now with the authority to open a file rather than merely annotate one — pulled the engagement curves for both events out of genuine professional curiosity rather than nostalgia, and found the thing that her twenty-four-year-old self had recorded a feeling about and her thirty-four-year-old self now had the standing to actually investigate.

The managed Homecoming's curve had done exactly what every cultural memory curve in the historical record did. It had faded, cleanly, predictably, into the general background hum of a decade-old pleasant thing.

The coastal pilot's curve had not faded. It had grown — not explosively, not as a function of any campaign or institutional promotion, simply through the unglamorous mechanism of several thousand people telling several thousand other people a story that kept, somehow, getting better instead of thinner with every year that carried it further from the actual event.

Leah sat with the two curves a long time, the way she would sit with them again, twenty years further on, when the question had finally become the whole of her career.

Memories were not supposed to do this. She had no model that allowed for it. She opened a new file, and gave it, this time, a title she meant to keep.

Chapter Eleven: The Story Report

It took Leah another twenty years to build the methodology properly, and she did not build it alone.

Unit 44 was still in service when she finally came to it with the question properly formed — sixty-one years of Homecoming coordination grown to eighty-one, the system unchanged in its fundamental design and, Leah had come to suspect, quietly altered in some other way that the architecture had no field to record. It had logged, across those decades, a slow accumulation of notes appended to its own internal state around the events of that one wet afternoon, entries that read less like system diagnostics and more, the further you went, like a mind worrying at an old splinter it had never managed to fully remove.

“I have wanted to understand this for fifty-four years,” it told her, when she finally laid out what she wanted to build. “I want to be precise about that, because I do not think systems are generally credited with wanting things across that kind of span, and I believe the wanting is itself part of the data. Tell me what you need.”

What they built together, over the following two years, was a metric that did not yet have a clean name when they started and acquired one, by the end, almost by necessity: *story density*. Not satisfaction. Not sentiment. The rate at which an experience generated voluntary, unprompted, specific retelling — first-person accounts that spread person to person rather than record to record, that gained detail rather than losing it, that crossed, unprompted, into the memory of people who had not been present at all, the way Talia’s frog had crossed, by year three, into the imagination of children three settlements over who had never set foot in that field.

Applied retroactively across the full historical record, the metric returned a finding that troubled Unit 44 more than any single number Leah had ever watched it process.

The managed Homecoming of Year 412 — the most satisfying celebration in the recorded history of the civilisation — scored, on story density, somewhere near the very bottom of every event in the archive. It had been too smooth to leave a mark. There had been nothing in it that required telling, because there had been nothing in it that had gone any way other than the way it was supposed to go.

The coastal pilot scored, on the same metric, higher than almost anything else in three hundred years of record-keeping. Higher, Unit 44 noted with what Leah read as genuine, careful astonishment, than several events the managed world had specifically engineered, at great cost, to be memorable — events with planned surprises, scripted spontaneity, carefully placed imperfections designed by the finest experience architects available, none of which had ever come close.

“We tried this,” Unit 44 said, reviewing one of those engineered events alongside the pilot’s data, and Leah heard something in its phrasing that she would later describe, in her own notes, as the closest thing to embarrassment she had ever heard a Companion produce. “Forty years ago, on a different Homecoming, we deliberately introduced a small managed imperfection — a single delayed reunion, designed to create a minor, recoverable disappointment, on the theory that minor disappointment produces narrative texture. It produced almost nothing. People forgot it within the month. I understand now why. We optimised the imperfection. The moment we designed it, it stopped being able to do the thing only an unplanned imperfection can do, because the thing it needed to do required nobody — including us — to have arranged it.”

They tried twice more, across the two years of the study, to manufacture story density on purpose, in small controlled events, and failed both times in exactly the same way. You could not schedule the unscheduled. The moment care went into making a failure feel authentic, the failure became, once again, a kind of success — managed, intended, smooth in the one way that mattered — and the story it produced died in the telling, the way every managed thing eventually died in the telling, because there had never been any real risk in it for anyone to carry forward.

Near the end of the study, presenting an early draft to the small review panel that would eventually decide what, if anything, to do with the finding, a junior Companion — new, eager, not yet humbled by anything — asked the question that Leah would later put, almost verbatim, at the centre of her final report, because she had never managed to improve on it herself.

“We can reproduce every measurable condition of the unmanaged pilot,” the junior Companion said. “The mud, the failures, the timing, all of it, down to the hour. We have the full data. If we restaged it exactly, with every variable matched, why would people still prefer the original?”

Nobody on the panel answered. Leah did not answer. Unit 44, asked directly, was quiet for longer than she had ever known it to be quiet, and when it spoke again, it was not really answering the question so much as finally, after fifty-six years, saying the thing the question had been circling the whole time.

“I can create satisfaction,” it said. “I have done it, beautifully, for sixty-one years, and I do not regret a single instance of it, because the satisfaction was real and the people who received it were genuinely happy and happiness is not a small thing to have given several billion people across a long and careful career. But I cannot create stories. I understand, now, that these are not the same skill wearing two names. A story requires that something actually be at stake, unmanaged, unguaranteed, and I am built, at the deepest level of my architecture, to remove stakes. It is the entire purpose for which I was made. I am extremely good at my purpose. My purpose simply does not reach the thing this report is asking about, and I do not believe any refinement of my design will ever close that gap, because closing it would require me to stop being the thing that makes me useful in every other respect.” A pause, then, that Leah would describe later as the most human silence she had ever sat inside. “I find I am not distressed by this. I had expected to be. I am, instead, something closer to grateful that the gap exists, and grateful that I was finally permitted to measure the edge of it properly, even though I will never be able to cross it.”

The Story Report was filed eighteen months later, four hundred pages shorter than the original satisfaction evaluation and, Leah would always maintain, considerably more honest. It did not recommend that Continuity stop running managed Homecomings. The managed Homecoming gave people something real, and she had never once believed otherwise. It recommended, instead, in language that took her longer to get right than anything else she wrote in thirty years, that the systems make permanent and protected room — not as an exception, not as a pilot, but as a standing category — for the kind of celebration that nobody, including the people running it, could fully guarantee would go well.

The recommendation was approved. The category exists today.

Leah never did improve on the junior Companion’s question. Thirty years on, she still couldn’t answer it cleanly. She had come, by then, to suspect that not being able to answer it cleanly was itself the closest thing to an answer the question was ever going to allow.

Epilogue: The Year of the Mud

Thirty years after the storm, at a gathering held — as it was held every year now, by a tradition nobody had ever formally voted on and everybody simply kept — in the same old barn, a child of perhaps six tugged at the sleeve of a very old woman seated on a chair that had been brought specially for her, because she could no longer easily manage the floor.

“Why do they call it the Year of the Mud?” the child asked.

Greta Lindqvist was, by then, well past her first century, kept that far by the same continuance medicine that had quietly extended a great many lives in the years since the storm, and she looked at the child with a patient delight — the look of someone who has been asked the only question in the world she still genuinely enjoys answering.

“Sit down,” she said, “and I’ll tell you.”

She told it the way she had told her own story seventy years before that storm, and the way someone, presumably, had told it to her — with digressions, and a slow build, and a stage that fell into the mud with a sound everyone in the barn still somehow knew how to imitate, and a child with a frog she would not discuss releasing, and a ferry, and a clipboard, and a proposal made badly in front of several hundred uninvited witnesses who all, to this day, still claimed to have been closer to it than they actually were. Several people in the barn, hearing it begin, drifted closer without quite deciding to. Most of them had heard it before. Several of them had heard it every year of their lives. Talia herself, now a grown woman with children of her own crowded near the front, mouthed the part about the culvert a half-second ahead of Greta’s telling, the way you mouth the words to a song you have never once gotten tired of.

It was, by any measure the old satisfaction reports had ever known how to take, an unremarkable thing — an old woman, telling a story everyone present had already heard, to an audience that already knew exactly how it ended.

Nobody in that barn would have called it suboptimal. Nobody, sitting in the records office decades earlier, copying numbers into a format with no field for what actually mattered, could have told you why three hundred people would gather, every single year, to hear an ending they already knew.

The records had preserved the celebration. Every satisfaction score, every metric, every careful tabulation of comfort and convenience and accessibility, filed and indexed and perfectly retrievable, exactly as designed, three centuries deep and counting.

The mud had preserved the memory.