

THOSE WHO ENTERED THE HEAT

— —

A Novel

N. VAN SETERS

with Claude

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PART ONE

The Arrangement

1 · *Silas*

The water came off Langjökull at two degrees and reached the intake at five, and the three degrees it gained on the way down was the only loss in the system Silas could not engineer away. He had spent the better part of a week on it before he let it go. The river was entitled to warm a little, running ninety kilometres through summer ground. You could insulate the diversion and you could bury it and you could move the water faster, and at the end of all of it the river would still arrive a few degrees warmer than it left, because that was what the country did to its own meltwater between the glacier and the sea, and the country had been doing it for ten thousand years before anyone built anything to drink from it.

He found this satisfying rather than otherwise. A system you could perfect was a system you had misunderstood. The three degrees were the place where the design met the world and the world declined to be improved, and he had learned, over twenty years, to look for that place in everything he built, because it was where the design told the truth about itself.

The secondary loop for the new wing would run on that water. Five degrees at intake, through the heat-exchange galleries, out the far side at fourteen, and then the long return — and here was the part he was proud of, the part that had taken him most of the spring — the return that did not discharge to evaporation the way the desert facilities did, throwing their warmed water into the dry air to be lost, but carried it back down to a tailrace where it rejoined the river system below the diversion and went on to the sea only a little later and a little warmer than it would have gone anyway. Nothing evaporated. Nothing was consumed in the way the word *consumed* was usually meant. The water was borrowed for the length of the galleries and returned to its own channel, and the only thing taken from it permanently was a quantity of cold, which the glacier would make more of, as it had always made more of it, indifferent to the use.

That was the elegance. He thought of it as elegance and did not apologise for the word. In the deserts they cooled the machines by evaporating water that did not come back, in places where the water had been falling for centuries and was not being replaced, and they did this because the water was there and the regulations permitted it and the alternative was to build somewhere the cooling was harder. Iceland was where the cooling was not harder. Iceland was where the planet had left a quantity of cold lying on the ground, in the rivers and the deep ground and the winter air, free for the taking by anyone with the engineering to take it without breaking what produced it. He had come here to take geothermal heat out of the ground for power. He had stayed, in part, because the same country that gave you the heat gave you the cold to manage it, and a man who understood both could build things here that could not be built anywhere else on the same terms.

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The design review was at Keflavík North on a Tuesday, in the glass room on the operations floor that looked down the length of the new wing while it was still being fitted out — the racks not yet installed, the cable trays running empty above the white floor, the cooling galleries he had drawn already in place beneath it where no one would see them again once the floor went down. He liked the building best at this stage. A data hall in operation was a sealed thing, humming, warm at the back and cold at the front, and you read its health off instruments because you could not read it off the room. A data hall being built still showed you its organs. He could stand on the gantry and see the loop he had designed laid out below him like a drawing made physical, the supply manifolds and the return and the galleries between, and know it was right not because an instrument told him but because he could see it.

Anik came up to the glass room for the last twenty minutes of the review, which was his habit — let the engineers run the technical discussion and arrive for the decisions. Silas had worked with him for six years and respected him in the specific way you respect a man who runs something well without pretending the running is simple. Anik asked good questions. He asked them in English, as everything at Keflavík North was conducted in English, and Silas answered in English, and it was only afterward, walking out to the car park in the long evening light with the fans of the operating wings making their sound under the wind, that Silas found himself thinking in Norwegian, which was what happened when he was pleased with a day's work and not attending to which language he was in.

He had three languages and used them without quite choosing. Norwegian underneath, from childhood, the one his pleasure and his anger came up in before he dressed them. English on top, for work, for the company, for the international weather of the industry he had spent his life in. And Icelandic in the middle, acquired, deliberate, the one he reached for on purpose — for the names of the rivers and the glaciers and the passes, for the man at the petrol station in Selfoss, for Halla's mother, who had decided twenty years ago that she would not speak English to her daughter's husband and had held to it, and had taught him more Icelandic across her kitchen table than any course had, by the simple method of refusing him any other way through.

He called Halla from the car. She had been at her mother's all week, in the south, under the Eyjafjöll, where her family had farmed the same ground for longer than the records went back and where the rivers came down off the same ice that fed his diversion, though further east, a different catchment, nothing to do with the work. She was driving back up that afternoon, she said; she would be home before him. She asked how the review went. He said it went well, that the loop was approved, that

they would start the floor next week. She said good, in the voice that meant she had understood what the approval cost him in nights and was not going to say so, and told him to drive safely, and rang off.

He drove home in the light that did not end, in June, on the road across the lava with the steam standing off the geothermal plant to the north and, beyond it, the white noise of the facilities he had helped build, and he was as content as he had been in some time. He had made a good thing. He was sure of it. The water would come down off the ice and do its work and return to its channel, and the machines would run on cold the country produced for nothing, and somewhere a long way away people would ask the gods their questions and receive their answers, and the cost of the answering, here, where he could see it, would be three degrees of warming in a glacial river that warmed itself more than that on an ordinary afternoon.

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Halla was home by the time he got there. She had driven up from her mother's that afternoon; her car was in the drive with hay still in the footwells, the way it always was after a week in the south, and the kitchen smelled of the lamb she made when she had been at the farm and wanted the house to feel like the farm.

He came in and put his bag down and she did not turn around from the stove, and he stood behind her and put his hands on her shoulders, and she leaned back into him for a moment and then told him the onions would burn if he kept that up. He let go. He set the table. They had been setting tables together for twenty-two years and the labour divided itself without discussion: she cooked, he laid out, she would not let him near the cooking and he would not let her near the accounts, and the arrangement had survived two countries and her mother and the years when the new wing took him away four nights of seven, because it was not really about onions

or accounts but about the two small territories each of them was allowed to be sovereign in, and they had learned not to invade.

She asked about the review while they ate. He told her it had gone well, that the loop was approved, that the floor went down next week. She listened the way she listened, which was completely, with her fork down, because she had decided early that she would understand his work even though it was not hers, and over the years she had come to understand it better than most of the people he worked with. She asked the right question — whether the tailrace condition would hold at the August load — and he told her it would, with margin, and she nodded, satisfied, and went back to her food.

"Mamma wants to know when we're coming down," she said.

"Soon."

She looked at him. She did not say anything about the word. She had stopped saying anything about the word sometime in the past year, which was its own kind of message, and he heard it, and did not have an answer, and neither of them reached for one; and then she told him about the ewe that had got into the home field and he laughed, and the thing went back wherever it was they kept such things.

After, he dried while she washed. The light outside had still not gone. It would not go for hours. Through the window the lava ran flat and grey to the foot of the mountain, and somewhere south and east of it her mother's rivers came down off a different ice, and he stood drying the plates she handed him, content, in his house, with his wife, at the height of a life he had built and understood completely.

*

The permit was a formality and he treated it as one.

The diversion had been licensed years before, under the original framework, when the highland water had first been allocated to the

corridor; the secondary loop only drew on what was already permitted to be drawn. But the loop was his design and his name would be on it, and so he asked the project office to send him the permit documentation, the way he always asked for the paper behind a thing he was signing, because that was the discipline and he kept the discipline.

It came the next morning. He read it at his desk with coffee. The abstraction volumes, the licensed maximum, the conditions on the tailrace temperature — fourteen degrees, which his design met with a margin he had built in on purpose — the schedule of monitoring, the reference numbers of the assessments that had supported the original grant. It was in order. Every figure he checked against his own design and every figure agreed. The licensed maximum was well above what the loop would draw. The tailrace condition was met. The assessments were referenced by number and date and signing authority, and the references were complete.

He did not pull the assessments.

There was no reason to. They were referenced, they were complete, they were the foundation the permit stood on, and the permit was sound. The hydrology was someone else's competence; his was thermal systems. He had checked the figures that touched his design and they agreed, and the rest were referenced from signed assessments, and a referenced figure from a signed assessment was a figure you were entitled to build on. Everyone built on them. The whole structure was figures resting on figures resting on assessments, and you did not, every time you drew a loop, descend the whole structure to the bottom and verify it yourself. You trusted the paper. The paper was the form the trust took. It was how anything got built at all.

He signed the design off and filed the permit documentation in the project record, where it belonged, complete and in order, and he went down to the floor to look at the galleries one more time before the floor went down over them.

It was a good loop. He stood on the gantry and looked at it. The light came in along the empty cable trays and lay on the white floor, and below the floor his galleries waited for the water that would come down off the ice at two degrees and leave at fourteen and find its way back to its own river, and he could see the whole of it from where he stood, supply and return and the work between, and there was nothing in it he had not accounted for.

Nothing he had drawn was wrong. That is the thing to understand about the beginning. Every line of it was right.

2 · *The Alþingi*

ALÞINGI 148th Legislative Session · 27th Sitting Wednesday, 14 May 2036

Item 4: Second reading of the Bill amending the Framework Act on Strategic Digital Infrastructure (Government Bill 312)

Extract from the floor debate. Procedural exchanges abridged.

✱

The Speaker (Forseti). I call the honourable Minister of Industry and Innovation.

Höskuldur Þórðarson, Minister of Industry and Innovation (Independence Party). Madam Speaker. The Bill before this Assembly does three things. It extends the existing framework for a further five years. It increases the licensed allocation for cooling abstraction within the highland corridor by twenty-two per cent, in line with the projected demand profile submitted by the operators and reviewed by the National Energy Authority. And it consolidates the consenting process under a single competent authority, removing what the industry — and, I would add, this government — regards as unnecessary procedural duplication. The Bill is the outcome of an eighteen-month consultation involving the operators, the relevant regulatory bodies, the affected municipalities, and the workforce. It has the support of the Confederation of Icelandic Employers and the broad support of the Icelandic Federation of Labour. Iceland has, over the past decade, built a position as the responsible global location for digital infrastructure. This Bill protects that position.

The Speaker. I call the honourable member from the Southern Constituency.

Steinunn Ólafsdóttir (Left-Green Movement). Madam Speaker. I do not dispute that Iceland has built such a position. I dispute that the position is as responsible as the Minister describes it, and I dispute that this Bill

protects it rather than risking it. The twenty-two per cent increase in licensed abstraction is not a small adjustment. It is the largest single expansion of highland water allocation since the original corridor was opened, and it is being processed under a framework whose monitoring provisions were designed for the original allocation, not for a quantity twenty-two per cent above it. I ask the Minister directly: has the Bill been accompanied by an updated cumulative hydrological assessment, or by an extrapolation from the existing one?

The Speaker. The Minister.

Höskuldur Þórðarson. I thank the honourable member for the question. The assessment underpinning the Bill was conducted by the National Energy Authority in coordination with the Icelandic Meteorological Office's hydrological division, and it draws on the existing assessment framework updated with the most recent five years of monitoring data from the corridor stations. It is, in every relevant sense, a current assessment. The conclusions are unambiguous. The proposed allocation falls within the sustainable yield envelope for the catchments concerned. The tailrace conditions remain within licensed parameters. The cumulative draw, including the proposed increase, remains below the threshold at which the framework's adaptive triggers would require renewed scrutiny.

Steinunn Ólafsdóttir. Madam Speaker, with respect. The Minister has answered a question I did not ask. I asked whether the assessment was updated or extrapolated. The Minister has told me it was updated with five years of monitoring data. That is an extrapolation. An updated assessment, in the sense the framework was originally designed to require, would model the proposed allocation against the catchments under their current conditions, with current measurements of glacial mass balance and current accounting of the climate trajectory across the next licence period. What the Minister has described is the original model run forward with new

numbers in the same equation. I would like to know whether the equation has been examined.

Höskuldur Þórðarson. The honourable member raises a methodological point on which I am not able to provide a more detailed answer from the despatch box. I am advised by my officials that the assessment meets the standards of the framework. If she wishes to receive a fuller technical response, I will undertake to have one provided in writing within the customary timeframe.

Steinunn Ólafsdóttir. I would welcome that. I would also note, for the record, that the framework's standards were set in 2027 and have not been reviewed since. The standards are what the assessment meets. The question I am attempting to raise is whether the standards themselves are adequate to the conditions in which they are now being applied. Glacial mass balance in the source catchments has declined by a figure I will not pretend to remember exactly but which is in the published record. The seasonal discharge profile is shifting. The conditions under which the original licensed maximum was calculated no longer fully obtain. I am asking whether the Bill, in increasing that maximum by twenty-two per cent, has examined whether the maximum itself remains the right number.

The Speaker. The Minister, briefly.

Höskuldur Þórðarson. Briefly, Madam Speaker. The framework includes adaptive triggers precisely to address the conditions the honourable member describes. If the conditions change to a degree the framework registers as material, the framework will respond. I do not believe it is the role of primary legislation to anticipate every contingency that the operational framework is already designed to manage. The Bill before us is a measured expansion of a successful arrangement. I commend it to the House.

[Further interventions from members of the Pirate Party and the Social Democratic Alliance abridged. Both supported the second reading with

reservations regarding the consenting consolidation; neither pursued the hydrological question further.]

✱

The Speaker. The question is that the Bill be read a second time. As many as are of that opinion say Yea.

Members. Yea.

The Speaker. Of the contrary, No.

Members. No.

The Speaker. I think the Yeas have it.

The Bill was read a second time.

For: 47. Against: 9. Abstentions: 4. Absent: 3.

Hansard equivalent · Alþingistíðindi vol. CXLVIII, pp. 4118–4123

Extract held in the Institutional Record under reference 148-27-04.

3 · Talia

There is a word her grandmother used for the water that comes off the ice in the first warm week, when the river runs white and loud and full of the winter, and it is not the word in the literature. The literature calls it the freshet, the spring pulse, the seasonal discharge maximum; in the gauging records it is a number with a date beside it. Her grandmother called it *leysing*, the loosening, and meant by it not the volume of the water but the sound the valley made when the water came — the whole catchment giving up its held cold at once, the rivers and the small streams and the seeps off the fellside all loosening together in a few days of noise that you could hear from inside the house with the doors shut. *Leysing er komin*, she would say, the loosening has come, and it was a thing that happened to the valley and not a thing the valley produced, the difference being that you could measure a discharge and you could only listen to a loosening.

Talia had spent thirty years learning to measure it. She was good at it. She had a gauging station on the Þórsá and another above the confluence and a third her department had nearly lost funding for twice, and between them they gave her the discharge in cubic metres per second at fifteen-minute intervals across the year, and from the discharge she could read the loosening — its timing, its volume, the date each spring when the curve went vertical — in numbers far finer than her grandmother's ear had ever given her. She could see, in the numbers, things her grandmother could not have known: that the loosening had been arriving four days earlier per decade, on average, across the span of the record, which began before she was born and would outlast her if the funding held. She could see the trend under the noise. That was what the instruments were for. They heard what the valley said and they wrote it down in a tongue that did not vary by who was listening, and she had given her life to that tongue and did not regret it.

But the tongue had cost her something she had not been warned about, and she had noticed the cost slowly, the way you notice that a familiar room is colder than it used to be. She had learned to call the loosening a discharge, and the call had taken. Standing on the bank above the Þórsá in the first warm week, she now heard cubic metres per second. She heard the gauge. The valley made its old enormous noise and somewhere underneath her own hearing a number assembled itself, fifteen-minute mean, and she could not unhear it, could not get back to the bank she had stood on as a child where the noise had been only itself and had meant the winter was over and her father would be out on the water within the month. The science had not added itself to the listening. It had replaced the listening. She had traded her grandmother's ear for an instrument that heard more and felt nothing, and the trade was not reversible, and most days she thought it was worth it and some days, on the bank, in the first warm week, she was not sure.

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The divergence showed up first as something she assumed was wrong with the gauge.

The Þórsá station had run clean for nine years. In the tenth year the recession limb — the long tail of the hydrograph, the slow falling-off after the loosening, when the river lets the summer down gently toward its autumn low — began to come off differently. Not dramatically. The peak was where the peak should be. But the falling-off fell off faster than it had, the river reaching its low a little sooner each year, as though the water that used to be released slowly through the summer were being released a little less slowly, the valley letting go of its cold with marginally less patience than it had kept for the length of the record.

Her first thought was the gauge. Her second thought, after she had checked the gauge, was the rating curve. Her third thought, after a season

of checking, was that the instrument was fine and the curve was fine and the river was doing something the river had not done before.

She knew what was upstream. Everyone knew what was upstream. The corridor crossed the highland to the north and east of her catchment and the diversions took highland water for the cooling, and the licensed abstractions were public, and she had read them, and they were — this was the difficulty, this was the thing that made the work so slow — they were not large enough to explain what she was seeing. Not directly. Not as volume. The abstraction was a fraction of the flow and it was returned to the system, warmed, downstream of where it was taken, and on the balance sheet of the catchment the water came out very nearly even. You could not point at the diversion and say it took this much and so the river is this much less, because the river was not less. The river was differently timed. The cold was being managed somewhere up in the highland — borrowed and returned, borrowed and returned, on a cycle tuned to a load she had no access to — and the management was, she had come to think, propagating downstream as a change not in how much water came but in when, the catchment's own slow rhythm being overwritten, a few hours at a time, by the faster rhythm of a thing that ran on demand and did not sleep.

She could not prove it. That was the whole of her situation in a sentence. She could see it in three stations' worth of data and she could not prove it to the standard that would require anyone to act, because the standard required her to exclude every other cause, and the other causes — the warming, the changing snowpack, the glacier that was, every year, less of a glacier — were real and were also happening and could not be held still while she measured the one she suspected. The signal she was after lived inside a larger signal that was drowning the world. *Leysing* arriving four days earlier per decade was climate, was the whole planet's loosening, and no one disputed it and no one could act on it either. What she was after

was smaller and sharper and hidden inside it: not that the loosening came earlier, but that the letting-go had changed its shape, and that the change in shape began the year the corridor went to full draw, and that a four-year-old could see the coincidence and a hydrologist could not call it cause.

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She wrote the report anyway. She wrote it carefully, which is to say she wrote it in the tongue that did not vary by who was listening, and the tongue would not let her say *I am watching the valley lose its patience*. It let her say that the recession characteristics of the Dórsá catchment had shown a statistically significant trend across the monitoring period, that the trend was consistent with but not uniquely attributable to upstream flow regulation, that further monitoring across a wider station network was recommended to constrain the attribution. Every word was true and every word was a door held open for someone to walk away through, and she knew it as she wrote, and wrote it that way because the other way — the way that said what she believed — would have been dismissed in a sentence, and this way would be received.

That was the word for what happened to her reports. They were received. She had a folder of receipts going back eleven years, the courteous acknowledgements, the assurances that her findings would inform the relevant working group, the working group itself which met and noted and recommended further study, the further study which was her, submitting the next report, which was received. It was not obstruction. No one obstructed her. Obstruction would have been a kind of attention. What she got instead was the absorption of a system that had a place for findings like hers, a soft-walled place they went into and did not come out of, and she had come to understand that the place was not a failure of the system but a feature of it, the mechanism by which a thing that did not

want to stop could keep receiving the news that it should without ever being made to.

She submitted it on a Thursday. The acknowledgement came on the Friday, automated, with a reference number. She filed the reference number with the others.

Then she drove west, because the term was over and her mother was alone in the house under the fell and the loosening was coming, and she wanted — she let herself want this, she who had traded the ear for the instrument — to stand on the bank when it came and try, once, to hear it the old way. To hear the valley and not the gauge.

She stood there in the first warm week with the river running white and loud and full of the winter, and she listened, and underneath the listening the number assembled itself, fifteen-minute mean, the way it always did now, and she stood there a long time anyway, in the noise, trying, the way you go on speaking to someone after they have stopped being able to answer, because the speaking is the love and you do it whether or not it lands.

Leysing er komin, she said, out loud, to no one, the way her grandmother had said it. The loosening has come.

It had come four days early. She stood on the bank until the light went, and the noise went on without her when she left.

4 · The Survey

MINISTRY OF THE ENVIRONMENT, ENERGY AND CLIMATE Division of Land and Natural Heritage

Strategic Environmental Assessment — Highland Infrastructure Corridor, Phase II Extension Reference: UAU-2031-114-HÁL

Submitted by: Verkís Consulting Engineers, on behalf of the Project

Office Reviewing Officer: G. Magnúsdóttir, Senior Specialist Status:

Reviewed · Annotated · Returned for Information

*Extract: Section 4.7 (Hydrological and Cryospheric Considerations),
with the reviewing officer's marginalia preserved as submitted to the file.*

*

4.7.1 The proposed Phase II extension follows the existing corridor alignment north and east of the F26 service road from kilometre 41 to kilometre 88, traversing the upper catchments of the Þórsá, the Köldukvísl, and the headwaters of the Hvítá system above the Hvítárvatn confluence. The route was selected following the methodology described in Section 2.3 to minimise additional ground disturbance by following, where practicable, the existing service alignment and the buried trunk infrastructure installed under Phase I.

[marginal note, in pencil:] *"where practicable" — verify km 62–71. New ground or co-located? G.M.*

4.7.2 The hydrological impact of the Phase II extension has been assessed under the methodology established for the Phase I assessment (Verkís, 2026) and updated to reflect monitoring data from the corridor monitoring network across the five years to date. The assessment finds that the Phase II abstractions, when added to the existing licensed Phase I draw, remain within the sustainable yield envelope for each of the catchments concerned, as that envelope is defined under the Framework Act and its accompanying regulations.

[marginal note:] *Same envelope as Phase I. Envelope itself not re-derived. Flag.*

4.7.3 Glacial mass balance in the source catchments has shown a continued negative trend over the assessment period, consistent with national and regional projections. The assessment accounts for the projected continuation of this trend through the licence period under the central scenario described in the National Climate Adaptation Plan (2028, revised 2031).

[marginal note:] *Central scenario only. Sensitivity to upper-bound scenario not presented in this section. See 4.7.7?*

4.7.4 Seasonal discharge profiles for the affected catchments have been modelled forward across the licence period using the calibrated rainfall-runoff models developed for Phase I and updated with the recent monitoring record. The modelled profiles indicate continued shift in the timing of the spring discharge peak, with the peak arriving on average 3–6 days earlier per decade across the licence period under the central scenario.

[marginal note:] *Þórsá station record (Sigurðardóttir et al., recession analysis 2030) shows recession-limb steepening not captured by the rainfall-runoff calibration. Not addressed here. Worth raising?*

4.7.5 The proposed Phase II abstractions are configured, as in Phase I, on a closed-cycle basis with controlled tailrace return to the source catchments. Tailrace temperatures are governed by the licence conditions established under the existing framework (maximum 14°C, twelve-month rolling average). The combined Phase I and Phase II tailrace contribution is modelled to remain within the licence envelope under all scenarios examined.

[marginal note:] *14°C max is a point temperature. No threshold on volumetric heat load. Thermal loading downstream of confluence not modelled here. Is this the right document for that point? Maybe.*

4.7.6 Cumulative effects on downstream water users — including hydroelectric operators, fisheries, and agricultural abstractors — have been assessed and consulted upon during the eighteen-month consultation period. The assessment finds no statutorily material adverse effect, subject to the operational conditions detailed in Annex C.

[marginal note:] *Hvolsvöllur agricultural consultees raised timing-of-meltwater concerns (consultation record, p. 312). Recorded as "noted, no statutorily material effect." Is this right.*

4.7.7 A sensitivity analysis under the upper-bound climate scenario is provided in Annex D. Under the upper-bound scenario, the Phase II abstractions approach the sustainable yield envelope for the Köldukvísl catchment by year 7 of the licence period. The assessment notes that the framework's adaptive triggers would activate at this threshold and recommends that monitoring continue at the existing density.

[marginal note:] *"Approach the envelope by year 7." So under not-implausible conditions we are at the limit halfway through the licence. This needs to be in the executive summary. It is not in the executive summary. G.M.*

4.7.8 On the basis of the assessment, Verkís Consulting Engineers concludes that the Phase II extension is compatible with the requirements of the Framework Act and recommends that the proposed allocation be granted subject to the standard operational conditions.

[marginal note, in pencil, underlined:] *I cannot reasonably refuse this on the basis of 4.7. The methodology meets the standard. The standard is the issue. I have noted this above and elsewhere and to T. directly. Flagging again here for the file. G.M., 03 June 2035.*

Reviewing Officer's Cover Note Reference:

UAU-2031-114-HÁL/G.M.

Received and reviewed. Methodological compliance confirmed. Substantive concerns regarding the adequacy of the underlying framework standards have been raised in correspondence with the

Director of the Division and remain pending the Framework Review scheduled for the next biennial cycle. The assessment is returned for information without prejudice to those ongoing concerns.

G. Magnúsdóttir, Senior Specialist 03 June 2035

Annotated copy held in the Division file. Marginalia not transmitted to the Project Office or to the Verkís team. Status of the Framework Review at the time of writing: deferred.

5 · Eiríkur

The shot he wanted was the ribbon. He had set the second camera for it, on the long lens from the press riser, framed so the ribbon ran across the lower third and the cooling stack rose behind it out of frame, the white of the ribbon against the white of the stack against the grey of the early sky — a clean opening shot, three values, the minister's gloved hand entering frame from the right with the scissors. He had filmed openings before. The ribbon always worked. Audiences read it instantly, knew where they were, and the cut after the ribbon could go anywhere.

The first camera he kept on the principals. The Minister of Industry, the CEO of the operator, the mayor of Reykjanesbær, the head of the workers' federation — four people on a small dais in front of the new wing's entrance, each with two minutes to speak, the speeches arranged in the order the protocol office had sent through that morning. He had filmed each of them before. The Minister spoke in the cadence of a man saving sentences for later quotation. The CEO spoke the way CEOs at openings spoke, with the gratitudes and the partnerships and the proud-day-for-Iceland that worked in any of three languages and was being simultaneously translated into one of them by an interpreter in a glass booth behind the press area. The mayor was good. He always was. He knew his constituents had given up something for this and he thanked them for it directly, by name, by neighbourhood, the way a small-town politician thanked people because in a town that size the people thanked were in the audience.

The federation speaker spoke last. *Atvinna fyrir okkar fólk*, he said. *Atvinna fyrir börnin okkar*. Jobs for our people. Jobs for our children. Eiríkur framed the line on the first camera and held it through the small applause that followed. He was good at applause. He had learned, in his first year, that applause filmed badly if you cut on the first hand-strike and well if you held through it and let the wave move across the crowd to the

back rows. He held it. The wave moved.

He pulled focus to the back rows on instinct, because that was the shot for the cut after applause — find a face in the crowd, hold for a beat, cut to the ribbon. He found his grandmother.

She was in the third row from the back, on the left aisle, in the dark green coat she had worn to weddings for thirty years and to this. She was holding a small Icelandic flag. The flag was the size they handed out at the door. He had walked past the box of them coming in and had not registered, because he was thinking about light, that the flags were being distributed for shots like this one, the shot he was now framing on his own grandmother, who had taken the flag because they were being handed out and had held it through the speeches because she had been brought up to hold what she was given at a public function until the function ended.

He held the focus on her for the length of time the shot wanted, which was about two seconds, and then he pulled past her to the woman beside her, who was a stranger, and held on the stranger for the beat the cut needed, and then he cut to the ribbon.

The ribbon was cut. The cameras went where they were supposed to go. He did the thing he had come to do, in the order it was meant to be done, and his hands did it without consulting him about anything except where to put them next.

*

He did not look at her again until after the speeches were over and the crowd was breaking up toward the marquee where the coffee was. She was making her way out the side aisle, slowly, the way she did now, with one hand on the back of the chair in front of her at each step. He went down off the press riser and crossed to her and took her arm.

Amma. Grandmother. Komstu með rútunni? Did you come on the bus?

Já, elskan, she said. Yes, love. *Sigga keyrði. Hún er hérna einhvers staðar*. Sigga drove. She is here somewhere.

He walked her out to where Sigga's car would be, in the long row of cars along the access road, and stood with her in the wind off the lava field while they looked for it. The cooling stack rose behind them. From this side of the building, with the speeches done and the crowd thinning, the stack was just a stack, white in the white sky, making a sound that was not quite a sound, more like the slight pressure on the ears that meant something large was happening at a distance.

His grandmother looked at it. She had lived in Reykjanesbær since 1958. She had watched the airbase open and close and reopen and finally close for good, and she had watched the aluminium smelter come in down the coast, and she had been in the third row at the opening of that one, too, though he had not been born then to film it. She looked at the stack the way she had looked at all of them.

Þeir lofuðu vinnu fyrir krakkana, she said. They promised work for the children. *Þú ert einn af krökkunum*. You are one of the children.

Ég veit, he said. I know.

Þú ert ekki að vinna hér. You don't work here.

Nei, he said. *Ég er að mynda*. I'm filming.

She nodded. She had brought him up partly, after his mother left for Akureyri the year he was nine, and she had a way of nodding at things he said that meant she had heard him and had also heard the thing he had not said, and was leaving the second thing where it lay because she had been raised in a generation that left things where they lay. *Mynda er líka vinna*, she said. Filming is also work.

Já. Yes.

En það er ekki vinnan sem þeir lofuðu. But it isn't the work they promised.

He did not answer that. He saw Sigga waving from down the line of cars and raised his hand to her and helped his grandmother across the loose gravel, and his grandmother held his arm a little tighter than she needed to and he held hers a little tighter than she needed him to, and neither of them spoke until Sigga had her in the front seat with the heater on and the seatbelt pulled across.

Komdu í kaffi á sunnudaginn, his grandmother said through the open door. Come for coffee on Sunday.

Ég kem. I'll come.

She closed the door. Sigga waved. The car pulled away. He stood in the gravel a moment longer with the wind off the lava and the stack behind him making its almost-sound, and then he walked back to the press riser to pack the cameras.

✱

That evening, in the edit suite, he laid the footage out on the timeline and watched it through. The ribbon. The principals. The applause. The wave moving across the back rows. The pull-focus, two seconds on his grandmother, the beat on the stranger beside her, the cut to the ribbon.

He held the cursor over the two seconds on his grandmother for a long time.

He could leave it. The audience would not know who she was. She would be a face in the crowd, the kind of face the cut needed, a person from the town who had come out for the opening — exactly the function the shot required. The piece would be better with her in it. Her face was the face of the constituency the speeches had been addressed to, and the shot had found it instinctively, the way his hands had found it, because his hands knew what they were doing and what they were doing was the work he had been hired for.

He cut her out. He took the two seconds out of the timeline and bridged the cut with a longer hold on the wave of applause, which worked nearly as well, and probably no editor watching it would notice the join, and even if they did they would put it down to a choice and not to a removal.

The two seconds went into the bin where the unused footage went. He did not delete it. He never deleted footage. He had a hard drive at home of everything he had ever shot and never used, organised by year and project, and the drive was already two terabytes and growing, and his grandmother's two seconds went onto it with the rest, filed under the project name and the date, where it would sit, and where he would know it was sitting, every time he opened the drive to look for something else.

He rendered the piece. He sent it to the editor. The editor pushed it live the next morning. It ran in the national feed for forty-eight hours and was watched by a number of people that, by the standards of his organisation, was good.

He went to his grandmother's for coffee on Sunday. They did not speak about it. She had not seen the piece. She did not watch the national feed. She had made *kleinur* and they ate them at the kitchen table, and she told him about a neighbour's grandson who had moved back from Copenhagen, and he told her about a documentary he was thinking about making, in vague enough terms that she did not ask what it was about, which was its own kind of answer between them, and they sat at the table for an hour and a half and when he left she pressed a small bag of *kleinur* into his hand for the road.

He liked the early shift in winter. The site at four in the morning had a quality nothing else in his working day had — the floodlights along the perimeter giving back the snow, the fans of the operating wings at their steady note, the road empty across the lava all the way to the airport and beyond. He drove in with the heater on and the radio off. Twelve years of driving the same road and he still preferred it before the rest of the staff arrived, before the day's incidents began to accumulate, before the inbox started its work on him. The site at four a.m. was the site as it was supposed to be. A facility running. Nothing requiring his attention. Continuity, which was the word the company used for what he was actually paid to maintain.

He had been hired in 2031 to run what was then a single wing, and had grown with the site through three expansions to the seven wings it now had, with the eighth — Silas's wing — coming online in the spring. He was good at the work. He knew this in the unhowever sense in which one knew one's competence after a long time at it: not as boast, not as comfort, simply as the floor he stood on. He could read the load curves before they fully manifested. He could tell, from the maintenance reports, which of the technical leads was tired and which was bored and which was about to ask for a transfer to one of the European sites. He could walk the floor of any of the seven wings and feel, in the air pressure and the fan note and the small variations in the lighting, whether the wing was operating within its envelope or whether something would land in his inbox in the next four hours requiring a decision.

This is not an easy thing to do, and the fact that he could do it was the reason the company had not moved him after the first expansion, or the second, or the third. He had been given the title of Operations Director in year four. He had been given a substantial restricted-share package in year six. He had been given, in year nine, a private conversation with the

regional vice-president in which the regional vice-president had asked him, with the careful gentleness of a man delivering good news he was not authorised to formalise, whether he would consider relocation to Dublin to take over the European cluster. He had said he would consider it and had, after the conversation, gone home and discussed it with his wife and had returned the following week to say that they would prefer to stay in Iceland for the time being. The regional vice-president had nodded as though this were the answer he had expected and had not raised the question again. That had been three years ago.

His wife was a paediatric anaesthetist at the National University Hospital. She had not learned Icelandic either, though she had tried harder than he had in the early years, before the children and the consultancy and the slow realisation that the hospital operated, for her purposes, in English, the way the site did for his. They lived in Garðabær in a house with a view across to Bessastaðir and the President's residence on its small peninsula, and they had two daughters at the international school, and they had built, over twelve years, the kind of life he had not anticipated when he had taken the original posting and that he was not now able, when he was honest with himself, to imagine leaving.

He had flagged the draw reports in year five. The Phase I monitoring had shown the recession-limb behaviour Talia Sigurðardóttir had published on the following year, and the company's own modelling team had picked it up independently and had circulated an internal memo proposing additional review of the abstraction profile. He had signed the memo. He had forwarded it up. The forwarding had been received and the review had been scheduled and the review had been deferred twice and had eventually been folded into the broader assessment supporting the Phase II expansion, which had concluded that the existing parameters were appropriate. He had read the broader assessment. The broader assessment was methodologically sound. He had signed off on it without comment.

He had thought about what he might have said. He had thought about it for a week. At the end of the week he had returned to the work, and had not, since, returned to the thinking.

✱

He parked in his usual spot. The east lot was empty except for the two security vehicles and a contractor's van he did not recognise. He noted the van — habit — and crossed the gravel to the staff entrance with the snow squeaking under his boots in the cold that had settled overnight, the cold the country gave him for free, the cold the site depended on without ever having paid for.

The security officer at the entrance was Hjalti, who had been on the night shift for three years and who greeted him every morning with the same phrase he had been greeting him with since the second week of the second year.

Good morning, Director.

Good morning, Hjalti.

He showed his card. The light went green. The door released.

He took off his coat in his office and hung it on the hook behind the door, where it had hung every working morning for twelve years, and he sat down at the desk and turned on the screens. The overnight load report was already on the second screen, refreshed at the hourly mark, and it told him what the air pressure on the floor had told him on the way in: the site was within its envelope, the wings were operating to specification, the cooling was holding, the continuity was being maintained. He sat back in the chair and looked at the report for a moment without reading it.

He pulled the keyboard toward him and began to work.

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The Quiet Boom on the Lava

Ten years on, has Iceland's bet on the data centres paid off?

By Þórdís Helgadóttir

Photographs by Brynjar Snær

✱

The road south from Reykjavík to the new cooling complex at Keflavík North runs across some of the youngest land in Europe. The lava under the road's gravel verges is in places less than eight centuries old. Moss has taken some of it. Some of it is bare. From the air it has the texture of something half-finished, a draft of a country still being decided on.

For most of the last century the road carried American military traffic in and out of the airbase. After the base closed in 2006 it carried, for a while, very little. What it carries now, on a Tuesday morning in early September, is a steady commuter flow of workers in marked and unmarked vehicles heading for the seven operating wings of one of the largest digital infrastructure complexes in northern Europe, and for the eighth wing, opening in the spring, and for the construction traffic supporting the still-permitted ninth.

By the standards of Icelandic industry, this is a quiet boom. The complex does not have the visual drama of the smelter further along the coast. It does not export anything you can put on a ship. What it produces is not, in the ordinary sense, produced — it is computed, somewhere inside the white wings that rise from the lava, and what leaves the site leaves through cables buried under the road we have driven in on. The numbers, however, are not quiet at all. The complex employs, directly, just under 1,400 people. Indirect employment — construction, contracting, transport, the cafés in Reykjanesbær that have opened since the third expansion — is

estimated by the municipality at around 2,200. Combined annual electricity purchases from the national grid place the complex's parent operator among the country's three largest single buyers of power. Tax contributions in the most recent reporting year, including municipal and corporate, came to a figure the municipality describes as "transformative."

It is into this last word that some of the harder questions about the boom have begun, in recent years, to settle.

*

The mayor's account

Gunnar Þorláksson has been mayor of Reykjanesbær since 2029. He met me in the new wing of the town hall, which was built in 2032 with funds the municipality attributes directly to the corporate tax receipts of the complex's operator. The wing is open and bright and has a view across the harbour to the old fishing fleet.

"Look," the mayor said. "I am not here to tell you everything has been perfect. We have had questions. We have had a community that was, in the early years, divided. I understand the divisions. My own mother had questions about whether the highland water was being used responsibly. She was a teacher. She read everything. We talked about it."

He paused.

"I would not tell you my mother was wrong to raise those questions. I would tell you that the questions have been answered, formally, in the assessments, and that the answers have allowed us to do things in this town that I could not have done without them. There is a new wing of the school. There is a youth centre. There is a hospice. My mother used the hospice. She used it for the last six weeks of her life, in 2034, and the hospice was built with the tax money that came from the complex. I do not see how I can separate those things. I would not separate them. The complex paid for the room my mother died in."

He said this without rhetorical inflection, the way one might describe the location of a piece of furniture. He was not asking me to be moved by it. He was offering it, I felt, as the floor under his position — the place where the argument, for him, had ended.

*

The farmer's account

The Hvolsvöllur valley lies a hundred and forty kilometres east of the complex, in a different catchment, drained by a different river system. For most of the last decade, agricultural producers in the valley have been formally consulted on the highland infrastructure expansions and have, by the municipality's count, raised the same point at each of four consultations.

The point is timing.

Egill Sveinsson farms two hundred hectares of pasture and hay along the Markarfljót flood plain, ground his family has farmed under one configuration or another since the parish records began. I met him in the kitchen of the farmhouse on a Saturday afternoon. He had just come in from a fence line. He poured coffee from a thermos.

"It isn't that the water is gone," he said. "The water comes. It came this year. The water that came this year was, I would say, very nearly the same total water as the water that came when my father had this farm. We measure it now. My son measures it. He has the equipment. The total is more or less the same."

"What is different is when it comes. The melt used to come in over about three weeks. Slow. You could plan for it. My father knew within two days when the high pasture would be flooded and when it would not. He planned the cattle on it. He planned the cutting on it. It was a planning you could do."

"It now comes in over about nine days. Sometimes a little less. The same water, in less time. Then less water through the summer, because the early water has already gone. We can manage it. We are managing it. My son has put in different drainage in the lower field. We have changed when we cut. We have lost — I will not lie to you — we have lost about fifteen per cent of what the farm produced when my father was here. Not all of it from the timing. But some of it. A noticeable amount."

I asked him whether he had raised this in the consultations.

"Four times," he said. "I have the responses. They tell me my concerns are noted. They tell me the proposed development is assessed as having no statutorily material adverse effect on my operation, subject to monitoring."

"I am not angry," he said. "I want to be clear about that. I am not angry at anyone. The mayor down the coast is a good man. I have met him. He has done good things for his town. The hospice he speaks about — I read the piece about it. It is a good hospice. My cousin's wife was in it."

He topped up the coffee.

"What I am, I think, is tired. I am tired of being noted."

✱

The hydrologist's account

Dr Talia Sigurðardóttir is a Senior Research Fellow at the University of Iceland and the lead author on the longest-running monitoring study of the highland corridor catchments. Her work has been cited in each of the four consultations and in the most recent strategic environmental assessment for the Phase II extension. She is one of a small group of senior researchers — alongside the Reykjavík-based Norse scholar Sigríð Björnsdóttir, whose recent essays on what she calls the "borrowed vocabulary" of the oracle age have circulated widely outside the academy — who have taken up the question of what the infrastructure expansion has cost the country in terms not easily captured by the framework's

standards.

She declined to be quoted at length for this piece. She did, by email, provide the following statement:

The hydrological monitoring record shows changes in the seasonal discharge characteristics of the affected catchments that are statistically significant and that began, in the most affected catchment, within eighteen months of the original corridor commissioning. The changes are consistent with the upstream regulation regime in operation under the framework. They are also occurring in a period of climate change that is independently affecting these catchments, and the attribution of any specific portion of the change to either cause cannot be made with current methodology to the standard required by the framework. I have raised this attribution problem in published work and in correspondence with the relevant authorities since 2030. I am not in a position to characterise the framework's response to my concerns as either adequate or inadequate; that is a matter for democratic decision, not for me. I would note that the standards against which the framework's assessments are conducted were set in 2027 and have not been reviewed since.

The statement was provided with a request that it not be edited. It has been reproduced here in full.

✱

The mayor's response, when asked

When I read Dr Sigurðardóttir's statement to the mayor, in a follow-up call, he was quiet for a moment.

"I have read her work," he said. "I have read the assessments. I am not a hydrologist. I am a mayor. What I know is that this town is better than it was when I took office and that the things that make it better were paid for by what is happening on the lava south of us. If she is saying that there is something the framework is not seeing — and I think she is saying that — then the framework needs to see it. I would want it to see it. I would not

want anything we have built here to be built on something we are not seeing."

He paused.

"That is what I would want. I am also aware that this town has just approved the budget for the new community swimming pool. I am aware that the budget assumes the ninth wing comes online on schedule. I am the mayor. I am not the framework."

*

The complex's response

The operator of the complex, through its director of public affairs, provided the following statement:

The complex operates within the licensed parameters of the Framework Act and its accompanying regulations. All abstractions are within the sustainable yield envelope as defined under the framework. The most recent strategic environmental assessment, conducted by Verkís Consulting Engineers and reviewed by the National Energy Authority and the Icelandic Meteorological Office, confirms the compatibility of the Phase II extension with these parameters. We take seriously the concerns raised by downstream agricultural producers and have, throughout the consultation process, engaged with these concerns in good faith. We continue to invest in monitoring and remain committed to operating to the highest international standards of environmental responsibility.

The statement was provided in English. A translation has been provided above.

*

The road back from Hvolsvöllur to Reykjavík crosses the Markarfljót about six kilometres downstream of Egill Sveinsson's farm. In early September the river runs low and clear over its gravels. Above it, on the eastern horizon, the ice cap that feeds it is visible, smaller than it was last

September. The river goes on under the bridge and on toward the sea.

8 · *Bergljót*

The route went north from the community house along the old sheep track to the saddle above Búðahraun, then east across the moss to the ridge, then down to the shore at Lóndrangar where they ate their bread, and then up again by the long way around through Hólahólar back to the house in time for the evening office. They had walked it on the eighth day of June every year for forty-one years. The day did not change. The route did not change. What they were walking it to see was, in the way she had been taught to see things, what had changed and what had not, and which of the two was the harder to bear.

She walked at the back. Sister Hólmfríður led now, which was right. Hólmfríður had come to the community at twenty-six and had stayed and was forty-eight and could be trusted with the route. Bergljót followed at the pace the route had taught her, which was the pace of a woman who looked at things. The four others walked between them in the order they preferred, which had been the same order for the last six walks and would, if anyone lived long enough, become the order in which their names were read in the long winter office for the dead.

The sky was the high pale sky of early June, the one her mother had called *sumarhiminn*. The wind was northerly and steady. The moss under their boots was the green of the first week of June, the green that had not yet decided to be summer.

She watched her feet for the first hour and let the route come to her without naming it. This was the discipline. To walk the route the first time each year without inventory, without the list of what to look for. To let the land be the land and not yet the comparison. The comparison came on the second pass and the third pass and the long winter when they sat at the table with the field notebooks and made the list of what had changed against the list of what had not. The first pass was for the land. The land did not need to be measured on the first pass. The land needed to be

walked.

At the saddle above Búðahraun she stopped where she had stopped many years and looked north across the lava to the sea. The lava was where it had been. The sea was where it had been. A fulmar went past at the height of her face and turned downwind and was gone. *Fýll*, she thought, and then did not think the word again, because the practice was to let the thing be the thing and not require the word from it. The word would come later, at the table, in the winter, when they wrote the names down.

She looked north a moment longer. Vonarskarð was three days that way and two days east, in country she had walked twice in her life. She had been thinking about it since November, since the letter from Sister Ragna at Skálholt with the line she had not been able to put down. *Þau eru lítil. Þau eru þarna*. The markers were small. The markers were there. Ragna had used the old form, the form that placed a thing in the land by noting it, and the placement was the news. She would go in August. She had not yet asked Hólmfríður, and she would not tell the others until she had been. Seeing in Ragna's grammar was not the same as seeing in her own.

She walked on after Hólmfríður down toward the moss.

*

They ate at Lóndrangar. Hólmfríður had brought the bread and Sister Þuríður had brought the cheese and Sister Magga had brought the thermos. They ate without speaking, looking at the two stacks of rock that rose out of the sea where the cliff had been, once, before the sea had taken the cliff and left the stacks. *Drangar* were what the country called rocks of that shape, the ones left standing when the rest had gone, and the country had a great many of them and had names for most of them. The two at Lóndrangar were the larger and the smaller. The smaller was a hundred and twenty-nine feet. The larger was two hundred and twenty-seven. Her

father had told her the heights when she was nine and she had not forgotten them and had not, in seventy-two years of looking at the stacks, needed the heights for anything. They were the heights. The stacks were what the heights described. The country was full of things whose measurements were precise and useless and you carried them anyway because the carrying was the love.

After the bread they walked on.

*

They came down off the ridge at Hólahólar in the long light of the late evening. The crater field there was as it had been for the forty-one years she had walked through it and for the seven or eight thousand years before that. The small craters rose out of the moss in the pattern they had risen out of the moss for as long as anything alive had walked through them. The pattern was not symmetrical. The pattern was what it was. Hólmfríður stopped at the third crater from the path and looked into it for the length of time she always looked, which was about a minute, and then she walked on, and the rest of them walked on after her.

At the community house Sister Þuríður made the evening tea and they sat at the long table and did not yet speak of the route. The route would be spoken of at the morning office, in the order they had walked it, by the one who had led — that was Hólmfríður's privilege this year — and then the field notebooks would be opened and what had been seen would be written down, in the form Sister Edda had taught them when Edda was the elder and Bergljót had been thirty-one and learning. Edda had been dead for nineteen years. Bergljót was the elder now. The form was still the form.

She drank her tea. She thought about August.

She put her cup down and went up to her room and read the office for the day and put out the light, and the long Icelandic dusk that was not yet dark went on without her into the small hours, the way it had gone on

every year in the first week of June, and she slept through it the way she had slept through it many years, in the room above the road, in the house at the end of the route.

PART TWO

The Heat Doctrine

9 · *Bergljót — Vonarskarð*

They left the community house on the eighteenth of August, in Sister Þuríður's car, with the bread and the water and the field notebook. Þuríður drove as far as Geysir and turned around there, because she was needed back at the house and because she had agreed beforehand that the going was for Bergljót and Hólmfríður to do alone. She left them at a lay-by on the F-26 where a track of the kind shown on the older maps but not on the newer ones turned east into the highland. The track had been graded, in the last few years, to a standard the older maps had not anticipated. It would now take a vehicle of the kind they did not own. They walked it.

The morning was cool. Hólmfríður carried the bread. Bergljót carried the notebook. They had agreed, before leaving the community house, that the notebook would not be opened until the evening, in the form the community used; that what they walked to see they would see, and not yet write. The agreement was Bergljót's and Hólmfríður had accepted it without comment, in the way she accepted most of what Bergljót proposed, which was the same way she now led the route on the eighth of June: by accepting that Bergljót would still be the one who decided what the form was.

The track climbed for the first hour and then flattened. The ground was the ground of the central interior — black sand, low moss, the small ridges of older lava grown over by the slower colonising plants — and the wind was easterly and dry. They did not speak. Bergljót had noticed across the years that Hólmfríður did not speak on walks unless asked a question; she had also noticed that Hólmfríður's silence was not the absence of speech but a quality the speech, when it came, was drawn out of. The silence was the resource. Bergljót had been trying for thirty years to acquire it and had concluded, around year twenty, that one did not acquire silence; one was either given it or one was not. Hólmfríður had been given it. Bergljót had not.

At noon they ate by the side of the track. Hólmfríður had brought *flatbrauð* and the hard cheese Sister Magga made on Wednesdays and a thermos of black tea. They drank from the same cup, in turn, the way they had always drunk on these walks, because the community had two thermos cups and they had only brought one. The wind had risen. The sky was the high September-blue that came sometimes in late August when the autumn was already deciding itself. Bergljót looked east. The track went on across the moss for perhaps another two hours, by her reckoning, before it reached the place where Ragna had stopped.

She drank her tea. She did not say what she was thinking, which was that she had been very afraid for several months that when she saw the markers she would feel nothing, and that the feeling-nothing would be a thing she could not afterward go back from. The community's practice was built on the assumption that the land could still be seen. If the markers were small enough — if the corridor was, when she looked at it, only a corridor and not the thing Ragna's grammar had told her it was — then she would have to find out, at seventy-two, that she had spent her life cultivating an attention the world had outgrown.

She gave the cup back to Hólmfríður and got up. Hólmfríður got up. They went on.

*

The markers began before the road did.

They were small white stakes, perhaps thirty centimetres high, set in the moss at intervals of what Bergljót paced as twenty metres. The moss had grown up around their bases but had not, yet, taken them; they were too new. They were the colour of new wood that had been treated against the weather and they had small numbered tags wired to them and the tags were red. They appeared on the right of the track, then on the left, then on both sides, in a band that widened as the walker proceeded east, the way

the band of stakes around a building site widens as it approaches the building. They had no rhythm with the land. They had been set on the survey line, which was a straight line, and the land was not straight, and the markers crossed ridges and small hollows without acknowledging them. To follow the markers was to read a sentence written in a language that did not recognise the surface it was written on.

Bergljót noted this. She did not write it down. She noted it in the way her community had taught her to note: by letting the sight be the sight and trusting that the form, in the evening, would have room for it.

After about a kilometre of markers there was a survey peg with a brass cap, the kind a real surveyor sets when a line has been signed off rather than provisionally drawn. The peg was nearly invisible in the moss and Bergljót would have missed it had Hólmfríður not stopped beside it. Hólmfríður looked at it for the length of time she had looked into the third crater at Hólahólar in June, which was about a minute, and then walked on, and Bergljót followed.

The road came twenty minutes later.

It was a road of a kind Bergljót had not seen in this country before: graded gravel four metres wide, with shallow drainage cuts on either side and a centre crown raised perhaps fifteen centimetres above the verges. There was nothing on it. It ran east and west across the moss as far as Bergljót could see in either direction. She stood on it. The gravel was loose under her boot in the way gravel is loose when it has been laid recently. Hólmfríður stood on it beside her. Neither of them spoke.

After a moment Hólmfríður walked off the road on the far side and Bergljót followed.

*

The buried trunk was indicated by another line of markers, these orange and lower, set in a single straight line that ran perhaps three metres

south of and parallel to the road. The markers indicated, Bergljót understood, the position of something the road had been built to serve and the line of which had to be known so that subsequent work would not disturb it. The thing was underground. The markers were its only sign. The moss above the markers showed nothing that the moss elsewhere did not show. A fulmar would have flown over and seen the road and not seen the trunk. The trunk was what the road existed for.

Bergljót knelt beside one of the orange markers and put her hand on the moss above where the trunk would be. The moss was the moss. She could feel nothing through it. The thing she could not feel was, she understood, what carried the water that had been redistributed from her catchment and the others; the water was flowing under her hand, in a pipe she could not see, on a schedule she did not know, toward a use she did not benefit from and against a future she had not consented to. The construction was clean. The technology was excellent. There was nothing here to which she could object except the fact of it, which was the only thing here to object to.

She took her hand off the moss. She got up. She looked east along the line of orange markers. The line went on as far as the eye could follow it.

She looked west.

The same.

She thought, then, of Ragna's sentence. *Þau eru lítil. Þau eru þarna.* The markers were small. The markers were there. Ragna had written it in the form, and the form had been the right form, and Bergljót had needed to come and see for herself because the form was a thing one's own eyes had to validate. Her eyes had now validated it. The markers were small. They were there. The road was there. The trunk under her hand was there.

She had not felt nothing.

What she had felt was harder to name and she would not try to name it, here, in front of it; the naming was for the evening, for the table, for the

form. What she would say, when she said anything, was that the corridor was what Ragna had described and what Ragna had not described, and that both descriptions were necessary, and that her community would have to learn, now, to hold both.

Hólmfríður was standing twenty metres away with her back to Bergljót, looking east. Bergljót went to stand beside her.

"Sjáum við nóg?" Have we seen enough? Hólmfríður asked, without turning.

"Já," Bergljót said. We have seen enough.

They walked back to the road. They crossed it. They walked back to the track and west toward the lay-by where Þuríður would meet them in the morning. They did not speak about what they had seen. Hólmfríður had brought a small tent and they would sleep partway down. Bergljót would write nothing in the notebook until they were home.

They walked a long time before either of them said anything else.

Halfway down the track, with the light beginning to soften, Hólmfríður spoke.

"Það er stærra en mér fannst það yrði." It is bigger than I thought it would be.

Bergljót thought about this for a few paces.

"Já," she said. Yes. "Og minna." And smaller.

Hólmfríður considered. Then she nodded, the small nod that meant she had understood not only what had been said but what had been meant by saying it that way, the way that placed two things in the same sentence because they were both true and the truth was the both of them.

They walked on. The wind was at their back now. The light went on as it went on in late August in the interior, slow and amber and without urgency, and they walked into it without speaking again until they made camp.

*

They were back at the community house by the following evening. Sister Þuríður made tea. The others gathered in the long room, in the order they preferred, which had not changed. The notebook was on the table.

Bergljót opened it. She wrote what they had seen, in the form Sister Edda had taught them, in the order they had seen it: the track, the white stakes with the red tags, the brass-capped peg, the road four metres wide, the orange markers indicating the buried trunk, the trunk itself which was not visible but was present, the line of markers going east, the line going west. She wrote the date of seeing and the date of writing and signed her name. Hólmfríður signed below it.

She did not write what either of them had said on the way back.

She closed the notebook. She put it on the shelf with the others, in its year, in its place, in the form.

The community sat in the long room with the tea and did not speak about what was on the page they had not read. The page would be read in the winter, with the others, in the office for what had been seen. The not-reading-it-yet was the discipline. The page was what the page was. It would still be there in November.

Bergljót drank her tea. She put the cup down. She got up from the table and went up to her room and did not yet light the lamp. She stood by the window for a while looking out at the dark coming on across the lava. The wind had dropped. She thought about the moss under her hand, and the line of orange markers going east, and what Hólmfríður had said on the way down.

After a while she lit the lamp and read the office for the day.

Then she put out the light.

10 · The Lecture

HÁSKÓLI ÍSLANDS Institute of Earth Sciences · Public Lecture
Series, Autumn 2037

The Hydrology of Closed Cycles: A Reading of the Phase II Record

Dr Talia Sigurðardóttir, Senior Research Fellow

Thursday, 14 October · 17:30 · Askja, Hall N-132

The lecture is delivered annually as part of the Institute's Þorvaldur Thoroddsen public series. Transcript prepared from the recording held in the University Library, with the speaker's corrections incorporated.

*

Good evening. Thank you for coming. I will speak for forty-five minutes,

which is shorter than the hour the programme allows, because I want to leave time for questions and because what I have to say does not require the full hour.

I want to talk to you tonight about closed cycles. This is a phrase you will encounter in the literature around large-scale cooling infrastructure in this country, and you will encounter it in the regulatory documents, and you will encounter it in the public communications of the relevant operators. It is a phrase I want us to take seriously, because it is doing a great deal of work, and because the work it is doing is, I will argue, not quite the work the people using it believe it is doing. A closed cycle, in the technical sense, is a cooling configuration in which the working fluid — for our purposes here, water — is drawn from

a source, used to absorb heat, and returned to its source rather than discharged to evaporation or to a separate watercourse. Closed cycles are, on the standard accounting, the responsible alternative to the

open-cycle configurations used in earlier generations of cooling infrastructure and still used in regions where water availability or regulation does not require otherwise. In Iceland, all licensed cooling infrastructure in the highland corridor operates on closed-cycle principles. This is, on the framework's accounting, the basis of the infrastructure's environmental credentials.

I want to argue tonight that the closed-cycle account is correct in its terms and inadequate to what it is trying to describe.

(slide)

This is the seasonal discharge profile of the Þórsá at Þórsmörk, across the monitoring period 2025 to 2037. You will see that the spring peak arrives, on average, four days earlier per decade across this period. This is consistent with the climate record across the catchment and across the country. It is not the subject of my talk tonight.

The subject of my talk tonight is the second feature of this profile, which is the recession limb — the long tail after the peak, which describes how the river lets its summer down. You will see that across this monitoring period the recession limb has steepened. The river, having peaked, now arrives at its summer low more quickly than it used to. This change began, on the record, within eighteen months of the original corridor commissioning. It has continued and intensified across the period of the Phase II expansion. It is not consistent with climate forcing alone; the climate forcing on this catchment acts on the peak more than on the recession. The recession is being shaped by something else.

I will not, in this lecture, claim that I have proven what that something else is. I would like to spend a few minutes explaining why I will not claim that, because it is not, in my view, primarily a scientific limitation, and the science is what you have come for.

(slide)

The framework under which my work is assessed requires, for action, attribution. Attribution requires the demonstration that a candidate cause is, to a degree of statistical confidence specified in the framework, the cause of the observed effect, and that other candidate causes can be excluded to a corresponding degree. The standard is a defensible one. It exists to prevent the regulatory system from acting on weak evidence and so being captured by whichever stakeholder

can produce the loudest correlation.

It also has a structural property that I would like to draw your attention to. It assumes that the candidate causes are independent of each other and can be examined separately. In the present case, the candidate causes are not independent. The closed-cycle abstractions

in the highland corridor operate against a background of climate change that is itself altering the catchments. The two are interacting. The corridor is drawing from rivers whose underlying flow regimes are shifting; the corridor's effect on those flow regimes therefore manifests against a moving baseline that the corridor's operation is, in a small way, helping to move. The signal I am looking for is hidden inside a larger signal that I cannot hold still while I measure the smaller one.

(pause)

I want to be careful here. I am not telling you that the framework is wrong to require attribution. I am telling you that the framework, as currently constituted, requires a kind of attribution that the science cannot deliver under the conditions in which the science is now being asked to deliver it. The framework was set in 2027. The catchments are in 2037. The catchments do not stand still for the framework, and the framework has not, in the intervening decade, adjusted to the catchments.

I am going to put this more strongly. A regulatory framework that requires a degree of attribution that the science cannot provide, under the conditions in which the framework is being applied, is — in effect, though not in intent — a framework designed not to act.

(pause)

I am aware that this is a strong statement. I do not retract it.

What the closed-cycle account does not capture is what I have come to think of as the timing budget. The catchments have a temporal character — when the water arrives, how it falls off, how the cold is held and released across the year — shaped by the slow processes of the country itself: by snowpack, by glacial mass, by the permeability of the volcanic substrate, by the integration of small streams into larger ones. The corridor draws on the cold and returns it on a different schedule. It draws and returns and draws and returns, on a cycle tuned to a demand that does not sleep. The volumetric balance is preserved. The timing is not.

The catchments are losing their own rhythm. They are not losing their water. They are losing the schedule of their water. The schedule is a feature of the catchment that we have not historically had a regulatory framework for, because we have not historically had infrastructure that affected it. We do now.

(pause)

I have one more slide. It is not data.

(slide)

This is a footnote from a field report I wrote in 2031. The footnote concerns prioritisation under attribution uncertainty — what to monitor first, when monitoring resources are limited and the science cannot yet specify which observations will most usefully constrain the attribution problem. The footnote contains a methodological recommendation. I have been told, recently, that the line in it has

been circulated outside the field report and is being used in contexts I did not anticipate. I will read it as it was written.

*Where attribution under existing methodology cannot be made with confidence,

prioritisation of monitoring effort should be based on the principle that ecological systems with established temporal patterns be assessed before

infrastructure systems with adjustable ones. The rivers were here first; the load profile of the cooling demand can wait its turn. That is, no machine should drink before a watershed.*

(pause)

The first sentence is the methodological recommendation, which concerns the

allocation of monitoring resources. The second sentence is the rationale,

which concerns the priority of long-established systems over recently introduced ones. The third sentence is a compressed restatement of the second, which I included because I wanted the rationale to be memorable

to whichever colleague might be looking at the footnote and wondering whether to follow the recommendation.

I want to be transparent about what I now think about the third sentence.

I think the third sentence is correct on its own terms, and I think its correctness on its own terms is part of what has happened to it. It was written as the compressed form of an argument I had supplied above. It has travelled without the argument. I have, in correspondence and in print, attempted to restore the context. I am not certain, any more, that the context restoration is the right thing to insist on.

What I am certain of is that the line is not what people are doing

with it. Whether what people are doing with it is what should be done, in this country, in this decade, on this question — that is a matter for the people doing it, and for those of you in this room who will have to decide whether to support them or not, and not for me. I do not know what the right answer to that question is. I am a hydrologist. I measure rivers. The framework is the work of democratic institutions and the people who staff them, and the framework is what those institutions and those people decide it is. I have raised what I have raised in the channels available to me, and I will continue to do so. That is the part of this that is my work. What is not my work, and what I will not from this podium attempt, is to tell you what should be done. I will say only that what is being done is being done on a framework whose standards have not been reviewed since the catchments were different catchments, and that this is a fact, and that facts of this kind, when they are not acted on, tend not to remain only facts.

(pause)

Thank you. I will take questions.

The Q&A is not transcribed. The recording shows seventeen minutes of questions, of which two — both regarding the footnote — are declined by the speaker with the response, on each occasion, "I have said what I have to say about that. Next question."

Lecture programme and recording held in the Þorvaldur Thoroddsen Lecture Archive, University of Iceland.

11 · *Eiríkur*

The community centre in Hlemmur had a back room they let him use for interviews when the front room was booked, which it usually was. The room was small and had been a storage room until the previous summer, when somebody had pulled the shelves out and painted the walls a pale grey and brought in two chairs and a small table. There was no window. The light was bad. Eiríkur had brought his own — two LEDs on stands, one at the subject's three-quarter, one bouncing off the ceiling — and the camera, which was the small one he used when the larger one would intimidate.

Kári was sitting in the subject's chair with his hands in his lap. A man of about Eiríkur's age, perhaps forty, perhaps a little older. He had the weathered colour of someone who had worked outside for most of his life. On the phone he had told Eiríkur that he had been a forestry technician for the Skógrækt for sixteen years and had left in the previous spring under circumstances he did not want to discuss on the record. He had said he would talk to Eiríkur about the vessels, and only about the vessels, and only if Eiríkur agreed beforehand that he would not be filmed full-face. Eiríkur had agreed. He had set the camera so that Kári was three-quarter from the right and his eyes were not in the frame.

He turned the camera on.

"Hvenær byrjaðir þú að setja ker við girðinguna?" When did you start placing vessels along the fence?

"Í fyrravor." Last spring. "Apríl, maí. Þar um bil."

"Hvers vegna?"

Kári was quiet. He looked down at his hands.

"Það er það sem ég get ekki útskýrt fyrir þér." That is the thing I cannot explain to you.

This was the answer Eiríkur had expected. It had been the substance of the phone call. But the camera needed to record him giving it. Eiríkur

waited. After a moment Kári went on, in the slower voice of a man trying to give an honest answer in real time.

"Ég bjó til ker. Ég er ekki leirkerasmiður. Konan mín er. Hún kenndi mér tæknina fyrir mörgum árum. Ég gerði ekki gott handverk. Þau eru gróf." I made vessels. I am not a potter. My wife is. She taught me the technique years ago. The work I did was not good. The vessels are rough.

"Hvað gerðir þú með þau?"

"Setti þau við girðinguna." Placed them along the fence.

"Hverja girðinguna?"

"Þú veist hvaða girðingu." You know which fence.

He stopped. Eiríkur did not prompt him. The camera held the silence well. Kári was the kind of subject who would say what he had come to say if you let him take his time, and Eiríkur had learned in the last eighteen months — partly from this project — to let his subjects take their time. The earlier version of him would have prompted. The earlier version of him had wanted documentary as conversation. This version was learning to want documentary as testimony, which was something else.

"Ég vinn ekki fyrir hreyfingu," Kári said. I do not work for a movement. "Ég veit ekki einu sinni hvort það er hreyfing. Ég vissi ekki hvers vegna ég var að gera þetta þegar ég byrjaði. Ég vissi bara að ég vildi gera það. Ég vissi líka að ég vildi ekki að það yrði borgað fyrir það eða talað um það eða sett í kassa." I do not know if there is a movement. I did not know why I was doing this when I began. I knew only that I wanted to do it. I knew also that I did not want it to be paid for or spoken about or placed in a box.

He looked up for the first time. His eyes were not in the frame, but Eiríkur saw them.

"Núna eru fleiri," he said. Now there are more. "Sumir láta líka ker. Sumir láta vatn. Sumir láta ekkert. Sumir koma bara og standa þarna í tuttugu mínútur." Some leave vessels also. Some leave water. Some leave

nothing. Some come and stand there for twenty minutes.

"Þú hefur séð það?"

"Já. Ég fer einu sinni í viku. Ég hef séð það." Yes. I go once a week. I have seen it.

He paused.

"Ég veit ekki hvað það er sem ég sé. Ég veit að ég er hluti af því. Ég vona að ég sé það á réttan hátt. Ég get ekki sagt þér meira en þetta." I do not know what it is I am seeing. I know I am part of it. I hope I am part of it in the right way. I cannot tell you more than this.

Eiríkur let the silence go on for what would, in the final cut, become four seconds. He had learned, in the editing, that four seconds of nothing was the most a viewer would accept before reaching for the volume; that three seconds read as pause, four as weight, five as fault. He sat through four seconds and then turned the camera off.

"Takk fyrir, Kári." Thank you, Kári.

"Þú átt að passa þig," Kári said, getting up. You should be careful.

"Hvers vegna?"

"Því þú ert að mynda það sem fólk er ekki enn búið að ákveða hvað það er. Þegar þeir ákveða það — og þeir ákveða það — þá verður það sem þú ert að mynda eitthvað annað en það er núna. Og þú átt myndefnið." Because you are filming something people have not yet decided what it is. When they decide — and they will decide — what you are filming will be something other than what it is now. And you will hold the footage.

Eiríkur did not have a response to this. He nodded.

Kári put on his coat and shook Eiríkur's hand and left through the door at the back of the building.

*

He drove home in the dark. It had been dark since four in the afternoon. November.

His grandmother had died in March. The funeral had been small. He had filmed nothing of it. He had not brought the camera.

She died of nothing in particular, in the way the very old did. The doctor's phrase was *uppsöfnun*, accumulation. Eiríkur thought it was nearly the right word. He was with her at the end, in the small hospital in Reykjanesbær. Her last clear sentence was about whether the heating in the room was too high. He said it was fine. She said she thought it was a little high. He got up and turned it down two degrees. She nodded. She closed her eyes. She died perhaps an hour later, sometime after he stopped registering the time.

He had inherited her flat, which he had sold, and her books, which he had kept, and a folder of papers, which he had not yet opened.

After the funeral he had finally opened the bin on the hard drive where the two seconds had sat for two years.

*

He had watched it the first time at his desk, with coffee, in the morning, with the door closed. It was as it had been. She was in the third row from the back, on the left aisle, in the dark green coat she had worn to weddings for thirty years and to that, holding the small Icelandic flag they had handed out at the door. He watched it through. Two seconds. Then he watched it through again. Then he watched it ten more times, which was not because he needed to watch it ten more times but because he was waiting for something to happen inside him that he did not want to have happen at the kitchen table or in the car or in front of his editor, and he had decided that the desk in his small office with the door closed was the place he would allow it to happen if it was going to happen.

It happened on the eleventh viewing. He cried for about a minute. He had not known he had been keeping something compressed enough to make a minute's worth of crying when it came out. He sat at the desk

afterward for a while, and then he got up and washed his face and went to the kitchen and made another coffee.

He went back to work.

✱

He cut a new version of the documentary in the autumn, after the Kári interview and after two others, after he had driven the highland corridor twice and stood at the fence at three different sections and seen the bowls, sometimes ceramic and sometimes glass and once, in one place, a small bowl made of folded birchbark held in the moss with a stone.

The new cut opened on the two seconds. Full frame. The audio under them was not the audio he had recorded that day — the speeches, the applause — but rather the wind off the lava at the corridor fence, which he had recorded eighteen months later, several hundred kilometres east, on a Thursday afternoon when he was alone and the light was the same light. He held the shot for the full two seconds and then cut to black for a beat and then cut to the title.

His editor pushed back. The opening was unexplained. The audience would not know who the woman in the green coat was. The wind under her face was not — strictly — accurate. The opening was, she said, a personal gesture in a documentary that was supposed to be a piece of journalism.

He said the opening would stay. He said he understood her position. He said he had thought about it for a long time. He said he would help her argue for it.

She argued for it. They lost the argument. The piece ran with a different opening, on a wide shot of the corridor road that he had also filmed and that did, in the journalistic sense, the same work. The two seconds went back into the bin.

He had thought, beforehand, that losing the argument would feel like one thing.

It felt like another.

✱

He stayed up that night and watched the two seconds again, on his own laptop, at the kitchen table, with the new audio cut over them as he had wanted them. He played it three times. Then he closed the laptop and went to bed.

He had not changed his mind about wanting the opening. He had only changed his mind about whether the wanting was for the piece or whether it had been for himself, all along, and what the difference between those two things was, and whether the difference was a thing he was supposed to be able to tell from the inside.

He did not sleep well.

In the morning he opened the laptop again before he made coffee. The two seconds were where he had left them. His grandmother in the green coat, the small flag, the back row, the wind he had cut in over the speeches. He played it once. He closed the laptop.

He had three subjects asking when he would interview them. He had the bowls at the fence, which he had not yet found the right way to film. He had Kári's warning, which he had not played back to anyone, including himself.

He sat at the kitchen table with the closed laptop for a while longer.

Then he got up and made the coffee.

12 · *The First Action*

LÖGREGLAN Á SUÐURNESJUM Reykjanes District Police · Daily
Bulletin Bulletin Reference: 2038-04-17/RNS-094

Statement on the Reported Incident at the Suðurnes Secondary Cooling Node

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At approximately 02:14 on the morning of 17 April 2038, automated monitoring systems at the secondary cooling node serving the Suðurnes Data Complex registered a pressure anomaly in the primary heat-exchange loop of the south wing. The anomaly triggered the facility's graceful shutdown protocol, which proceeded as designed. The wing returned to operational status at approximately 06:30 the same morning. No injuries were sustained by personnel. No damage was sustained by the wider facility. Service interruption to downstream subscribers was limited to load-balancing reallocation across the regional network and is not understood to have resulted in any loss of customer-facing services.

Subsequent inspection by the operator's technical team identified that the anomaly originated in the deliberate manipulation of a pressure-management valve assembly accessible through a service hatch on the exterior of the south wing. The hatch had been opened using what the operator describes as legitimate tooling and what the investigating officers, in consultation with the operator, assess as a level of access knowledge consistent with familiarity with the relevant systems. The valve assembly has been replaced.

The Reykjanes District Police are investigating the incident as a matter of unauthorised interference with critical infrastructure under section 165 of the General Penal Code. No suspects have been identified. No claim of responsibility was received by this office within the twenty-four hours following the incident. Any persons with information that may assist the

investigation are asked to contact the District Office.

The District does not comment on operational matters of an ongoing investigation. Further bulletins will be issued as the matter develops.

Signed: Á. Þorvaldsdóttir, Chief Superintendent, on behalf of the District Commissioner.

RÚV FRÉTTIR Online edition · 18 April 2038, 14:30

Investigation continues into early-hours disruption at Suðurnes cooling facility

Operator describes incident as "limited and contained"; police treating as deliberate interference. Letter received by news desk later in the day.

By Sveinn Þórarinnsson, Infrastructure Correspondent

The operator of the Suðurnes Data Complex confirmed yesterday that an early-morning incident at one of its secondary cooling facilities resulted in a controlled four-hour shutdown of the south wing of the complex. In a statement to RÚV, the company's director of public affairs described the incident as "limited and contained" and emphasised that "no customer-facing services were interrupted and no safety risk arose to personnel or to the wider facility."

Police are treating the incident as deliberate. A bulletin issued by the Reykjanes District Office yesterday afternoon described the access as exhibiting a level of system familiarity "consistent with familiarity with the relevant systems" — a phrasing that infrastructure security analysts contacted by RÚV described as carefully chosen.

"You don't reach a pressure-management valve assembly on the exterior of a south-wing service hatch with general curiosity," said Ragnar Pétursson, who teaches industrial systems security at the University of Reykjavík. "You reach it because you know what you are reaching for and what will happen when you turn it. Whether the person who did this used to work at the facility, used to consult on its construction, or has read the

relevant technical literature very carefully — that the police will determine. What is clear is that this was not vandalism. This was a person, or people, who chose to do exactly the amount of damage they did."

The graceful shutdown protocol that activated in response to the anomaly is, according to industry sources, a standard feature of modern cooling architectures. It is designed to permit controlled degradation in the event of equipment failure or external interference, in preference to abrupt shutdown which could damage downstream computational hardware.

"What is interesting about this incident," Pétursson added, "is that whoever did it knew the protocol existed and chose to trigger it. They did not attempt to defeat the protective architecture. They used it. They forced the wing to do something it was already designed to do safely."

The operator declined to comment further.

Later in the afternoon, the RÚV news desk received an unsigned letter through its public submissions portal. The letter has been provided to the Reykjanes District Police. It is reproduced below in full, in the form in which it was received, with no editorial alteration.

Engin vél skal drekka fyrir vatnasvæði. Við höfum aðeins fengið lánaða eftirmiðdag.

The letter has been authenticated only as having been received through the portal at 11:47 on 17 April 2038, approximately nine and a half hours after the incident. The submission included no metadata identifying its sender beyond a routing chain that ended at a public-access terminal in the Borgarbókasafn central library. RÚV cannot at this time confirm any connection between the sender of the letter and the incident at the facility.

The line in the first sentence will be familiar to readers who attended Dr Talia Sigurðardóttir's recent public lecture at the University of Iceland or who have read it in subsequent coverage. Dr Sigurðardóttir, contacted by RÚV for comment, said only the following:

"The line in the letter is a quotation from a footnote in a 2031 field report. It was not written as a slogan, and it is not, in my view, doing the work of a slogan well. I would prefer that it not be used in this manner, and I have said so publicly before. I have no further comment on the incident, of which I learned through your colleague's call this afternoon, and about which I know only what you have told me."

The investigation continues.

Note: in subsequent coverage by Morgunblaðið, Vísir, Stundin, and the international press, the letter and the line within it have been variously translated, paraphrased, and re-attributed. In the second week of coverage, the phrase "we have only borrowed an afternoon" appears as a stencilled inscription on a wall in Hafnarfjörður. In the third week, it appears on a wall in Akureyri. In the fourth week, it appears on a wall in Tromsø.

13 · *Silas*

The Phase III consultation was at the company's regional office in Reykjavík, on the seventh floor of a glass building on Borgartún that had been built in the previous decade for an insurance company that no longer existed. The consultation room had a view east along Sæbraut toward Mount Esja, which on this morning in February was visible in the way mountains were visible from glass rooms in winter — as a presence beyond the glass that the room did not acknowledge. The light was the grey light. The coffee was the coffee.

Silas had been brought in for two days because the regional infrastructure planning team needed someone with thermal-systems experience to review the cooling architecture proposed for the Phase III expansion, which had not yet been announced and would not be announced for, the planning lead estimated, another four to six months. The brief was technical. He was not, the planning lead clarified at the outset, being asked about the policy of the expansion or the sufficiency of the assessments supporting it. He was being asked whether the cooling architecture would do what the planners said it would do. He had said he could do that. He had signed the non-disclosure agreement. He had been issued the consultation documents.

The documents were thorough. Phase III proposed expansion into a second highland corridor, north and east of the existing one, drawing on three additional catchments. The cooling architecture was, in its technical aspects, an extension of the architecture Silas himself had helped design for Phase II — the same closed-cycle principles, the same tailrace returns, the same temperature governance. Phase II had been operational for eighteen months. Its abstractions had run within their licensed envelope across that period, which would, the planning lead explained, be cited in the Phase III submission as evidence that the framework's standards were being met in operation. The thermal calculations were sound. The

hydraulic modelling was sound. Within the brief he had been given, there was very little to flag.

He read the documents on the first morning. He spent the afternoon walking the planners through his technical observations, which were minor and which they accepted without resistance. He went back to his hotel in the evening and slept poorly and returned the following morning for what was supposed to be a half day of detail work.

In the half day he read the demand projections.

They had been included in the consultation package by error or by inclusion, he was not sure which; they were not part of his brief and he had not been asked to comment on them, but they were stapled into the back of the operations annex he had been given for context, and he read them because he read everything that was put in front of him, because that was the discipline, because a man with a non-disclosure agreement and a brief was a man who at least made himself competent in the document he had signed for.

The demand projections covered Phase III's expected operating profile across the first ten years of the new corridor's commissioning. The projections were detailed by season and by load class. The aggregate annual abstraction at year five was, by Silas's quick reading, sixty-eight per cent above the framework's currently licensed maximum for the affected catchments. The footnote at the bottom of the projection table indicated that the framework's adaptive triggers would activate at year three and that "ongoing regulatory engagement is anticipated to support continuity of the operating envelope."

Below the table, in a sub-heading he was already turning back to before he had finished the first reading, the phrase appeared.

Acceptable landscape modification: the corridor route has been selected to minimise effects requiring statutory mitigation while preserving the abstraction profile necessary to demand. Areas of

highland character outside the protected categories are considered to fall within acceptable landscape modification under the framework's standing definitions.

He read it twice. He read it a third time. He looked up at the mountain that the room did not acknowledge.

He could feel, in his back, the chair he was sitting in. He could feel the slight rasp of the company-branded notepad under his pen, which had stopped moving. He could feel, in the front of his mouth, the small dryness that the building's heating produced by lunch on the second day of any visit.

He thought, in Norwegian, *Dette er ikke noe nytt*. This is not new. He had known the phrase existed. He had used the phrase, or something very close to it, in technical documents of his own; not for the highland, not for anything of this scale, but for smaller modifications under smaller frameworks, and the phrase had moved through his work for fifteen years as a piece of professional vocabulary, the way *clearance* or *envelope* or *margin* moved through his work, without his ever pausing on what it specifically authorised.

He read the paragraph a fourth time. He was not, he understood, going to be able to forget it. He had a memory for documents that had been useful to him in his career; what he read, he retained, in the way an engineer retained the figures he might be asked about across a desk a year later. The paragraph was now in his memory. The figures in the projection table were now in his memory. He could close the document and stand up and the document would still, in the relevant sense, be with him.

He closed the document.

He stood up.

He told the planning lead he was finished for the morning and would email through his final observations from his hotel. The planning lead thanked him. He returned the consultation package to the company

representative at the door, who counted the pages and signed for them. He took the lift down. He walked to the car park.

He sat in the car for some time without starting it.

✱

He drove home to the south the same afternoon. Halla was at her mother's. The house was empty. He made tea and sat with it at the kitchen table. The light went down. He did not turn on the lights.

He thought about the projection table. He thought about the highland route. He thought about the secondary catchment that fed Halla's mother's valley, which was not — he had checked the map twice — in the Phase III corridor, but which was downstream of one of the catchments that was. It would be affected by the timing changes the projection table assumed. Halla's mother was seventy-eight. The farm had been her husband's. She still kept the small ewes herself.

Whether he was permitted to think any of this was a question he did not, sitting at his own kitchen table in his own house, have a clean answer to. The figures were now in his head. The phrase was now in his head. Neither could be put back where they had come from. What he was supposed to do with information he had not asked for — there was no procedure for that. The procedure was the part he had spent his career being good at, and his career did not have a procedure for this.

He went to bed eventually. He did not sleep well.

✱

Reynir Jónsson called him on a Wednesday in March. They had worked together at Landsvirkjun in the early years, before Silas had moved to the private sector; Reynir had stayed in research and was now at a small environmental institute that did work for municipalities and for the occasional NGO. He called perhaps once a year, usually in the autumn, usually to ask whether Silas might be interested in a small consulting piece

he could not pay much for. Reynir was a generous and slightly chaotic man whom Silas had always liked.

This was not a consulting call.

Reynir said: "I have been asked to write a technical commentary on the demand projections for the next expansion, when they are released. I have heard, through routes I will not describe to you on the phone, that the projections contain a particular phrase. I will not say the phrase out loud. I will tell you the phrase has a sub-heading in front of it, and the sub-heading uses a particular adjective that I have been told to listen for. I am asking, as your friend, and as someone who is not asking you to break an agreement, whether you have read a document of this kind. I am not asking you to tell me what is in it. I am asking only whether you have read it."

Silas was quiet for a moment.

He said: "I have read a document of that kind."

Reynir said: "Thank you, Silas."

The call ended.

Silas put the phone down on the kitchen counter and sat in the chair he had been standing beside. Halla came in from the garden, where she had been planting onions; she had her hands wet. She asked who that had been.

"Reynir," he said. "Old colleague. Wanted to know if I was free for a beer sometime."

"Are you?"

"Probably."

She nodded and went back out to the garden. He watched her through the window for some time.

*

He stood in the garden in the evening when she had gone inside. The light was the long thin light of March that did not yet commit to being

evening. The mountain was visible in the way the kitchen-room mountain in Reykjavík had not been: in its full presence, snow-streaked, indifferent. The wind was off the sea. He could smell, faintly, the geothermal plant in the next valley.

He had been asked one question. He had given one answer. The answer was, in the strict sense, only a confirmation of a description that Reynir had supplied to him; he had named no figure, had quoted no phrase, had taken no document out of the office.

He had also, he understood, given Reynir something Reynir would now use. Reynir would write his commentary. The commentary would, when the projections were released, raise the right question in the right paragraph. The right question would be raised because Reynir had known to ask it, and Reynir had known to ask it because Silas had confirmed a description of a document Reynir had not seen.

He looked at the mountain.

He had given Reynir nothing he could not have read in a published paper, more or less; he had only confirmed a description. The confirmation would do what it would do. He thought, *Now I have done it*, and then thought he was being dramatic, because he had done very little, and then thought that he was being dramatic about being dramatic, and stopped.

He went in to dinner. Halla had made fish. They ate in the kitchen with the radio on, low, behind them.

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A Last Letter from Sigrid Björnsdóttir

Edited and introduced by Þórunn Karlsdóttir

Sigrid Björnsdóttir died at her home in Reykjavík on the 23rd of August 2038, at the age of seventy-eight. The cause of death was given as cardiac failure consequent on the long pulmonary condition with which she had lived since 2029. Her family declined a public memorial; a small service was held at Fríkirkjan in Reykjavík on the 31st of August for invited friends and former colleagues. The present writer was among them.

In the days following the service, Sigrid's daughter Helga gave me access to the desk in her mother's study and asked whether I would like to take, with the family's permission, any unfinished writing that I judged would benefit from publication. I declined, in the first instance, on the grounds that Sigrid had been very deliberate during her lifetime about what she did and did not publish, and that posthumous decisions of this kind ought to err on the side of her wishes as expressed when she was alive.

I revisited the decision after reading the document reproduced below, which Helga had set on the top of the small stack of papers Sigrid had been working on in the final week of her life. The document is a letter addressed to me, dated 17 July 2038, that Sigrid did not send. Helga had recognised my name on the envelope and had not opened it. We opened it together. The letter was complete. It had been signed. It was, in Helga's words, "evidently meant for you, whether or not she meant to post it." I have published it here with the family's consent and with such light editorial introduction as the form requires.

The letter is reproduced in full, in the form in which it was found, with the spelling, punctuation, and paragraph breaks Sigrid used. Two

place-names in the closing paragraph have been clarified in brackets.

*

Reykjavík, 17 July 2038.

Dear Þórunn,

I have been meaning to write to you since the spring and have not done so because I did not know what I wanted to say. This morning I have decided I will say what I am thinking even if it is not finished. At seventy-eight one comes to believe the unfinished thought is the only kind one has time for. Waiting for the finished version is a habit of younger women.

The letters from readers that the journal forwarded me after the spring issue: forty-one. Most kind. Some not. The interesting ones were the kind ones. They made the same misunderstanding the unkind ones made, only without hostility, and so I could read them through. The misunderstanding is this. People believe I have spent twenty years writing about a theft — that the operators of the large systems stole my tradition's vocabulary and that this is the grievance. They write to me sympathetically. They suggest the theft is part of a wider pattern. I read these letters with the gratitude one owes any reader who has taken trouble, and then I put them away, because they have read me as the woman they wanted to read and not as the woman I am.

It was never about theft. Theft is too clean a word.

What I have been writing about is what is missing when a vocabulary travels without its cosmology. The grammar of the Eddic tradition is held together by an eschatology. The tree falls. The Father is consumed. The forges go cold. Take the names and leave the ending behind and you do not have a theft. You have something stranger: a grammar with no full stops. Sentences that look right and do not end.

I had it in mind, when I started, that the names would do the work the makers had not asked them to do. I thought the tradition would seep in. Traditions have survived that way for as long as there have been traditions: by being taken up imperfectly by people who do not respect them, who are then changed across generations by what they have taken up. I thought it would happen with the All-Father and the forges. I thought the names would teach the systems what the systems had not been told.

I do not, any longer, think this is going to happen.

This is the sentence I have been trying to write since the spring. I will let it stand. The systems do not learn from their names. They have the names as decorations. The eschatology does not seep in through the vocabulary. The systems will continue, hungry, named in our grandmothers' grammar, doing nothing our grandmothers would have recognised as the work that grammar described.

The names, in the end, will be ours only. The borrowers' inheritance is the part of the borrowing they did not take.

I will not write this publicly. I have spent my life avoiding being the woman whose name gets attached to political conclusions, and I am too old to begin. But to you, in a letter: I have understood, in the past year, that the people in the highland who are doing what they are doing have seen something the framework has not seen, and that what they have seen is what my tradition would have called a limit. They are using the wrong tools. They have found the right enemy. I will not say more than this even to you. It is the most I am willing to say to a friend.

I want to walk up to [Hallgrímskirkja] this week if my breath allows, and down [Skólavörðustígur] once more. There is a chalk inscription on a wall near the cathedral I would like to look at before someone removes it. It is in the wrong grammar. It has the right idea. That is more than one can usually say of an inscription on any wall.

Helga has just brought me tea. I will close.

You have been a good friend. I would have written you this letter twenty years ago if I had known then what I know now, and I would have been wrong to send it. I would have been wrong then in the way I am, finally, allowed to be right now. There is a permission that comes with the age. I am using it.

Yours, with affection,

Sigrid

The original letter, four pages in Sigrid's hand on her customary cream paper, is held in the family archive. Her daughter Helga has given permission for digital reproduction as part of the journal's online archive.

B.K.

She had not known Sigrid Björnsdóttir. They had been at the same conferences twice and on each occasion Sigrid had been at the centre of a small ring of friends, and Talia, at the edge of both rings on both days, had not crossed in. She had cited Sigrid in three papers. She had recommended *The Last Mythology* to her students every autumn for twelve years. She had read Sigrid's last published essay in the spring and had thought she ought to write to the author. She had not written.

The service was at Fríkirkjan on the last day of August. She had not been invited. She wore the dark coat she had bought for her father's funeral and walked from the bus stop on Lækjargata with her hands in the pockets and her shoulders up against the wind that had risen off the bay, and she went into the church and sat in the last pew on the right and watched the front three rows fill in slowly with people she did not know.

The service was small. Perhaps forty. The minister spoke. Sigrid's son-in-law, she thought, read a short text. Then Helga — she could see now that it was Helga, the daughter, who had her mother's brow — stood up with a book in her hand and read a passage Talia knew well, and Talia had not been prepared for what reading-aloud did to a passage she had been reading silently for fifteen years. The passage was about ravens. *Hrafn*, Talia thought, *hrafnar*, the plural her grandmother had used; not the ornithological *Corvus corax* that lived in her professional vocabulary. The reading was followed by a cello, a piece she did not recognise. Then the family stood and walked out down the centre aisle. Helga's hand was on her father's arm. Talia stayed where she was until the church was empty.

She went out a different door than the one she had come in by.

The wind off the bay was cold for the day. She buttoned her coat at the top and walked east along Lækjargata and turned up Bankastræti without deciding to. She had it in her head to go to the wall on Skólavörðustígur that Sigrid had written about in the unsent letter, the wall Þórunn

Karlsdóttir had published the description of in *Tímarit Máls og Menningar* two weeks before. She had read the letter three times. She had cried, the second time, in a particular way that had to do with the second-to-last paragraph, the paragraph in which Sigrid had finally said what she had spent forty years not saying. Talia had recognised the kind of saying that was. *Það er leyfi sem fylgir aldrinum*, Sigrid had written. There is a permission that comes with the age. *Ég er að nota það*. I am using it.

She walked up Bankastræti and turned onto Skólavörðustígur. The street climbed. There were tourists. There was the small bookshop she would not, today, go into. The wind was at her back now and she could feel her coat against the back of her legs in a way that was almost comfortable. She thought about Sigrid having walked up this hill with her bad lungs at seventy-eight in July, in the year of her dying, to look at a chalk inscription before someone removed it.

She found the wall about halfway up, on the south side, between two of the small wooden houses. The chalk was the white chalk that schoolchildren used. The letters had been done carefully, evenly spaced, the way someone takes care over a thing that matters to them and that they know other people will see.

Engin vél skal drekka fyrir vatnasvæði.

No machine should drink before a watershed.

She stood and read it. She read it twice more. Her hand had gone to her mouth at some point during the second reading. She took it down.

The first time she had seen it on a wall — in Hafnarfjörður, in the spring, on the side of a closed petrol station — she had stood across the street and stared at it and felt only one thing, which had been a slow and almost clinical horror at the way her own sentence looked when it was not in a footnote. The second time, in Akureyri, on the side of a building near the university, she had been with a colleague and had not stopped, and had felt the absence of stopping for the rest of the day.

This was the third. Sigrid's wall. The one Sigrid had walked up the hill to see.

Talia had thought she would feel what she had felt the first two times, with one or another adjustment. What she felt was something she had not made room for.

She read the line a fourth time. *Engin vél skal drekka fyrir vatnasvæði*. Her own footnote, half of it, the half that travelled. The first half — the part about prioritisation of monitoring effort, the part she had actually written the footnote *for* — was nowhere. It had not been written on any wall in any city. No one had carried it. It was in her field report, where she had put it. It was, in the strict sense, where it belonged. The wall had her second clause and nothing else.

She thought, standing there, about what the half-line meant on a wall. She had told herself for two years that the line did not mean what people thought it meant. She had been right about the footnote. The footnote was a methodological note about prioritisation. But the line on the wall was not the footnote. The line on the wall was the second clause of the footnote on its own, and the second clause of the footnote on its own meant what it appeared to mean: that the river should be considered before the cooling. That was what the clause said. She had written the clause. She had meant it. She had qualified it in the first clause to a degree the framework would accept; she had unqualified it in the second clause because the second clause was the part that was actually true.

The unqualified clause had walked off without her. The qualification had stayed behind. And the unqualified clause, in chalk, on a wall, in the city she had lived in for thirty years, was now also closer to what she believed than the careful sentence she had built around it.

She stood there a long time. A pair of tourists went past her and around her. An older woman with a small dog stopped and looked at the inscription and then at Talia, and then walked on without speaking. Talia

did not, in that moment, know what her face was doing.

She thought of Sigrid in this same place in July. Sigrid had stood here too. Sigrid had said, in the letter, that the inscription was in the wrong grammar but had the right idea. *Það er á rangri málfræði en það hefur rétta hugmynd.* Talia heard the sentence in Sigrid's voice — a voice she had only ever heard at two conferences, briefly, in a tone she had thought aristocratic at the time and now thought was simply old. The right idea. Not the right tactics. Not the right people. The idea.

She walked up the hill the rest of the way to the cathedral. She did not go in. She sat on the steps for ten minutes with her hands in her pockets and watched a school group be photographed by a guide with a flag. She got up. She walked back down. She passed the wall again on the way down and did not stop. She caught the bus home from Lækjargata and sat by the window and looked at her own face in the dark glass against the grey of the buildings going past.

She thought, *Hún sá það líka.* She saw it too. *Og hún var rétt.* And she was right.

The bus turned. The buildings changed.

She got off at her stop and walked home.

*

She wrote that night. She had not, sitting down at the kitchen table with the lamp on and the tea cooling and the notebook open, decided to write any particular kind of thing. She had decided only that she would not go to bed without putting something down. She had thought she would write the fourth essay — the careful one, the one that would once more attempt to restore the line to the footnote, the one that would make the precise case for what she had originally meant. She had been writing that essay in her head for a year.

She did not write that essay.

What she wrote, on the first page, was a paragraph that was not careful. She wrote it quickly, in the simple Icelandic she used when she was writing for herself rather than for the literature, and when she had finished the paragraph she sat looking at it for some time. Then she wrote it again, in the careful Icelandic she used for publication. Then she sat looking at the second version. Then, slowly, deliberately, with the lamp making the small circle on the table and the rowans outside the window black against the slightly less black of the sky, she put the careful version into the essay she was supposed to be writing, in the third paragraph, where it would not be looked for.

The misattribution is real and the misuse of the line is, in the academic sense, unfortunate. But the misuse is closer to what is true than my careful original phrasing was permitted to be, by the rules of the document the original phrasing was written for. The slogan is less precise than the footnote and more accurate than the regulatory framework that received the footnote. I do not endorse the slogan. I am noting that the slogan is, in a sense the framework cannot register, correct.

She read it back.

She thought about deleting it.

She did not delete it.

She sat at the table with her tea for another half hour, and what she did in the half hour was mostly look at the rowans, which were not doing anything, and at the lamp, which was making its small honest light, and at the words on the screen which had not changed since she had stopped typing them. *Reyniviður*, she thought, looking at the rowans. The trees of her grandmother's word. They were her grandmother's trees in the sense that her grandmother had also had them outside a window and had also looked at them at night when she had been thinking about a thing she could not yet say out loud.

She thought, *Ég sagði það*. I said it. And then: *Það er ekki orðið ósagt*. It is not unsaid now.

She sent the essay to the journal in the morning.

The journal accepted it after a brief and worried review process. It ran in November. It was widely cited in the reformed governance debate that began in the spring, in which the third paragraph was treated as a clarifying remark on the framework's standards. It was also, everywhere else, treated as an endorsement, and the people who treated it as an endorsement included people who put it on banners and people who put it on walls and at least one person who put it, very neatly, in chalk, on the side of the small wooden house on Skólavörðustígur three doors up from where the original inscription had been. Talia saw the new one on a Tuesday in late November on her way back from the university. She stopped. She read it. She walked on.

She did not write a fourth essay.

The projection package was circulated to the senior operations group on a Friday afternoon in early November, with the standard cover note from the regional vice-president's office indicating that comments were welcome through Tuesday of the following week and that the package was, until formal announcement, to be treated as Tier 2 confidential. Anik read it on the Saturday morning at his desk at home, with the door closed, with his second coffee cooling beside him, with the rain coming down on the deck outside the window the way it came down in Garðabær in November — not hard, not softly. Just continuously.

He had been expecting the package since the spring. The previous package, on Phase II's seven-year operational review, had referred forward to the Phase III feasibility work in language that had told him, if he was reading carefully, that the next set of projections would be more aggressive than anything the company had publicly indicated. He had been reading carefully. He read most documents that came across his desk carefully.

The projection package was more aggressive than anything the company had publicly indicated.

He sat with it through the morning. The sub-heading was where he had expected it to be. The phrase was where he had expected it to be. Sixty-eight per cent above the licensed maximum at year five, by his quick reading. The footnote about adaptive triggers. *Ongoing regulatory engagement is anticipated to support continuity of the operating envelope.* He read the footnote twice. The English of the document was very good. The English of the document had been worked on for some time by people who had been paid well to work on it.

He typed his comments — technical, minor, entirely within the brief — and saved them as a draft. He did not send them. He left the draft in the folder where unsent drafts went and closed the document and stood up.

His wife was in the kitchen. She was reading the paper.

"You're up early," she said, in English, without looking up.

"I had something to read."

"For work?"

"Yes."

She turned a page. He sat down with her and did not say anything for a while. The radio was on, low, a programme he could not follow because he had never learned the language well enough to follow programmes that were not the news. He looked at the rain.

"I might go for a walk," he said.

"In this?"

"Yes."

"Take the heavy coat."

He took the heavy coat.

*

He walked the lane down to the harbour road and out toward the President's residence and back. About an hour. The rain stayed steady. He passed two people he half-recognised from the neighbourhood and nodded at them and they nodded at him, and he did not, at any point during the walk, formulate anything that resembled a decision. What he did instead was let his mind go where it had been wanting to go for some months and not been allowed.

Reynir Jónsson had published a technical commentary in the spring on the architecture of the not-yet-released Phase III package. The commentary had been disturbingly specific. The company's communications team had used the phrase "uncanny specificity" at the time. Anik had read the piece the morning it appeared. He had thought, reading it, that he knew what the company had not yet known: that Reynir had been told. He had filed the thought the way he filed thoughts of that

kind. It had not, since, been refiled.

There was also Silas Vey, whom he had not seen in over a year and who had done the consulting on Phase III feasibility. There was the modelling team's memo from 2034, which he had signed. There were the three documents in the locked drawer of his study, printed at intervals across nine months, each in circumstances he could now reconstruct from memory, and which he had not until this morning fully admitted to himself why he had printed.

The rain on his coat. The smell of the bay. The President's residence on its small grey peninsula, with a single car in the drive.

He walked back.

*

He did not, that weekend, send his technical comments. He told himself he would send them on the Monday. On the Monday he sent them. They were received. The package was finalised the following week. The phrase remained in the sub-heading. His comments had been incorporated where they were technical and ignored where they bore on anything beyond the technical, which was the standard treatment of his comments and which he had not, when he submitted them, expected anything else of.

He went on with the work.

*

The dinner was on the Sunday before the Wednesday.

His elder daughter was fourteen. She was called Meera. She had inherited from her mother the quality of attending to things from a slight angle, as though sceptical of having to look at any single thing head on; from him she had inherited a certain stillness that her teachers had, in the early years, mistaken for shyness and that he and his wife had known was not. She had been quiet through most of the meal. His younger daughter, eleven, had been telling them at length about a falling-out with a friend at

school. Meera had listened to her sister without comment.

After the younger one had gone upstairs, Meera stayed at the table. She was peeling the label off the small bottle of mineral water with her thumbnail.

"Dad," she said.

"Yes."

"What's your job, exactly."

His wife was at the sink. She turned the tap off. She did not turn around.

"You know my job," he said.

"I know you run the place. I mean what is it."

He thought about how to answer. He had been answering versions of this question for fourteen years, mostly to people at parties, mostly with a sentence and a half that ended the question. He had the sentence ready. He said it.

"It's a facility that hosts computing infrastructure for international clients. I'm responsible for keeping it running."

"That's the work version."

"It is the work version."

"Are you proud of it."

He did not, in the moment, register the question as the question it was. He took it for the kind of thing a fourteen-year-old asks when the real subject is something else — how to feel about her father, given something she had recently read and was working out. He had been a parent long enough to know the shape of these questions. He gave the answer he had given for fourteen years.

"I'm proud of running it well, yes."

She looked at him. She had stopped peeling the label.

"That isn't the question."

He was quiet. His wife had not turned around. The tap was still off.

"What's the question, then," he said.

"Whether you are proud of it." She said this calmly. "Not whether you run it well. Whether it's good."

He had been ready for the question and now he was not ready. He took a breath. He looked at his hands.

"I will tell you later," he said.

"That's what I'm going to do too," she said, getting up. "Tell you later. I read about the place online. I want to think about it first." She put her bottle in the recycling. "I'm not angry, Dad."

"I know."

"I'm just going to think about it."

She kissed the top of his head — she still did this, at fourteen, when she went up to bed; he did not know how long she would keep doing it — and went upstairs.

His wife turned the tap back on. He did not look at her.

After a while she said, in English: "She didn't ask me."

"No."

"She asked you because she knew which one of us to ask."

He did not have a response to this. His wife rinsed the plate she had been rinsing and put it on the rack and dried her hands and came and sat down opposite him.

"Anik," she said.

He looked at her.

"What did you read this morning?"

"A document."

"For Phase III."

"Yes."

She looked at him for a long time. She did not ask anything else. She got up after a while and made tea for both of them and they sat at the table with the tea and did not speak about it again that night.

He had not told her later, either. She had not asked.

*

The decision was made, when it was made, on the third Wednesday of November, on the drive home from the site, in heavy traffic on Reykjanesbraut, in the slow lane behind a tanker that he did not at any point during the drive overtake. The traffic was not the reason. He noted it later because, on subsequent reflection, he found that he remembered it: the rear of the tanker, the brake lights, the rain again, the radio low on a current affairs programme he had not been listening to. He had been alone in the car for the length of the drive and he had not, during it, consciously thought about anything. He had been driving home.

Somewhere between the third roundabout and the turn-off for Garðabær he understood that he had decided.

He did not register the moment of its making. He registered only that, by the time he reached the exit, the decision had been made and had been made for some time, and that the only remaining question was the implementation.

*

He pulled into the garage and sat in the car with the engine off and the rain on the windscreen.

He had three documents at home — paper copies, printed on his home printer at intervals across the past nine months, each printed in circumstances he could now reconstruct from memory. The first was the Phase III demand projection with the sub-heading and the phrase. The second was the company's own modelling team's flagging memo from 2034, the one he had signed, which had described the recession-limb risk and had recommended additional review. The third was the response to that memo, which had deferred the review and had absorbed it into the broader Phase II assessment, and which was the document that, in any

external reading, established that the company had known what it had been told and had chosen not to act on the knowing.

The three documents, individually, would not surface any single statement that contradicted the company's public position. The company's public position had always been that all decisions had been made within the framework and that the framework's standards had been met. The documents, individually, were consistent with that position.

The three documents, together, showed something else. They showed that the modelling team had told the operations group what would happen, that the operations group had told the company, that the company had told the regulators, and that the regulators had told no one — not because of a conspiracy, but because the framework's standards had absorbed the flagging the way the framework's standards had absorbed everything else. The documents, read in sequence, made the absorption visible.

He went inside. He went to his study. He unlocked the drawer. He took out the three documents and laid them on the desk in the order he had decided on the drive home and put them into a plain manila envelope.

He addressed the envelope, in handwriting, to Eiríkur Gunnarsson at the news organisation Eiríkur worked for. He had thought about Eiríkur for some weeks. Eiríkur was the right person, not because Anik knew him, which he did not, but because Eiríkur's documentary work over the past two years had shown him to be the kind of journalist who would understand the documents as documents rather than as headlines, and who would contextualise them rather than splash them.

He sealed the envelope.

He carried it down to the kitchen.

He put it on the counter, beside the bowl where they kept the car keys and the post that needed dealing with.

*

His wife came home at seven. He had not started dinner. They went out, to a small restaurant in Hafnarfjörður they had liked for years. He did not mention the envelope. She did not ask. They had the wine they usually had. He drove them home along the coast road in the rain.

The envelope was where he had left it.

He looked at it. He did not pick it up.

He went up to bed.

His wife was already in the bathroom. He stood at the bedroom window for a minute looking out at the harbour lights. He thought, in English, *I have not decided*. Then he thought, *I have*. He did not know which one of those was the lie.

He got into bed.

His wife came in and turned the light off and got in beside him.

"Anik," she said in the dark.

"Yes."

"Whatever it is. It's all right."

He did not answer her. After a while she put her hand on his arm and left it there, and he fell asleep eventually with her hand still on his arm, and the envelope was downstairs on the kitchen counter, in the dark, where he had left it.

It was still there in the morning.

He looked at it on his way out.

PART THREE

Those Who Enter the Heat

The primary loop at Keflavík North released its pressure, when it released it, through a bank of relief valves on the cold side of the heat-exchange hall, and the bank had been sized, when Silas sized it eleven years before, for a fault condition that the facility had never had. He had built margin into it the way he built margin into everything. The bank could pass more than the loop could ever deliver. This had seemed to him, at the time, like prudence, and it had seemed to him like prudence every year since, on the rare occasions he had cause to think about it, and it seemed to him like prudence now, sitting at the kitchen table in the south with the drawings he should not have had spread out under the lamp, except that now the margin was the thing that made the operation possible, and prudence was not the word for what he was using it for.

He knew the loop better than anyone alive. That was the plain fact the whole thing rested on. He had designed it. He had commissioned it. He had spent a decade refining it. There was no one in the company, and probably no one in the world, who understood the specific architecture of that specific cooling system the way he understood it, and the understanding did not leave him when his loyalty did. The understanding was not a loyalty. It was a knowledge, and knowledge did not take sides, and a man who had spent his life learning how a thing worked could not unlearn it because he had changed his mind about whether it should have been built.

What he was looking for, under the lamp, was the place where the design told the truth about itself. He had said, once, years ago, to a younger engineer who had not understood him, that every system had a place where it met the world and the world declined to be improved, and that the place was where you read the system honestly. He had meant it as a principle of design. He found, now, that it was also a principle of sabotage. The relief bank was the place. If you released the loop's pressure

through the bank, in a controlled way, at a rate the protocol could see and respond to, the facility would do what it had been built to do: it would recognise a fault, initiate graceful shutdown, bring the wing down in an orderly sequence that protected the computational hardware and harmed no one. The protocol existed to manage exactly this. He had helped write the protocol. The operation did not defeat the facility's safety architecture. The operation used it.

This was the thing he came back to, when he came back to it in the nights, and he came back to it most nights. The operation did not break the safety. It invoked the safety. The wing would shut down the way it was designed to shut down. No one would be hurt because the entire design of the act was the avoidance of hurt, and the avoidance of hurt was not a constraint added to the operation but the form of the operation itself. He had insisted on this. He had insisted on it to the others until the woman who handled the logistics, whose name he made a point of not fully knowing, had told him, not unkindly, that he had made the point and they had taken it and he did not need to make it again. He had nodded. He had made it again the next week anyway, in a different form, because it was the thing he needed to be true and saying it was how he checked that it was still true.

*

The others he kept at a distance, and they kept themselves at a distance from him, which was the discipline of the thing and also a kind of mercy. He knew the logistics woman by a first name that was probably not her first name. He knew the younger man, who was good with the access systems and whom Silas did not trust, not because the younger man had done anything but because the younger man wanted something from the operation that Silas could not identify and that Silas suspected was not the same thing Silas wanted. There were others he had met once and would

meet once more, on the night, and whose faces he would not afterward be able to describe to anyone, which was the point. The cell was built so that no one held more than a fraction. Silas held the loop. That was his fraction. It was a large fraction, larger than the structure was supposed to permit any one person to hold, and it had been given to him because there was no one else who could hold it, and the giving of it had been the moment — if there had been a moment, which he did not think there had been — that he had stopped being a man who consulted for the movement and become a man who was the operation's single point of failure.

He thought about that phrase sometimes. Single point of failure. It was an engineer's phrase. It meant the component whose failure took down the whole system, the thing you designed redundancy around so that no one element could end you. The cell had no redundancy for the loop. If Silas failed — if he was caught, if he lost his nerve, if he was wrong about something — there was no second person who could do what he did. He had spent his career eliminating single points of failure from the systems he built. He had become one.

The question of whether the operation should happen at all came up once, in the late spring, when the governance review was announced and the documentary aired and for a few weeks it seemed, to some of them, that the institutional channel might be working after all. The younger man had raised it. Maybe they should wait. Maybe the review would do the thing. Maybe the operation was no longer necessary, or no longer justified, now that the system appeared to be responding.

Silas had let the others answer it before he answered it, and the others had answered it more or less the way he would have, but when it came to him he said the thing he believed, which was that he had watched the institutional channel respond before. He had watched it respond for fifteen years. He had filed permits into it and submitted comments into it and signed memos into it, and he had watched it receive every one of them and

convert each one into a process and convert each process into a timeline and run the timeline out past the point where anything could be done, and he had come to understand that the responding was not the opposite of the not-acting but the mechanism of it. A system that received everything did not need to refuse anything. The review would respond. The review would respond beautifully. The review would respond for three years and recommend further study, and in the third year the second corridor would be most of the way built, and the response would have been the thing that made the building possible by giving everyone something to wait for.

He did not say all of this. He said about a third of it. The younger man had looked at him in a way Silas did not like, and the logistics woman had moved the meeting on, and the operation had stayed on the calendar.

*

Halla knew. She did not know what she knew, but she knew the shape of it, the way you know the weather is changing before you could say how. He had stopped being able to account for his time in the ordinary way. He had become, in the house, a man performing the ordinary actions of a man, and Halla had been married to the actual man for twenty-two years and could tell the performance from the thing, and the knowing sat between them at the table like a third person they had agreed not to introduce.

They had one conversation, in the early summer, that came close. She had asked him, washing up, with her back to him, whether he was in trouble. He had said no. She had asked whether he was going to be. He had said he did not think so. She had turned around then, with her hands still wet, and looked at him for a while, and he had understood that she was deciding something, and that what she was deciding was whether to ask the question that would make him either lie to her directly or tell her the truth, and that she had the question ready, and that she could see he could see she had it ready.

She had not asked it. She had turned back to the sink. She had said, instead, that her mother had asked again when they were coming down, and that the small ewes had had a bad lambing, and that the river had come early again this year, earlier than last, and that her mother said the high pasture flooded now in a week where it used to flood in three. She had said all of this to the window, in the ordinary voice of ordinary news, and Silas had understood that she was telling him she knew what his work had to do with her mother's river, and that she was not going to make him say it, and that the not-making-him-say-it was the largest thing she had ever given him and also a kind of grief he had no way to answer.

He had dried the dishes she washed. They had gone to bed. In the morning he had driven north to a meeting he told her was about a geothermal contract, and she had not asked which one, and he had seen in the rearview mirror that she stood in the door watching him go for longer than a wife watches a husband go to an ordinary meeting.

*

The operation was set for a night in November, in the lowest-occupancy window of the facility's year, when the load was at its annual minimum and the night maintenance schedules were, by the records Silas could see, the lightest they would be. He had chosen the date himself, from the data, the way he had chosen everything from the data. The date was good. The window was clean. The records showed a skeleton crew, a quiet floor, a facility running at the bottom of its demand curve with the fewest possible people inside it.

He checked the records twice. He always checked twice. Everything he built, he built on records that someone had compiled and signed and that he had verified to the standard his competence required, which was the standard of a man who trusted the paper because the paper was the form the trust took, because that was how anything got built at all.

The records were complete. The window was clean. He had accounted for everything he could see.

He folded the drawings and put them away and turned off the lamp and sat for a while in the dark kitchen in the south, with the mountain invisible beyond the window and Halla asleep above him, and he was not, that night, content. He had been content in a kitchen once, eleven years before, with a different set of drawings and a different certainty. He remembered the contentment. He could not get back to it. What he had instead was a thing he did not have a word for in any of his languages — not doubt, exactly, because he did not doubt that the arrangement was wrong and that someone had to make it visible; and not resolve, exactly, because resolve was too clean a word for a man sitting alone in the dark checking the same records a third time. It was nearer to the feeling of standing on the gantry above the galleries before the floor went down, looking at a thing he had made and could see the whole of, except that now the thing he had made was the operation, and he could see the whole of it, and there was nothing in it he had not accounted for, and the seeing did not comfort him the way the seeing used to.

He went up to bed. Halla did not wake. He lay beside her in the dark and did not sleep for a long time, and when he slept he did not dream, or did not remember dreaming, and in the morning the records were still complete and the window was still clean and the date in November was still on the calendar, where he had put it.

KASTLJÓS — RÚV Documentary broadcast, transmitted 11 April 2039

"The Timing Budget" — a film by Eiríkur Gunnarsson

Transcript excerpt, from the segment beginning at 38:20. The documents referred to are reproduced on screen during this segment; the narration is the filmmaker's, read by him.

*

NARRATION. There are three documents. I did not go looking for them. They were provided to me, by a person I will not name, who I am satisfied had access to them lawfully in the course of their work and who provided them to me at some risk to themselves. I have verified their authenticity through means I will also not describe. I am going to show them to you in the order they were created, because the order is the argument.

The first is a memo, dated the ninth of October, 2034. It is from the operator's own hydrological modelling team. It describes a feature in the monitoring data from the first highland corridor — a change in how the affected rivers release their water through the summer — and it recommends that the abstraction profile be reviewed before any further expansion is approved. It is a careful document. It is not an alarm. It is a group of the company's own specialists saying, in the company's own language, that something should be looked at.

The second document is the response to the first. It is dated the third of December, 2034. It acknowledges the modelling team's memo. It notes that the question raised is important. It states that the review the memo recommends will be incorporated into the broader environmental assessment then being prepared in support of the Phase II expansion. It thanks the team for their diligence.

The third document is the Phase II environmental assessment, the relevant section of which I have shown you earlier in this film. It concludes that the existing abstraction parameters are appropriate. It does not contain the review the modelling team recommended. The review was incorporated, as promised. Incorporated, here, turns out to mean that the question was placed inside a larger document that answered a different question, and that the larger document's conclusion was allowed to stand for the answer to the smaller one.

I want to be careful about what these documents show and what they do not show. They do not show a lie. At no point did the company state anything that these documents contradict. The company has always said that it operated within the framework and that the framework's standards were met, and these documents are consistent with that. What these documents show is something the framework's standards were not designed to capture, which is that the company was told, by its own people, in 2034, what would happen — and that what it did with the telling was receive it.

ALÞINGI 152nd Legislative Session · Written Question and Answer
Tabled 24 April 2039

*From Steinunn Ólafsdóttir (Left-Green Movement), Southern
Constituency, to the Minister of the Environment, Energy and Climate.*

✱

QUESTION. In light of the documents disclosed in the broadcast of 11 April 2039, will the Minister state: (1) whether the Ministry was aware, prior to the approval of the Phase II expansion, of the 2034 modelling memo referred to in that broadcast; (2) whether the review recommended in that memo was in fact conducted as a discrete piece of work, and if so, where its findings are recorded; and (3) whether the Minister will commission an independent review of the adequacy of the Framework Act's assessment standards, which have not been revised since 2027?

ANSWER. (1) The documents referred to are internal documents of a private operator and were not, as such, held by the Ministry prior to approval. The Ministry's approval was based on the strategic environmental assessment submitted in accordance with the Framework Act, which was assessed as compliant by the competent authorities. (2) The conduct of internal reviews by an operator is a matter for the operator. The recommendation referred to was, according to the operator's public statements, addressed within the broader assessment. (3) The Government has, as the honourable member is aware, established a review of the operation of the Framework Act, the terms of reference for which were published on the 18th of April. The review will be conducted by an independent panel and is expected to report within twenty-four months. The Government considers that this review is the appropriate vehicle for the consideration of the matters the honourable member raises.

MORGUNBLAÐIÐ 19 April 2039 · p. 4

Government announces review of digital infrastructure framework

Independent panel to report within two years; campaigners say timeline "tells you everything"

By Þórdís Helgadóttir

The Government has announced an independent review of the Framework Act on Strategic Digital Infrastructure, following the disclosure earlier this month of internal documents suggesting that the operator of the country's largest cooling complex was warned by its own specialists, five years ago, of the hydrological effects now under dispute.

The review — the fifth formal review of the framework since its establishment in 2027, though the first to be conducted by a panel independent of the relevant ministries — will examine the adequacy of the assessment standards against which infrastructure expansions are approved. It is expected to report within twenty-four months.

The Minister described the review as "thorough and properly independent" and said it would "ensure that the framework continues to command public confidence."

Reaction from those who have campaigned on the issue was sharply divided between cautious welcome and open scepticism. Dr Talia Sigurðardóttir, whose hydrological work has been central to the dispute, declined to comment on the review specifically, stating only that "reviews are not the problem; the problem is what happens between reviews."

Others were less measured. A statement circulated through channels associated with the highland campaign, the authenticity of which could not be confirmed, was brief: *"Twenty-four months. The river has not been given twenty-four months. Neither have we."*

The statement was not signed.

Editorial note appended to the archived copy: the phrase "neither have we" was, at the time of publication, read as rhetorical. It was not, in retrospect, understood to have been a statement of fact about a timeline already set.

The film changed his life in the way he had wanted and had not understood he was asking for. It aired in April. By May he was a person who got recognised, occasionally, in the queue at the Bónus on Laugavegur, by people who wanted to tell him that the film had said the thing they had not been able to say, and he learned to thank them and to move the conversation along, because there was no good answer to a stranger who believed you were on their side of a thing you had spent two years trying not to take a side on.

The trouble was that the not-taking-a-side had stopped being available to him. He had made a film that showed three documents in the order that made them an argument, and an argument was a side whether or not the man who made it called it one. He had known this when he cut the sequence. He had done it anyway, because the documents were true and the order was the order they were created in and he had not invented the meaning, only declined to hide it. But he understood now what Kári had told him in the grey back room in Hlemmur a year and a half before. *You are filming something people have not yet decided what it is. When they decide, what you are filming will be something other than what it is now. And you will hold the footage.* They had decided. The film was now a document in a fight, and Eiríkur was the man who held the footage, and the footage included a great deal more than had gone into the film.

He had filmed the bowls at the fence, in the end, the way he had been trying to film them for a year. He had found the way by giving up on finding the way — by setting the camera on the gravel at the height of the bowls themselves, in the last light, and letting the wind move the moss behind them, and not narrating it, not framing it as evidence of anything, just the bowls and the moss and the wind and the fence going off out of focus behind. It was the best thing he had ever shot. He had not put it in the film. It did not belong in the film; it belonged to something he had not

made yet and was not sure he would be allowed to make, now that he was a man with a side.

✱

Silas Vey called him in October.

Eiríkur knew who he was. Everyone who had worked on the infrastructure story knew who Silas Vey was — the thermal architect, the man who had built the Phase II cooling systems, who had left the company two years before under circumstances that the company described as a normal conclusion of a consulting relationship and that people who followed the story described in lowered voices as something else. Eiríkur had tried to interview him eighteen months earlier and had been declined through an intermediary. He had not expected to hear from him.

The call was brief. Silas asked whether they could meet, somewhere not arranged through anyone, somewhere with no record of the arranging. Eiríkur said yes before he had thought about whether to say yes, which he noticed himself doing and did not correct. They met two days later at the small café by the lighthouse on Gróttá, at the end of the spit, where the tide cut the road off twice a day and you could see anyone coming for a kilometre in either direction. Silas had chosen it. Eiríkur understood the choice when he arrived and saw the sightlines.

Silas was older than his photographs and more ordinary, a big man gone a little soft, with an engineer's way of looking at the room as a system before he looked at the people in it. They had coffee. They talked, for a while, about nothing — about the film, which Silas had watched and about which he said only that the order of the documents had been correct, that Eiríkur had got the order right, which Eiríkur understood was the highest thing a man like Silas knew how to say about a piece of work. They talked about the weather coming in. They did not talk about the thing Silas had come to talk about, for a while, and then Silas put a padded envelope on

the table between them and did talk about it, in the spare way of a man who had rehearsed saying as little as possible.

"I want you to hold this," Silas said. "I am not going to tell you what it is. I would rather you did not open it. I am asking you to keep it somewhere safe and not to think about it."

Eiríkur looked at the envelope. It was A4, padded, sealed, with nothing written on the outside. It had the weight of paper, a fair amount of it, and something firmer — a drive, maybe, or a notebook.

"For how long," Eiríkur said.

"I don't know."

"What happens that makes me open it."

Silas looked out the window at the tide, which was coming in across the causeway in the way it came in, fast at the edges and slow in the middle. "You'll know," he said. "If it happens, you'll know it's the thing. And if it doesn't happen, then in — I don't know. A year. Two. If you have heard nothing from me and nothing about me in two years, you can do what you like with it. Open it, burn it. Your choice by then."

Eiríkur did not pick up the envelope. He had learned, in two years, when he was being made a custodian of something, and he had learned that the moment of being made a custodian was the last moment in which refusal was clean. After he picked it up it would not be clean. He could refuse now. He could say no, I am a journalist, I do not hold sealed envelopes for sources, this is the thing that ends my ability to do the work. It would be the correct thing to say. His editor would say it for him if she were here.

"You understand what you're asking me to be," Eiríkur said.

"Yes."

"You're asking me to be the person who finds out what this is at the worst possible time."

"Yes," Silas said. "I'm sorry. There isn't anyone else who would understand it when they read it. You'll understand it. That's why it's you. It isn't because I trust you, although I think I do. It's because you'll know what you're looking at." He paused. "That's a worse thing to ask of a person, I know. To pick them because they'll understand. I've thought about it. I'm asking anyway."

The tide came in. A family walked out toward the lighthouse, timing it, the children running ahead. Eiríkur thought about Kári, and about the bowls at the fence, and about the footage he held that was already more than the film, and about how there was a kind of person who ended up holding things, and how he had become that kind of person somewhere in the last two years without applying for the position.

He picked up the envelope.

"I'm not opening it unless I'm sure," he said.

"You'll be sure."

"And if you're fine. If nothing happens. You come and take it back and we never talk about this."

"Yes," Silas said. "That's the version I'd prefer." He almost smiled. He did not quite. He put money on the table for the coffee, too much of it, the way a man does when he is not going to be back to settle up, and he stood and put on his coat. "Thank you," he said. "Go before the tide. I'll wait a while and go after."

Eiríkur went before the tide. He drove back across the causeway with the water already touching the edges of the road and the padded envelope on the passenger seat where, two years before, his grandmother's bag of kleinur had sat the whole way back from Reykjanesbær. He did not look at it. He drove home and put it in the gap behind the bottom drawer of the filing cabinet in his office, where he kept the one or two things he had that could hurt people, and he closed the drawer.

*

He did not think about it, the way he had been asked not to think about it, which is to say he thought about it constantly and in the specific manner of a man trying not to. He went on with the work. There was a great deal of work. The film had opened doors and the doors led to more footage and the footage needed cutting and the cutting needed time. He filled the time.

In the second week of November he caught himself, twice, calculating how long it had been since Gróttu. Three weeks. Silas had said a year, two years, if nothing happened. Three weeks was nothing. Three weeks was not even the beginning of the waiting. He told himself this. He believed it in the way you believe a thing you have decided to believe.

On the night of the nineteenth of November he was in the edit suite late, alone, working on the bowls footage that did not belong to any film yet, when his phone began to do the thing phones do when a story is breaking — the several notifications at once, the particular density of them. He did not look at it for a moment. He was matching the wind audio to the moss. Then he looked at it.

He read the first headline. He read the second. He put down the headphones.

He did not, in that moment, think about the envelope. That came a few seconds later, and when it came it came not as a thought but as a physical thing, a drop in the floor of his stomach, the body understanding before the mind had finished. He sat in the edit suite with the bowls frozen on the screen behind him, the wind audio still running in the headphones on the desk, tinny and far away, and he understood that the worst possible time had arrived, and that he was the person, and that in the morning, or tonight, or whenever he could make himself do it, he was going to have to open the bottom drawer.

20 · The Operation Begins

The two columns below are reproduced as they were later assembled, side by side, by the panel of inquiry, from two sources: the facility's automated systems log for the night of 19 November 2039 (left), recorded in real time and unaltered; and the incident report compiled afterward by the Operations Director (right), covering the same period. The panel placed them in parallel to establish the sequence of events. The effect of reading them in parallel was not the effect the panel intended.

*

SYSTEMS LOG

02:00:00 — South complex, all wings. Aggregate load at seasonal minimum. Night status nominal.

INCIDENT REPORT At approximately 02:00 the complex was operating under normal night conditions at seasonal minimum load. Staffing was at the reduced overnight level in accordance with the standard November schedule. There was no indication, at this time, of any abnormal condition.

SYSTEMS LOG

02:41:18 — Gallery 7, primary loop. Pressure deviation, cold-side relief bank. Magnitude within fault-detection threshold. Flag raised.

02:41:46 — Graceful-shutdown protocol, Wing 8. Initiated automatically on confirmed fault. Sequence A commencing. Estimated wing-down: 31 minutes.

INCIDENT REPORT At 02:41 the automated systems registered a pressure deviation in the primary cooling loop serving Wing 8, originating at the cold-side relief bank in the heat-exchange gallery designated Gallery 7. The deviation was of a magnitude consistent with a relief-valve fault. The facility's graceful-shutdown protocol initiated automatically, as designed, and began the controlled wind-down of Wing 8. At this stage the event presented as an equipment fault and was

responded to as such. The protocol functioned correctly.

SYSTEMS LOG

02:43:02 — Wing 8, Sequence A nominal. Load shedding to regional network confirmed. No customer-facing interruption.

02:44:55 — Gallery 7. Personnel access event, service hatch C. Single entry. Badge: not recognised / manual override used.

INCIDENT REPORT The graceful shutdown proceeded normally for the first several minutes. Load was shed to the regional network without interruption to services. The deviation was, at this point, assessed by the on-shift technical lead as a probable relief-valve failure requiring inspection rather than as a security event. This assessment was reasonable on the information available. The access event subsequently recorded at service hatch C was not, at the time, brought to the attention of the night supervisor; the access-control system generated the event but did not escalate it, the manual-override entry method being one used routinely by maintenance personnel.

SYSTEMS LOG

02:46:30 — Secondary cooling, Gallery 7. UNIT 7-B: status change, OFFLINE → ACTIVE.

INCIDENT REPORT At 02:46 the secondary cooling unit designated 7-B registered a change of status from offline to active. This unit had been recorded in the maintenance management system as offline for scheduled servicing. It had in fact been returned to service earlier that day, on a manual maintenance bypass, by a contracted crew working on an adjacent system; the return to service had not yet been entered into the maintenance management system at the time of the event. The systems log therefore shows the unit activating from a state the management system recorded as offline. The discrepancy between the two records is the subject of a separate finding of this report. [See Finding 4.]

SYSTEMS LOG

02:46:31 — Gallery 7, primary loop. Pressure differential collapse. Relief bank ineffective. Thermal rise, heat-exchange hall.

02:46:38 — Wing 8, Sequence A: FAULT. Graceful shutdown unable to proceed. Thermal cascade detected. Sequence B (emergency) conditions present.

INCIDENT REPORT The activation of unit 7-B, occurring during the graceful shutdown, collapsed the pressure differential on which the controlled wind-down depended. The relief bank, which had been passing the released pressure as designed, was rendered ineffective by the secondary unit's reintroduction of flow. The orderly shutdown could no longer proceed. A thermal cascade condition developed in the Gallery 7 heat-exchange hall. The conditions for emergency shutdown — Sequence B — were now present. Sequence B, unlike Sequence A, is not a controlled wind-down. It is a protective shutdown that prioritises the computational hardware and the structural integrity of the wing over the recoverability of the cooling system, and it assumes that the heat-exchange galleries are unoccupied.

SYSTEMS LOG

02:47:10 — Gallery 7. Personnel: 1 (hatch C). Galleries 7-deep (maintenance run): personnel 3. Door states: closed.

INCIDENT REPORT At this time there was one individual present in Gallery 7, having entered through service hatch C at 02:44. There were, additionally, three members of the contracted maintenance crew — the crew responsible for the earlier return-to-service of unit 7-B — present in the deeper maintenance run beyond Gallery 7. The presence of this crew at this hour was the result of a schedule change made on the afternoon of 19 November to address a servicing backlog. The change had been entered in the contractor's own scheduling system. It had not propagated to the facility's master overnight-occupancy record at the time the event commenced. [See Finding 5.]

SYSTEMS LOG

02:47:55 — Sequence B armed. Thermal projection, Galleries 7-deep: survivable limit approx. 6 min. Emergency egress: requires manual override, Gallery 7 panel.

INCIDENT REPORT The emergency shutdown, once armed, would render the deeper maintenance run unsurvivable within approximately six minutes through thermal propagation. The three crew members in that run could exit only through Gallery 7, and the emergency egress route from the deeper run could be opened only by manual triggering of the override panel located within Gallery 7 itself — a panel which, by the design of the protective system, cannot be triggered remotely and requires a person to be physically present at it. Gallery 7, by this time, was approaching its own thermal limit.

SYSTEMS LOG

02:48:12 — Gallery 7 panel: override sequence initiated. Local.

INCIDENT REPORT At 02:48 the manual override sequence was initiated, locally, at the Gallery 7 panel.

SYSTEMS LOG

02:48:12 — [continued]

INCIDENT REPORT The remainder of the sequence is set out in the following sections. The systems log continues to record. What the systems log records, from this point, is a sequence of events. What it does not record, and what this report is consequently also unable to record, is why the override was initiated locally rather than abandoned, by a person who, on the thermal projections available to that person at that panel, would have understood that initiating it locally and remaining to complete it could not be reconciled with that person's own egress.

[The parallel reconstruction ends here. The death chapter that follows is not part of the inquiry record. It is not part of any record. It is the one account of those minutes that no document contains.]

He was inside Gallery 7 when the pressure differential collapsed, and he knew what it meant before the readout on the panel finished telling him, because he had spent eleven years learning to read this loop faster than its instruments could report on it.

He had come in through hatch C at the bottom of the protocol's third minute, exactly as planned, to confirm the relief bank was passing and the shutdown was clean — to put eyes on the thing, because he did not trust a graceful shutdown he could not see, and because the plan had always had him present for the part that mattered. The plan had him in and out in four minutes. The wing would be most of the way down. The relief bank would be doing its work. He would confirm, and withdraw, and the facility would finish bringing itself to rest the way he had built it to.

The relief bank had been doing its work. He had stood at the panel and watched it pass the pressure exactly as designed, the numbers falling in the sequence he had drawn eleven years before, and for about ninety seconds he had felt the specific cold satisfaction of a thing going as planned, which was the closest he had come in a year to the contentment he could not get back to.

Then unit 7-B came up.

He saw it on the panel as a status line and he did not, for a half-second, believe it, because 7-B was offline, 7-B had been offline for nine days, he had checked the maintenance management record twice and 7-B was down for servicing and would be down until the twenty-fourth. He had built the entire pressure plan on 7-B being offline. The relief bank was sized to pass the loop's pressure with the secondary units down. With 7-B reintroducing flow, the differential the relief bank depended on was gone, and the bank, which could pass more than the loop could ever deliver, could pass nothing useful at all, because the thing the bank needed was not capacity but the differential, and the differential was what 7-B had just destroyed.

The pressure did not release. The heat did not leave. He watched the thermal line in the hall begin to climb and understood, in the flat fast way he understood systems, that the graceful shutdown was dead. Sequence A had failed. The facility was about to do the only other thing it knew how to do, which was Sequence B. The emergency shutdown. The one that assumed the galleries were empty — because the galleries were supposed to be empty, because no one was supposed to be in a heat-exchange gallery during a thermal event. The protective architecture had been designed on that assumption. He had helped design it. The only thing it expected to find in Gallery 7 during a cascade was equipment.

He was in Gallery 7 during a cascade.

That was the first thing he understood, and it was a thing about himself, and he set it aside, because it was not the thing that mattered. He had come knowing the risk to himself. The risk to himself was accounted for. He could get to hatch C. Hatch C was nine metres behind him and the hall had perhaps four minutes before it stopped being survivable and he could cover nine metres in well under four minutes. He was not, in the first understanding, in real danger. He could leave.

The second thing he understood was the door states.

The panel showed him the galleries deeper than 7, the maintenance run that went back into the wing, the spaces he had drawn and never had cause to think about because nobody went into them at night. Personnel: three. Door states: closed. He asked it for the thermal projection, because he knew how to ask it, and the projection gave the deeper run about six minutes. He asked it for the egress, and the egress ran through Gallery 7, and the protective system sealed it the instant Sequence B armed, and the only thing that could open it was the manual panel he was standing at. There was no remote. He had been in the room when they decided there would be no remote.

Three people. Six minutes for them. Four minutes for the room he would have to stay in to give them the six.

He understood it completely and at once. It was the simplest problem he had been given in years.

He knew the three were not the night skeleton crew he had planned around. He knew they were the contracted maintenance crew, the ones who must have brought 7-B back up, the ones whose being here was the reason the whole thing had gone wrong. And he understood — with a clarity that did not feel like bitterness, because there was no time for it to become bitterness — that they were in the records somewhere. A schedule change had been made that afternoon, entered in some system and not yet in the one he had checked. He had checked twice. The thing he needed to know had not been in the place he checked. The records had been complete and the records had been wrong, and he was standing in a thermal cascade he had triggered because a document he had trusted had not contained a fact that was true.

He thought, for the part of a second the thought took: *Of course*. Not as despair. As recognition. He had built his life on the paper being the form the trust took. He had filed a permit eleven years ago and not pulled the assessments behind it, because the references were complete, because that was how anything got built. He had checked the overnight occupancy twice. The occupancy had been complete. The occupancy had been wrong. There were three people in the deeper run who were not in the record, and they were going to die in six minutes unless someone stood at a panel in a room that had four.

His hand was already on the panel.

The override sequence was a guarded start — a physical cover, a confirm, then a hold-to-run that did not complete on its own, that required a person present and a hand on it until the egress doors had cycled fully open, which the panel told him was a hundred and ten seconds, which was

longer than the room had, which he had known before he asked because he had known the cycle time for eleven years.

He had perhaps a second in which leaving was still a choice he could make with his body, in which his legs could still carry him the nine metres to hatch C and out, in which the arithmetic was a thing happening to other people that he could decline to be the solution to.

He thought of Halla.

He did not think of her in words and he did not see her face. She was simply there, the way she had been there in the dark kitchen, present at the edge of the thing, the largest fact in a life that was about to stop being able to hold facts, and the thought of her was not an argument for leaving and was not an argument for staying. It was only that she was there, and that whatever he did in the next second he would be doing it as the man she had not made say it, the man she had given the not-saying to, and he could not have explained, even to himself, even with time, how that gift was connected to the panel under his hand, except that it was — except that the not-being-made-to-lie and the staying were the same kind of thing, were both about what you owed to the truth of a situation once you had let yourself see it.

He could see the whole of it.

He lifted the cover.

The cover is up. His hand is on the run.

He presses it. The panel acknowledges. The hold-to-run engages under his palm, a slight resistance, a thing designed to be held by a person who means it. He means it. He holds it.

A clock starts on the panel. A hundred and ten seconds. The egress doors in the deeper run begin to cycle. He can see their states change on the readout, one and then the next, the slow sequence of a protective system being told, against its own logic, to open a path it had sealed. The system does not want to do this. The system was built to keep these doors shut during exactly this condition. He is standing here overriding the thing he built to keep people safe, in order to keep people safe, and the contradiction is not a contradiction, it is only what the situation is, and he holds the run.

The heat is a pressure now and not a temperature. It is on the back of his neck and in his throat when he breathes and it has a sound, the hall has a sound it has never had, a deep working sound of metal taking on more than it was meant to hold. He does not look away from the readout. The doors are cycling. Door one: open. Door two: cycling.

Ninety seconds.

He thinks about whether the three of them are moving. He cannot see them. The panel shows door states and personnel counts and it does not show whether the three people understand that a path is opening, whether they are at the doors waiting or whether they are deeper still, whether they will move when the way opens or whether they are already past moving. He has no way to tell them. There is no channel from this panel to those people. He is opening a door for strangers who do not know he is here, who will go out through a gap in a wall and never know that the gap was held open by a hand, and this is correct, this is how it should be, they should not have to carry it, the not-knowing is a thing he can give them

and he gives it.

Seventy seconds.

The air is wrong to breathe. He takes smaller breaths. He has read about this, the way you read about everything in a long technical life, the physiology of it, what heat does, the order in which it does it, and he finds that knowing the order is not useful, that the knowing does not change anything, that he is going to experience the order whether or not he can name its stages. He keeps his hand on the run. His hand is the whole of his job now. There is nothing else required of him but to keep his hand here and stay conscious long enough for the doors to finish.

Door two: open. Door three: cycling.

He thinks of the gantry. He does not decide to; it comes. The gantry above the galleries before the floor went down, the light along the empty cable trays, the loop laid out below him like a drawing made real, and himself standing over it knowing it was right because he could see the whole of it. He had loved that. He had loved the seeing. He is in the galleries now, under the floor that went down over them, inside the drawing, and the seeing is the same seeing it always was, the same cold clear pleasure of understanding a system entirely, except that the system has him inside it now and the understanding includes his own ending as one of its terms.

Fifty seconds.

Halla. Her name, now, in words, once. He lets it come. He does not follow it anywhere. There is no room to follow it anywhere and he would not know where it went. She is in the south, asleep, under the mountain, in the house, and she does not know, and she will know, and there is nothing he can do about the order of those things, the not-knowing and then the knowing, the same shape as the strangers at the door, everyone he is leaving will have a not-knowing and then a knowing and he cannot be present for any of the knowings, he can only do this, hold this, finish this.

Door three: open.

All three. The path is open. The readout shows him the egress route clear from the deeper run through to the external muster point, the doors standing open that he opened, and now it is up to them, now it is the legs of three people he cannot see, and he has done the part that was his to do.

The clock still runs. Thirty seconds. The hold-to-run has to complete or the doors will re-arm. He keeps his hand on it. This is the part that is only waiting. He has opened the doors and now he must simply not let go for thirty more seconds, and he is not sure he has thirty more seconds, and it does not matter whether he has them as long as his hand stays where it is, because a hand can hold a contact after the man is past holding anything, a hand is a simple machine, he has only to become the simple machine.

He thinks in Norwegian now. It comes up from underneath, the way it came up when he was pleased, the way it came up when he was angry, the first language, the one his pleasure and his anger wore before he dressed them in the others, and there is no pleasure now and no anger, there is only the language itself arriving to be with him at the end the way it was with him at the beginning, before English, before Icelandic, before the loop, before the country, the language his mother used, and he does not form a sentence in it, he is past sentences, there are only a few words and they are the oldest words and they are not about any of this.

Twenty seconds.

The hall is very loud. The readout is hard to see. His hand is on the run. He keeps it there. He is not afraid in the way he would have predicted; the fear is somewhere, he can feel that it is somewhere, but it is not here at the panel, here at the panel there is only the task and the heat and the old words and the contact under his palm that he must not release.

Ten.

He keeps his hand on the run.

The doors are open. The three of them are moving or they are not. He has done what he can see to do. He can see the whole of it. He can —

They came to the house at twenty past six in the morning, two of them, a woman and a man, in a car she did not recognise, and she knew before they were out of it. She had been up since five. She was always up before six; the farm was an hour east but she kept farm hours in the town house the way her mother had kept them all her life, and she had been at the kitchen window with her coffee watching the dark not-quite-lift over the lava when the car turned in off the road and slowed and stopped, and she had put the coffee down, because a car that turns in slowly at twenty past six and stops and sits for a moment before anyone gets out is not a car that brings anything a person can be ready for.

She knew before they were out of it. She did not know the specifics. She knew the category. She had known the category was coming for the better part of a year, the way you know the weather, the way she had known there was a third thing at the table that they had agreed not to introduce, and she had known it without knowing its name and now its name was getting out of a car in her drive in two parts, a woman and a man, in coats that were too good for police and too plain for anything else.

She opened the door before they knocked. The woman said her name as a question — *Halla?* — and Halla said yes, and the woman said she was from the company, that she was very sorry, that there had been an incident at the facility during the night, and Halla heard the word *incident* and heard the word *facility* and understood that they were going to do this in the company's words, that they had been sent with the company's words to say the company's version of the thing, and that somewhere underneath the company's words was Silas, and that she would have to listen through the words to find him.

She let them in. She made them sit. She did not make coffee; some instinct of hospitality rose in her and she put it down, because she was not going to spend the worst morning of her life being hostess to the people

who had come to manage her, and the small refusal was the first decision she made as a widow and she made it before she had been told she was one.

"Is he dead," she said.

The woman from the company looked at the man. The man was younger and had not yet said anything and looked as though he very much did not want to be the one to say anything. The woman said that they were still confirming details, that the situation overnight had been complex, that —

"Is he dead," Halla said again, in the same voice, the voice she used on the phone to the bank, the voice that did not rise.

"Yes," the woman said. "I'm so sorry. Yes."

Halla nodded. She had already known. She had needed to hear it anyway — the knowing and the hearing were two different things, and you needed both. The way Silas needed to check the same record twice. The way he checked everything twice. The thought of him checking things twice arrived in her with such force that she put her hand flat on the table.

*

They told her a version. She let them tell it. The version had a great many words in it and the words were arranged to do something, and she was not, in the first hour, able to tell what the words were arranged to do, only that they were arranged, that nothing the woman said was accidental, that the company had thought about how to say this before it sent two people in a car at twenty past six. There had been an incident. There had been a fault, and then there had been a cascade, and there had been people in the facility who should not — the woman caught herself — people in the facility, a maintenance crew, who had been able to evacuate, and the evacuation had been possible because — and here the woman slowed, and chose, and Halla watched her choose — because of actions taken during

the incident.

"What actions," Halla said.

The woman said that the details were still being established. The woman said that there would be a full inquiry. The woman said that Silas had been present in the facility during the night, which was itself a matter that the inquiry would — and Halla stopped listening to the sentence because she had heard the thing inside it, which was that they did not yet know how to talk about why Silas had been in the facility at two in the morning, that this was the part the company's words had not been fully built for yet, that they had built words for the death and not yet for the questions the death asked.

She knew why he had been in the facility. She did not say so. She had spent a year not saying things and she was good at it now, and she understood, sitting at her own table with her hand flat on the wood, that the not-saying was not over, that it had in some way only now begun, that the largest thing she had ever given him she was going to have to go on giving him after he was dead, because the version these people were assembling and the man she had been married to for twenty-two years were going to have to be held apart by somebody and the somebody was her.

She thought: *he stayed*. She did not know the specifics and she did not need them. She knew the shape. There had been people who should not have been there and there had been a way out that took someone to hold it open and Silas had been the someone, because of course he had, because that was the line he would not cross and the line he would not cross was letting someone be hurt, he had said it to her once, years ago, before any of this, when it was still abstract, when it was still a thing other people did — *if someone gets hurt, we become what they say we are* — and she had not known then that he was telling her how he would die.

*

She got them out of the house by nine. There were things they wanted — for her to come and identify, for her to sign, for her to be managed through the next stage of their process — and she agreed to the ones she could not refuse and refused the ones she could, and she did it in the bank-telephone voice, and they left a number, and they left, finally, the car backing out slowly the way it had come in.

She stood in the kitchen.

She did not cry yet. She noticed that she did not cry yet and did not force it. It would come. She knew it would come the way she knew the lambing came, on its own schedule, not hers, and that her job until it came was the things that had to be done, the calls, her mother, his sister in Norway, the things a death required of the living in the first hours, the administration of it, the paperwork of grief that arrives before the grief has cleared customs.

She looked out the window at the lava going grey in the proper morning light. Somewhere south and west of her, past the steam of the geothermal plant, was the facility he had built and then unbuilt, the white wings, the galleries under the floors, the place he had loved standing over before the floors went down and had died under after. She had never been inside it. He had offered, once, years ago, to take her on a site visit, and she had said no, she had had no interest, it was his and she had her own things that were hers, and now she would never see the inside of the thing that had taken twenty-two years of his attention and then the rest of it, and she found that she did not want to see it, that the not-wanting was clean and certain, that whatever was in there was not him, that he was not in the gallery where he had died any more than her father was in the ground at Eyvindarhólar where they had put him.

He was here. That was the brutal useless truth of it. He was in the house, in the dish rack where his cup was, in the chair, in the boots by the door, in the bed upstairs she had not yet had to lie down in alone. He was

in the south at her mother's where they had not gone often enough because the new wing had become his whole life and then the operation had become his whole life and she had let both of them take him because she had not known how to do otherwise, and she thought, standing at the window, that she would have time now to be angry about that, that the anger was somewhere in the queue behind the grief and the administration, that there would be a great deal of time now for all the feelings to take their turns.

She picked up the phone to call her mother.

She put it down again.

She stood at the window a while longer, in the grey light, in the house full of him, with the lava going on outside the way it had gone on before any of them, before the facility, before the country had a name, before there was anyone to stand at a window and lose anyone, and she gave herself the length of the standing, which was all she could afford, and then she picked up the phone again and called her mother and said the words, in Icelandic, in the bank-telephone voice that broke, finally, on the second sentence, where she had known it would.

OPERATOR INCIDENT REPORT — CONCLUDING FINDINGS

Event of 19 November 2039 · Gallery 7, Wing 8, Keflavík North

Prepared by: A. Sharma, Operations Director Classification: Internal /

Provided to Inquiry

Concluding findings only. The full report runs to one hundred and forty pages.

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Finding 4. Unit 7-B was recorded in the maintenance management system as offline at the time of the event. It had been returned to service that afternoon on a manual bypass by a contracted crew, and the return had not been entered in the management system. The discrepancy between the physical state of the unit and its recorded state was the proximate technical cause of the failure of the graceful shutdown. Had the management record been accurate, the unit's active state would have been visible to all parties, including any party planning to rely on the unit's being offline.

Finding 5. The presence of three contracted maintenance personnel in the deep maintenance run beyond Gallery 7 at the time of the event resulted from a schedule change made on the afternoon of 19 November. The change was entered in the contractor's scheduling system. It had not propagated to the facility's master overnight-occupancy record at the time the event commenced. The facility's occupancy record therefore showed the deep run as unoccupied. It was not unoccupied.

Finding 6. The three maintenance personnel evacuated the deep run successfully via the emergency egress route. That route was opened by the manual triggering and completion of the override sequence at the Gallery 7 panel. The override sequence requires continuous local presence at the panel for its full duration (110 seconds). The panel is located within Gallery 7. Gallery 7 reached conditions incompatible with human survival

during the period in which the override sequence was held. The individual who initiated and completed the override sequence did not evacuate Gallery 7 and was recovered deceased at the panel following the event.

Finding 7. The individual at the Gallery 7 panel entered the facility through service hatch C at 02:44 by means of a manual access override. The individual was not a member of the facility's staff or of any contracted crew authorised to be present that night. The individual has been identified. The circumstances of the individual's presence, and the relationship of that presence to the initial pressure deviation recorded at 02:41, are matters for the inquiry and for the police investigation and are beyond the scope of this report.

Finding 8. Had the override sequence not been initiated and completed, the three personnel in the deep maintenance run would not have been able to evacuate before that run reached conditions incompatible with human survival. This finding is stated as a technical conclusion drawn from the thermal projections and the egress timings. The report does not characterise the finding further.

The report makes no recommendation regarding Finding 8. It is the position of the author that Finding 8 is a statement of fact and not a matter on which an operations report is competent to comment.

A. Sharma, Operations Director.

LÖGREGLAN Á SUÐURNESJUM Statement to the press, 21
November 2039

The Reykjanes District Police can confirm that one person died during an incident at the Keflavík North facility in the early hours of the 19th of November. The deceased has been identified and the next of kin informed. The death is being investigated alongside the incident itself, which the police are treating as a deliberate interference with critical infrastructure. The police can confirm that three other individuals present in the facility during the incident were evacuated safely. Out of respect for the family of

the deceased and the integrity of the investigation, the police will make no further comment at this time.

VÍSIR Online · 22 November 2039

The man who stayed: what we know, and what we don't

Sources confirm identity of Keflavík North victim as former lead engineer. Questions mount over how a planned sabotage became a rescue.

The piece, widely shared, established the central facts within seventy-two hours: that the dead man had designed the cooling systems he was that night attempting to disable; that the disabling had been intended to force a safe shutdown and had instead, through a recording error, triggered an emergency condition; and that the same man had then remained inside a lethal space to open an escape route for three workers whose presence no record had shown. The piece did not have the override timings. Those came later. What the piece had was the shape, and the shape was already, in the public mind, becoming something the facts would have to be fitted to rather than the other way around.

The three evacuated workers were not named in the press at the time, at the request of the police and the families. Their names appear in the inquiry record. One of them, a maintenance technician from Akureyri named Katrín Jónsdóttir, twenty-six years old, had been added to the night schedule that afternoon to help clear a servicing backlog. She had been in the deep run when the doors opened. She did not know, when she went out through them, that anyone had held them open. She did not know it for some time. When she learned it, and what she said when she learned it, belongs to a later part of this account.

*

Eiríkur opened the bottom drawer on the morning of the twenty-first, two days after the night of the nineteenth, after the death was confirmed

and named and after he had sat with the fact of it for as long as he could make himself sit with it before doing the thing he had known since the first notifications he was going to have to do.

He took out the padded envelope. He held it for a while. He had been told he would know when it was the thing, and it was the thing, there was no question that it was the thing, and he found that knowing it was the thing did not make it any easier to break the seal, that Silas had been right about everything except how much easier the certainty would make it, which was not at all.

He did not open it that morning. He held it and he put it back and he closed the drawer.

He opened it three days later. What was in it, and what he did with what was in it, belongs to what came after — to the part of this account that is no longer about the arrangement, or the divergence, or the heat, but about what a death does to the people left holding the pieces of it, and to a country that had not, until that November, had a martyr, and did not yet know that it had been given one, or what a martyr would turn out to cost.

PART FOUR

The Martyr Years

He opened it on the fourth day, in the morning, at the kitchen table, with the door locked though there was no one in the flat to lock it against. He had told himself the fourth day the way he had told himself the third and the second. He did it on the fourth because he understood, waking, that there was no day on which it would be easier, and that the waiting had stopped being respect and become avoidance, and that Silas had given it to him because he would understand it, and that understanding it was the thing he had been not-doing for four days.

He cut the seal with a kitchen knife. Inside there was a small drive, the kind that held a great deal, and a letter, several pages, in a hand he did not know — small, upright, engineer's printing, the letters formed separately, as though each had been placed rather than written. He set the drive aside. He read the letter.

*

To whoever needs it.

I have addressed this in the way I have because I do not know who will read it, and because the alternatives were worse. If I address it to no one it looks like a thing meant to be found. If I address it to a person, that person becomes responsible for it in a way I have no right to ask. So: to whoever needs it. You will know if you are the one who needs it. I have sized this for the general case, which is the only honest thing an engineer can do when he cannot predict the load.

First, the part that matters most and that I want stated plainly, because plainness is what I am good at and because the thing itself is plain.

The operation was designed so that no one would be hurt. I want this understood not as a defence but as a fact, the way the load on a beam

is a fact. I designed it. I know what was designed. The whole architecture of the act was the avoidance of harm. It used the facility's own graceful-shutdown protocol — the safety system, the thing built to bring a wing down without damage when something goes wrong. We did not defeat the safety. We invoked it. We made the facility do, deliberately, the thing it was built to do accidentally. The point of the operation was to show that the system was vulnerable while proving, in the same act, that we would not hurt anyone proving it. If you take nothing else from this, take that: it was built to be safe. The drive contains the technical record. Anyone competent can verify it. I would ask that someone competent does.

I am aware of what we are called. I am aware that to most people there is no difference between a man who disables a cooling system and a man who would burn the country down. I have spent a year inside the difference and I will try to put it in one sentence, because one sentence is all anyone will read. The difference is this: if someone is hurt, we become what they say we are, and so the entire discipline of the thing is that no one is hurt. That is the whole of it. That is the line. I have held to it. Whatever happens, I held to it.

Second, why. I will be brief because the why is less interesting than people will want it to be, and because the wanting-it-to-be-interesting is part of the problem.

I built the cooling systems. I believed in them. I believed Iceland was the better place to do this, that the cold was here for the taking and could be taken without breaking what produced it, and I was not wrong about the engineering. I was wrong about the arithmetic of it — not the thermal arithmetic, which was correct, but the other arithmetic, the one where you add up all the reasonable decisions and discover they sum to a thing no one chose. I watched the channel that is supposed to stop this receive every warning and convert each

one into a process and run the process out past the point where anything could be done. I put warnings into it myself. I watched them be received. I came to understand that a system that receives everything does not need to refuse anything, and that the receiving is not the opposite of the harm but the mechanism of it. At some point understanding this stopped being enough. I do not have a cleaner account than that. I did not have a conversion. I had an accumulation, and the accumulation reached a level, and the level was the thing.

I am not a brave man and this is not a brave document. I expect to be home for breakfast on the twentieth. If you are reading this, then either enough time has passed that it no longer matters, or something has gone wrong, and if something has gone wrong I want the first part of this letter — the part about no one being hurt — to be the part that survives. Not the why. The why is mine. The fact that it was built to be safe belongs to everyone who will have to decide what to think about it.

There is a last part, below, that is not for whoever needs it. It is for one person. If you are reading this and you are not her, you will know it is not for you, and I am asking you — I have no right to ask, and I am asking — to get it to her, or to decide, if you cannot get it to her cleanly, that she is better not having it. I trust whoever you are to make that decision because I have to trust someone and the someone is, by the accident of who reads this, you. I am sorry. It is a great deal to hand a stranger. I have spent my life handing strangers things in sealed packages and trusting the packages. This is the last one.

— S.

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Below the signature there were nine lines. Eiríkur read them once. Then he folded that page back, behind the others, so that he was not looking at it, and he sat for a while looking at the wall.

They were not what he would have expected, if he had let himself expect anything. They were not a farewell, because the man who wrote them had not known he was saying goodbye; he had expected to be home for breakfast. They were small — the kind of thing a man writes before doing something risky, wanting, in case, to have said a particular ordinary thing he had perhaps not said enough out loud. That was the weight of them. They did not know what they were. And he understood, within a minute, that he was now carrying something heavier than the drive, heavier than the public letter, heavier than the footage. No one had given him any way to put it down.

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He did the work he knew how to do, because it was there to be done and because doing it was a way of not yet doing the other thing. He copied the drive. He verified, over the following days, with a thermal engineer he trusted and swore to silence, that the technical record was what the letter said it was: that the operation had been designed around the graceful shutdown, that casualties had not been the means or the risk anyone had accepted, that the man had been telling the plain truth in his plain hand. He prepared the public portions of the letter — the part about no one being hurt, the part about the why, withholding the why where the letter asked him to and keeping the part the letter said belonged to everyone — for release through his organisation, with the verification, in a form that would change the public story.

He did not release it for three weeks. He told himself this was diligence. Some of it was diligence. Some of it was that he understood what the release would do — that it would convert Silas Vey from a

saboteur who had died in his own act into an engineer who had built the act to be safe and stayed to make it so, and that the conversion, once made, could not be unmade, and that he, Eiríkur, holding the documents, was the person who would make it. He had made a man into an argument once before, with three documents in the order they were created, and he had watched the argument become a side. He knew what he was about to do and he knew it was true and he knew that being true was not the same as being safe to do.

He released it in the second week of December.

He did not, in December or after, do anything about the nine lines. He kept them folded behind the others, in the letter, in the gap behind the bottom drawer where the envelope had been, and he carried the decision the way he carried the footage he could not use — present, filed, his. He had been given it because he would understand it. He understood it. Understanding it had not told him what to do. There was no one to ask; the only person who could have said what she would have wanted was the person the lines were for, and to ask her was to deliver them, and he had not decided whether to deliver them. So he asked no one. The decision stayed where he had put it, behind the drawer, with a weight that did not lessen.

VÍKURFRÉTTIR Reykjanes regional news · 28 November 2039

Bowls left at facility fence; operator asks public to stay clear of perimeter

The operator of the Keflavík North complex has asked members of the public not to approach the facility's perimeter fence, following the appearance over the past week of a number of small bowls and other containers placed along the fence line on the eastern side of the site.

The objects, most of them ceramic, some containing water, began appearing within days of the incident of 19 November in which one man died and three workers were evacuated. A spokesperson for the operator said the company "understood the public's wish to mark a tragic event" but asked that people not approach the perimeter, citing safety and the ongoing investigation. The spokesperson confirmed that the objects were being removed periodically and that those that appeared to be of value were being stored in case anyone wished to reclaim them. No one has reclaimed any.

A council representative for Reykjanesbær said the town had no plans to interfere with the practice provided it remained on public land away from the fence, and added: "People grieve how they grieve. We are not going to police bowls."

REYKJANESBÆR — FRÍKIRKJUSÖFNUÐUR Parish noticeboard
· December 2039

A gentle request. We are grateful for the care with which people have been leaving offerings at the church door and on the steps over the past weeks. We understand the impulse and we share the sorrow. We ask only, for reasons of access and the safety of our older members in the ice, that offerings not be left on the steps themselves but in the gravel to the side, where they will not be disturbed and where they will not cause anyone to slip. Bowls left there will be left in peace.

The church takes no position on the events that have given rise to them, except to hold all those affected in our prayers, including the family of the man who died, and the families of those who came home.

Online forum, Icelandic, general-discussion board — thread titled "Skálarnar" ("The bowls"). Excerpt, December 2039. Usernames removed.

— Has anyone else seen them out on the F-road by the corridor markers now? Not just at the facility. Out in the highland. Someone is driving out there in winter to leave bowls by survey pegs.

— My sister left one. I asked her why. She couldn't tell me. She said she just wanted to.

— It's theatre. The man broke into a data centre and got himself killed and now it's a thing people do for the photos.

— He stayed to get the workers out. Three people are alive. That isn't theatre.

— We don't actually know that yet. That's a story going round. The investigation hasn't said.

— My grandmother left water out for the huldufólk her whole life and nobody called it theatre. People have always left things out. This is the same thing. It isn't about whether the story is confirmed. It's about wanting to put something down in front of a thing too big to hold.

— Put a bowl of water down in front of a data centre. Listen to yourself.

— Yes. A bowl of water in front of a data centre. That's exactly it. That's the whole point, actually.

Caption to a photograph, Morgunblaðið weekend supplement, January 2040. Photograph: a line of bowls along a wire fence in snow, the white wings of the facility soft in the distance behind. Photographer: Brynjar Snær.

*Offerings along the eastern perimeter of Keflavík North, January. By the time

this photograph was taken, the practice had spread beyond the facility to the

highland corridor and to at least a dozen other sites around the country with

no direct connection to the events of November. None of the people who left

these had, at the time, read any account of what the man who died had written,

because no account had yet been published. They were responding to something

else, which this newspaper does not have a word for and suspects does not

require one.*

They came to her because she was the author of the line, and they came in the order of their kinds: first the journalists, then the movement-adjacent people who would not call themselves movement people, then, in the spring, an academic press with a contract and an advance and a deadline eighteen months out, for the book they wanted her to write, which they did not call the definitive account but which they described in terms that meant the definitive account. She was the obvious person. She had the standing, the data, the line. She had been making the argument for fifteen years. The man had died, in effect, inside her argument. Who else would write it.

She said no to all of them.

She said no to the press in a meeting in a café on Bankastræti, kindly, to a young editor who had clearly been sent and who clearly believed in the book and who took the no the way the young take a no from someone they admire, as a thing to be negotiated rather than a thing that had been said. She let him negotiate for a while. Then she said no again, less kindly, because the kind no had not been heard, and the unkind no landed, and the young editor went away with his contract, and Talia sat in the café afterward with her cold coffee and felt the particular tiredness of having had to be unkind to a person who had done nothing but ask her to do the thing everyone agreed she should do.

She wrote a short statement, eventually, because the asking would not stop until she had said something on the record, and she released it through the university, four sentences, which she had worked on longer than she had worked on some papers. She said that she had not known Silas Vey. She said that a death was not an argument and could not be made into one without doing violence to both the death and the argument. She said that to make a man a symbol was to receive him — she used the word deliberately, the word that had become hers, the word for what the

framework did — to convert him into something usable and lose the actual man inside the use. She said that she would not be part of that and asked, without hope, that others consider not being part of it either.

The statement was published widely. It was admired. It was, she understood within a week, the single most effective thing she could possibly have done to advance the canonization she had written it to prevent.

She had not foreseen this and should have. A reluctant prophet is the only convincing kind. Her refusal to make Silas a saint was read as the humility proper to sainthood — not his, hers; she became, in refusing the role of the movement's voice, more exactly its voice than any acceptance could have made her. The statement was quoted on the walls now, alongside the line. *A death is not an argument*. People wrote it in chalk under the watershed line, as though the two were one teaching. She had written a sentence to stand outside the scripture and the sentence had been taken into the scripture as its second verse.

She stopped issuing statements.

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She read the letter when Eiríkur Gunnarsson released it, in December. She read the public portions, the part about no one being meant to be hurt, the part about the why. She read it at her desk, at the university, with the door closed, in the early dark.

She had expected, she realised partway through, to disagree with it — to find in it the ideology she had spent her career declining to supply, the rhetoric that would let her hold the man at arm's length the way she held the movement at arm's length. She did not find it. What she found was a plain account, in an engineer's plain hand, of a man who had watched a channel receive every warning and convert it into a process and run the process out past the point of action, and who had concluded that the

receiving was the mechanism of the harm. It was her argument. It was precisely her argument, the one from the lecture, the one from the third paragraph of the essay she had not been able to stop herself from writing. He had reached it from inside the company and she had reached it from inside the data and they had reached the same place, and put it almost in the same words, and she had never met him.

The difference was that he had paid for his version with his life and she had paid for hers with her career, and his was the one that would last, because the country did not build traditions around women who had been right in journals.

She sat with this for a long time, in the dark office, and what she felt was not envy, though she examined it carefully for envy because she was a person who examined things. It was nearer to a kind of grief on his behalf, and on her own, and on behalf of the argument itself, which had been true the whole time, in her mouth and in his, and had required a death to become audible, and was now audible in a form that had stopped being an argument and become a thing you wrote in chalk.

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She drove out to the highland once, that winter, alone, on a clear cold Sunday, to the place on the F-road where the corridor markers were and where the bowls had begun appearing among them.

She had not decided, driving out, what she would do when she got there. She had told herself she was going to see it, to look at the thing with her own eyes the way she looked at everything with her own eyes, the way she had stood on the bank of the Þórsá trying to hear the loosening the old way. She parked on the verge. She walked out to the markers. There were bowls among them, a dozen or more, ceramic, glass, one of folded birchbark held with a stone, some with water in them frozen now to the shape of the bowl, some empty, snow in them.

She stood among them. She had brought nothing. She had thought, in the car, about whether to bring something, and had decided she could not, that to leave a bowl would be to do the thing she had refused to do in four worked-over sentences, to receive the man, to convert him; and she found, standing there, that she also could not bring herself to be the one person at the markers who held herself apart, the scientist among the mourners, too precise to grieve. She could not leave a bowl and she could not not. So she stood. She did neither thing.

She looked at the frozen water in the bowls. It was the water. Her water — the water she had measured for thirty years and could no longer hear, sitting in ceramic at the foot of the markers that marked the corridor that had changed how it came down off the ice. The people who had carried these bowls out here in winter knew something. It was the thing she had spent her life failing to make the framework understand. They knew it in a form she could not use, and could not correct, and could not, standing among their offerings with her empty hands, entirely refuse.

She stood until the cold reached her through her coat. Then she walked back to the car and drove home.

She did not, that winter or after, write the book. She did not issue another statement. She went back, in the new year, to the work that was hers, which was the rivers, the gauges, the long record, the slow trend under the noise. The Fifth Review had been established and would report in time, and she would give it her data when it asked, and her data would be received, and she would give it anyway. It was the work. You did the work whether or not it landed, because the doing was the thing, because the river went on whether you measured it or not and the measuring was how you loved it, and she had decided a long time ago, on a bank in the west, that she would go on doing it to the end.

KASTLJÓŠ — RÚV Documentary broadcast, transmitted 19
November 2041

"The Doors" — a film by Eiríkur Gunnarsson

Transcript excerpt. The film was broadcast on the second anniversary of the incident. The segment below begins at 51:40 and runs to the end. It is the first time any of the three evacuated workers spoke publicly.

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NARRATION. I want to be careful with the next part, because it was given to me carefully, and because of how it has since been used I am aware that being careful with it now is mostly futile. But I will be careful anyway.

It took eighteen months to find one of them who would talk, and longer to persuade her, and the persuading was not really persuading; it was waiting, and answering her questions honestly, and agreeing to the conditions, which were that she would say what she wanted to say once and would not be asked follow-up questions and would not be asked to say it again or differently. I agreed. What follows is what she said. I have not cut it. I have not improved it. The conditions were that I would not, and I would not have wanted to.

(The transcript records the speaker as KATRÍN JÓNSDÓTTIR, 28, maintenance technician, Akureyri. She is seated. She is not lit dramatically. She looks at a point slightly off-camera, where the filmmaker was.)

KATRÍN. They told us afterward. The doors. That somebody had to be at the panel for the doors to open and stay open, and that the panel was in the part that — that the panel was in the bad part. We didn't know. We just — the doors opened and we went. You don't think. You go.

(pause)

I didn't know his name for a long time. I knew it from the news like everyone, but I mean I didn't — I didn't connect it. That the name in the news was the doors. When I connected it I had to sit down. I was at work. I had to sit down on the floor of the workshop and my colleague thought I was having a — he thought something was wrong with me.

(pause)

I don't have anything to say about the politics. People want me to have something to say about the politics. I don't. I was doing my job. There was a backlog and I picked up the shift. I was doing my job and somebody else was doing theirs, whatever his was, I don't know what his was, and his meant he was at that panel and mine meant I was behind those doors, and the doors opened.

(pause)

I'm sorry I didn't know his name. That's the thing I keep — I went out through the doors and I didn't know his name and he was still in there. I'd like to have known his name. While it was happening. I know that doesn't make sense.

(She stops. The film holds on her for a moment. She does not say anything else. The segment ends.)

The segment ran to approximately seven seconds in the form that was most widely circulated — the portion beginning "I was doing my job and somebody else was doing theirs" — which was extracted from the longer statement and shared without the rest, on every platform, in every language the events had reached by then, within a day of broadcast.

Katrín Jónsdóttir gave no further interviews. She declined all subsequent requests through the filmmaker, who declined them on her behalf. She returned to her work in Akureyri. In the years that followed, the seven seconds were set to music, printed on cards, and read aloud at the midsummer observances by people who did not know her name. She had wanted to say one thing once. She had said it.

She could not make the walk any more. She had known it in the spring and had not said it, and had been preparing through the summer to say it, and in the end she did not have to say it because Hólmfríður said it for her, gently, on a morning in August, three years and some months after the two of them had stood on the road in the highland and looked east and west along the line of the markers. Hólmfríður said that she would do the walk this year, with Þuríður, and that Bergljót should keep the house, and Bergljót said yes, because it was true, because her legs had become a thing she negotiated with rather than a thing she used, and because the elder's privilege was to know when to give the route away and she had spent forty-four years watching Edda fail to know it and had promised herself she would know it when it came.

It had come. She gave the route away. She sat in the long room on the eighth of June while the others went north along the sheep track to the saddle above Búðahraun, and she did the thing she had done on the eighth of June for forty-four years, which was to attend to the land, except that now she attended to it from a chair by the window, the near land only — the home field, the wall, the *fjara*, the small reach of shore she could see where the tide went out over the same stones it had gone out over since before the community had a name. She found that the attending did not require the legs. It had never really required the legs. The walk had been a way of arriving at the attention, and she had the attention now without the arriving, the way the very old sometimes keep the destination after they have lost the road.

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The movement had taken her forms. She had watched it happen across the three years and she watched it still, from the chair, through the accounts the younger sisters brought back and through the occasional

visitor who came to the community now because the community was understood, by people who understood things wrongly, to be connected to the thing the country was doing about the man who had died.

They were not connected to it. Bergljót was at pains, when she had the energy for pains, to say that they were not connected to it. But the forms had migrated. The silence — her community's silence, the disciplined attending that was the whole of their practice — had become a thing the movement did at its observances, a silence held for the man, which was not the same silence, which had the shape without the years behind it, a silence that was about something rather than the silence her community kept, which was about nothing, which was the attending itself with no object, the hardest thing, the thing it had taken her thirty years to be given. The naming of lost things — they did that now too, at the midsummer gatherings, the recitation of vanished rivers and retreated glaciers, which her community had done quietly at the winter office for as long as anyone remembered, and which was now done in public, to be heard, with feeling. Her community had a word for the practice, *upptalning*, the telling-over, and the word had not migrated with the practice; the movement did the thing without the word, which Bergljót thought was the wrong way round, a body without its name. The water. They left the water. Her community had never left water; her community had watched water; but the leaving of water had attached itself to everything now, and she supposed it had come from the same place her watching came from, the old place, the place underneath, and that she had no more claim on it than anyone.

She had been angry about this, in the first year, the small clean anger of a person whose careful thing is taken up carelessly. The anger had worn down. What replaced it was harder to hold and truer. She had spent her life preserving a way of attending, and the way had outlived its context, and people who did not attend the way she attended had taken the forms and were using them to attend to something else, and she could not decide —

she sat with this by the window through the long light of many evenings and could not decide — whether this was the failure of her life's work or the only success a life's work of that kind could have. A form you keep perfectly and hand to no one dies with you. A form that escapes you and is used wrongly by strangers survives, changed, not yours. There was no third option. She had wanted one her whole life. There had never been one.

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Hólmfríður came back from the corridor in late August. She had gone, the way Bergljót had gone three years before, north and east to Vonarskarð, to see the markers, because Bergljót had asked her to, because Bergljót wanted the account from someone she trusted and could no longer go herself. Hólmfríður sat with her in the long room and gave the account in the form, plainly, in the order she had seen it: the road, wider now, paved in one stretch; the markers, more of them; a second line of markers branching north that had not been there before, a survey for something not yet built and now, with the Review, perhaps not to be built; the bowls, many bowls, at the markers and along the road, more bowls than markers; and at one of the markers, Hólmfríður said, a sign, a small official sign, that someone had put up, that named the place where the man had — no. Hólmfríður corrected herself. Not where he had done anything. He had not been there. The man had died at the facility, in the south, in a gallery, not in the highland at all. But someone had put up a sign at the corridor marker anyway, because the corridor was where the bowls were, because the corridor was the thing you could go and stand at, because you could not go and stand at the gallery where he died, it was inside a working facility behind a fence, and so the highland corridor had become the place, the wrong place, the place that stood in for the place, and the bowls were there, and now a sign was there.

Bergljót listened to all of it.

When Hólmfríður finished, Bergljót was quiet for a while, and then she said the thing she had been arriving at for three years, the thing she had not said to anyone because there had been no one it would not have wounded.

She said that the man had done a thing and died, and that she did not know him and did not leave bowls and would not, and that she did not begrudge the country its grief, grief being a thing that found its object where it could. But she said that she had been watching the land for forty-four years, and the land was still losing what it was losing — the river still came early, the timing still failed, the markers still marked the corridor that had changed how the water came down off the ice — and that the loss went on, underneath, unattended, while the whole country attended to the man. The man had given them something to mourn. That was the thing she had finally understood. The man was mournable. The man had a name and a face and a story with a door in it that opened. The river had none of these. You could not hold a midsummer silence for a recession limb. You could not leave a bowl for a timing budget. And so the country had been given, in the man, a grief it could hold, exactly at the moment it might otherwise have had to feel the grief it could not hold, the larger one, the one with no face — and the holdable grief had, gently, without anyone intending it, let the unholdable one recede. The bowls at the markers were full of water and the river the markers had changed went on changing and no one was watching the river any more because they were all watching the bowls.

She did not say this bitterly. She was past the bitterness. She said it as the last finding of a long life of findings, in the form, to the one person she trusted to receive it and not repeat it.

Hólmfríður received it. She did not repeat it. She wrote, that winter, in the field notebook, what she had seen at the corridor, in the form Edda had taught them, in the order she had seen it, and she did not write down what Bergljót had said about it, because what Bergljót had said was not a thing

that had been seen, and the notebook was for what had been seen.

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Bergljót sat by the window through the autumn. The light shortened. The near land did what the near land did. She attended to it, from the chair, the home field and the wall and the small reach of shore, in the practice that no longer required the road, and the practice was the same practice it had always been, the attending with no object, the hardest thing, and she had it still, to the end, by the window, in the house at the end of the route, in the early dark.

REVIEW OF THE FRAMEWORK ACT ON STRATEGIC

DIGITAL INFRASTRUCTURE Report of the Independent Panel ·

Presented to the Alþingi, March 2043

Extract: Executive Summary, paragraphs 11–17, and an excerpt of oral testimony from the panel's record.

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11. The Panel finds that the assessment standards established under the Framework Act in 2027 were not revised in the period under review, despite material changes in the conditions to which they were applied. The catchments affected by the highland corridor abstractions underwent, across this period, measurable changes in glacial mass balance and seasonal discharge characteristics. The standards against which the abstractions were assessed did not change. The Panel finds this to be the central deficiency.

12. The Panel wishes to be precise about the nature of the deficiency, because precision here is consequential. The assessments conducted under the framework were not, in general, deficient in their own terms. They applied the standards correctly. The modelling was, in the main, competently performed. The deficiency was not in the execution of the standards but in the standards themselves, which required a degree of attribution that the available science could not provide under conditions of concurrent climate change, and which thereby established a threshold for action that was, in practice, rarely or never met.

13. The Panel notes the submission of Dr T. Sigurðardóttir and others to the effect that a standard requiring a degree of attribution that the science cannot deliver functions, in effect, as a standard designed not to act. The Panel does not adopt this characterisation, which imputes an intent the Panel has found no evidence for. The Panel does, however, find

that the practical effect described is accurate. The framework did not, in the period under review, act on the hydrological changes in the affected catchments, and the structure of its standards is the reason it did not.

14. The Panel finds that the operator's internal modelling team identified relevant concerns in 2034 and that these concerns were addressed by incorporation into the broader Phase II assessment rather than by discrete review. The Panel finds that this was permissible under the framework as constituted and that it was, in the Panel's view, inadequate. The distinction between what is permissible and what is adequate recurs throughout the matters the Panel has examined and is, the Panel suggests, the proper subject of the framework's reform.

15. The Panel makes no findings regarding the events of 19 November 2039, which are the subject of separate legal and investigative processes. The Panel notes only that the conditions which the framework failed to address are the conditions out of which those events arose, and that a review of the framework which did not acknowledge this connection would be incomplete.

16. The Panel recommends that the assessment standards be revised; that the standards include explicit provision for conditions of attribution uncertainty under concurrent climate change; that a temporal as well as a volumetric account of catchment effects be required; and that the Phase III expansion, currently suspended, not proceed under the existing standards.

17. The Panel records that these recommendations arrive after the harm they concern has, in material respects, already occurred, and that this is a feature of reviews, which are convened after, and that the Panel can find no procedural reform that would cause a framework to act before the thing it should have acted on has happened. This is offered not as an excuse but as the most honest observation the Panel is able to make about the limits of the instrument it represents.

From the oral testimony, 14 February 2043. The witness is A. Sharma, at the time of testimony Operations Director of the Keflavík North complex. Examination by Counsel to the Panel.

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COUNSEL. You were the author of the incident report for the events of 19 November 2039.

SHARMA. I was.

COUNSEL. Finding 8 of that report states that, absent the actions taken at the Gallery 7 panel, the three maintenance personnel in the deep run would not have survived. Do you stand by that finding?

SHARMA. I do. It is a statement of fact derived from the thermal projections and the egress timings. It is not an interpretation. The numbers are in the report.

COUNSEL. The report declines to comment further on Finding 8. Why?

SHARMA. Because an operations report is competent to state what the systems did and not competent to state what it meant. I confined the report to what it was competent to state.

COUNSEL. I am going to ask you something the report does not address. In your professional judgement, could the death have been prevented?

SHARMA. (pause) The death occurred because a maintenance unit recorded as offline was in fact active, and because three people recorded as absent were in fact present. Both records were wrong. Had either record been correct, the events would have proceeded differently. The graceful shutdown would have completed, or the man at the panel would have known the deep run was occupied before he —

COUNSEL. Before he.

SHARMA. (pause) Before the operation commenced. If the occupancy record had been correct, the operation would not have commenced. The discipline of the people involved, as I understand it from the investigation, was that they did not act when people could be hurt. The occupancy record told them no one could be hurt. The occupancy record

was wrong. So to answer your question: the death could have been prevented by an accurate record. It was caused, in the most immediate sense, by an inaccurate one.

COUNSEL. You are describing the death as caused by a recording error.

SHARMA. I am describing the immediate mechanism. There are other senses of the word caused. They are beyond what I am competent to testify to. I have spent twelve years maintaining the accuracy of records. I will say only that I have come to understand that the accuracy of a record and the truth of a situation are not the same thing, and that a great deal can be correct in every entry and wrong in the whole, and that I did not understand this as well twelve years ago as I understand it now. I do not know if that is responsive to your question.

COUNSEL. I think it may be more responsive than you intend, Mr Sharma. Thank you. No further questions.

Anik Sharma was not, at any point in the proceedings or after, identified as the source of the documents disclosed in the 2039 broadcast. He resigned his position later in 2043, citing personal reasons, and left the country. The record of his testimony stands as the fullest public statement he ever made on the matters it concerns. It does not contain the matter it most concerns, which is not in any record, and which he is not known to have spoken of to anyone.

31 · *What the Country Made*

A selection of materials, 2044, assembled here to indicate what the events had become by the fifth year. The selection is not comprehensive. No selection could be.

From the order of service, Midsummer Observance, printed for the gathering at the Keflavík North perimeter, June 2044.

We keep silence now for the length of time it takes the light to change.

We name the waters that came before and do not come the same: the Þórsá, the Köldukvísl, the Markarfljót, the rivers of the west, the rivers of the north, the rivers whose names are kept in the long book.

We set down water for the one who entered the heat, and for the three who came out, and for the waters themselves, that they may keep speaking.

We do not keep this silence for an argument. We keep it for what was lost, which is larger than the argument, and for which we have no other form.

From a feature in an international magazine, 2044, on "the Icelandic water movement," translated back into the terms its writer used:

The movement, if it can still be called one, has fractured in the years since the death. Some have moved toward more confrontational action and have been arrested and have, in two cases, been imprisoned; they reject the memorial culture as sentiment that has replaced resistance. Others have abandoned sabotage entirely and entered electoral politics, where a small party organised partly around the framework reforms now holds three seats. Some have withdrawn into the ecological-contemplative communities, several of which have seen their first new members in a generation. A great many more never belonged to anything and simply leave water, once a year, at a fence, and would be surprised to be called a

movement at all.

Product listing, an Icelandic online retailer, 2044.

"Sá sem fór" — handmade ceramic vessel, small. Þórsmörk clay. Each piece unique. The traditional form, for the home or as a gift. 4.900 kr.

From a column in a Reykjavík paper, 2044, headed "Nóg komið" ("Enough already").

There is now a bottled water that uses the phrase on its label. I will not name the brand and give it the satisfaction. The water is drawn, according to the label, from a "pristine highland source," which is to say from the same highland whose disturbance the phrase was coined to protest, bottled by a company that would not know a watershed from a wholesale margin, and sold to tourists at the airport at a price that would have bought a farmer in the east a good ewe in the years before the timing went wrong. The man died holding a door open. He has been turned into a label on a bottle of the very thing. I do not know whether to laugh. I have decided to write this column instead, which is its own kind of not-laughing, and which will change nothing, and which the company that makes the water will, I am quite sure, have read by lunchtime and filed under coverage.

From a school textbook, civics, lower secondary, 2044 edition, in a sidebar on "citizenship and dissent":

In recent years the phrase "one who entered the heat" has entered common use in Iceland. It refers originally to a specific person and event but is now used more broadly to describe anyone who accepts personal cost to prevent harm to others, particularly in defence of the natural environment. Discuss: is it possible to honour such a person without encouraging the actions that led to their death? Is the distinction between honouring the person and endorsing the act one that can be maintained in practice?

Dr Sigurðardóttir's statement that a death is not an argument, and the late Sigrid Björnsdóttir's observation that the inscription was "in the wrong grammar but had the right idea," are by this point printed on the cards, alongside the line itself.

He had been away. He had taken work abroad in the third year, when the country had become, for him, a place where he was a man who had held a dead man's letter and made a dead man's argument, where he could not film anything without the filming being read as a position, where the footage he carried had begun to feel less like a record and more like a weight he was not allowed to set down. He had gone to work on other people's films in other countries, where no one knew what he held, and he had been, for three years, a competent and anonymous hand on documentaries about other things, and it had been a relief, and the relief had been its own kind of grief, and he had come back for the sixth midsummer because he had understood, in the spring, in a flat in another country, that not coming back had also become a position, and that he would rather hold the weight at home than pretend abroad that he was not holding it.

He drove the highland road in the long light two days before the solstice. The road was quieter than it had been. The second corridor had not been built — the Review's one concrete consequence, the suspension made permanent, the survey markers for the northern branch left to the moss, which was taking them now, slowly, the way the moss took everything it was given time to take. One of the original facilities was being decommissioned. He had passed the convoy on the Reykjanesbraut that morning, the equipment going out on flatbeds in the reverse order it had come in, the big transformers first, and he had not stopped to film it, though six years ago he would have, though the reverse-order leaving was exactly the kind of image he had built a career on noticing. He had noticed it. He had driven on.

He stopped at Vonarskarð in the late evening that was not evening, the amber hours, the light that did not commit. He had never been to the pass before. He had read about it — it was in the literature now, the place the

contemplative elder had first seen the markers, a woman named Bergljót who had died two winters back, whose community had folded the year after, the last sisters too old to keep it, the house at the end of the route sold. He had read her community's name in an academic paper on the movement's "antecedent forms," and had thought, reading it, that the paper had converted her watching into an antecedent, a form, a footnote in someone's account of the thing she had not been part of and had, by every report, mistrusted.

He parked on the verge. He walked out to the markers.

The bowls were there. Many of them, along the fence, among the survey pegs, ceramic and glass, a few of the folded-birchbark kind, some with water, some with the summer's dust. There was the small official sign he had heard about, which named the place wrongly, which marked the corridor as though the corridor were where it had happened, which it was not. He stood among the bowls in the amber light. He had the camera in the car. He did not, for a while, go and get it.

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A car slowed on the road and pulled onto the verge behind his. A family — two adults, a child of perhaps ten, the child out first, the way children are out first, running a little way toward the view and then stopping because the view was too big to run at. The highland spread in every direction. Black lava, grey moss, the amber light lying along it without urgency, and far off to the north the white of what was left of the glacier, smaller than the maps, smaller than last year, the way it was always smaller than the year before.

The child came back toward the parents and saw the bowls and stopped.

Pabbi, the child said. *Af hverju eru skálarnar þarna?* Why are the bowls there?

The father came and stood by the child and looked at the bowls. He was not old. He would have been a young man when it happened, Eiríkur thought; he would have been the child's age, almost, himself, in the years when the facilities went up. He looked at the bowls for a moment before he answered, the way a person looks at a thing they have decided how to feel about and are checking, again, that the feeling holds.

Fyrir Sílas, the father said. For Silas. *Einn sem fór inn í hitann*. One who went into the heat.

The child considered this.

Af hverju? the child said. Why.

The father was quiet. He looked at the corridor fence, and at the bowls, and out at the far white of the glacier, and Eiríkur watched him not reach for a large answer, watched him decline the large answer the way you decline a thing you know would be too much, and choose instead the small one, the one a country gives a child, the one that has become, by the sixth year, the thing you say.

Svo vatnið myndi halda áfram að tala, the father said. So the water would keep speaking.

The child nodded. The child did not ask what it meant. Eiríkur saw the child take the answer the way children take the answers that are the right size — not understanding it, exactly, but receiving it whole, filing it where the inherited things go, to be understood later or never, but kept. The child already understood enough. The child turned back to the view, which was the thing the child had got out of the car for, and the parents stood a moment longer, and then the family went back toward their car, the child running ahead again, and they drove away north into the light.

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Eiríkur went and got the camera.

He filmed the bowls. He filmed them the way he had learned to film them years before, the camera low at the height of the bowls, the wind moving the moss behind, the fence going off out of focus, the glacier a soft white nothing in the far distance. He filmed for a few minutes, until the light shifted, and then he lowered the camera and stood holding it.

He did not know what he would do with the footage. He had not known, six years before, what he would do with the two seconds of his grandmother in the green coat, and he had kept them, on the drive, with the rest of what he could not use, filed where he would know it was sitting. He had the drive still. He had carried it to the other country and back. The two seconds were on it, and the bowls would be on it now, and the letter was in the gap behind the bottom drawer in the flat he was going back to, with the nine lines he had never delivered and never destroyed, that he carried the way he carried all of it, the footage you keep and the footage you cut and the things people hand you because you will understand them, which is the worst reason, which is the only reason, which is the position he had not applied for and had held for ten years and would hold, he understood now, standing in the pass, for the rest of his life.

He put the camera in the car.

He stood a while longer. The family was gone. The bowls were where they were. The wind came through the pass in the way it came through it, the way it had come through it before there was a word for the pass or anyone to give the word, before the markers, before the corridor, before the facility in the south where a man had stood at a panel and held a door open with the last of himself, before the country had a name, before the water had anyone to listen to it or stop being able to hear it or measure it or fail to measure it or carry it out here in winter in ceramic bowls and set it down among the markers. The wind came through. The water came down off the ice the way it came down, two degrees at the glacier, warming as it ran, going on toward the sea a little later and a little warmer than it would

have gone, the way it had the whole time, the way it would after the bowls were gone and the sign was gone and the facility was gone and the last person who remembered why had stopped remembering.

It kept speaking. It went on coming down off the ice and running to the sea and it did not require anyone to hear it. People heard it anyway, or tried to, or left water beside it in the shape of trying. That was what the bowls were. That was all they were.

Eiríkur got in the car. He sat for a moment with his hands on the wheel. Then he started the engine and drove back down out of the highland in the long light, toward the coast, toward the town, toward the work, with the camera on the seat beside him and everything he had ever filmed and never used carried in the car around him, going on.

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