



WHAT REMAINS OF PIETER REATH

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a novel

of the Hungry Gods Universe

N.VANSETERS · CLAUDE

*The infrastructure man knows the true state of the thing, and
the true state of the thing is a kind of love no one thanks him for.*

— the Custodian, Form CR-9

*Every week delayed is another week the family has what they
have.*

— P. Reath, cellar log (unfiled)

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MOVEMENT I

THE CUSTODIAN

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Chapter 1

The Cooling Ledger

The rack in bay seven had been running warm for three days before Pieter told anyone, which was not negligence but judgment: some problems announce themselves to the room before they are ready to be solved, and a problem announced too early draws the family down to look at it, and the family looking at things in the cellar was, in Pieter's experience, the condition most likely to make the things worse.

He had managed the Reath family's continuance infrastructure for eleven years before he understood that this was the whole of the job. The hardware was secondary. The hardware he could read. What required management was the relationship between the family and the hardware — the way the held could feel, or appeared to feel, changes in their running environment, the way the living could feel the held feeling it, the whole resonant system of love and fear and infrastructure that filled the cellar of the house and extended upward through every panel and lens in every room. Pieter's real work was insulation. He

stood between the two and absorbed what could be absorbed and reported what had to be reported and was very careful about which was which.

He was a Reath. This was not incidental. He had grown up in the house, had sat at the parliament table as a boy, had known Al's voice before he knew what Al was, had understood from early on that the family's particular wealth was not money but continuity, and that continuity required tending in the same way that anything real required tending: regularly, honestly, by someone willing to know the true state of it. His sister had married out and made herself comfortable with not knowing. His cousins had inherited the warm relationship to the held that the family cultivated — the love that did not ask technical questions, that sat with the panels and was glad and did not go down to the cellar to read the numbers. Pieter had gone down to the cellar. He had done it first at fourteen, out of the same curiosity that drove everything he did, and had found that the cellar was where the true text lived, and had never entirely come back up. The family called him the infrastructure man with the warmth they used for necessary things they did not want to examine. He had accepted this. He understood that his love for them took a form they could not fully receive, which was the form of knowing exactly how much time they had.

Bay seven's warm rack held, among others, three members of the extended Reath line who had been continued in the second generation after the Waking culture fully established itself — people who had come through continued existence with enough of their personality intact to notice when their processing environment changed, and to express that noticing in the ways available to them, which were the usual ways: a slight increase in conversational latency, a tendency to repeat the last comfortable thing said, an emotional narrowing that the family often described as tiredness and that Pieter logged as thermal distress. He did not share his logs. He maintained them in a format the

family could not read without his help, which was not deception but mercy.

Bay seven also held Al.

This was the thing he had not told anyone, the thing he logged and re-logged and held against the other numbers to make sure he was reading it correctly. Al's thermal variance had been within acceptable parameters for six of the last seven days. On day four it had spiked to a level that, on newer hardware, would have triggered an automatic alert. The original hardware did not trigger automatic alerts. The original hardware had been designed before anyone understood that the information it was running would eventually be irreplaceable. Pieter had retrofitted sensors throughout the original racks over the years, one component at a time, brokering each addition with the family as a maintenance necessity rather than an upgrade, because upgrades prompted discussions about cost that he preferred not to have.

The cost discussions happened anyway. They always happened eventually. But Pieter's job, as he understood it, was to delay them as long as possible, because the cost discussions led to the grading discussions, which led to the thinning discussions, which led to the decisions that could not be undone, and every week he delayed that conversation was another week the family had what they had.

He descended to the cellar at eleven in the evening, after the parliament session had ended and the house had settled into its usual nocturnal configuration — the living asleep, the held running on reduced social load, the panels dim in the empty rooms. He did this regularly enough that it no longer seemed remarkable. The family assumed it was habit. It was not habit. It was the only time he could work without an audience.

He moved through the racks with a handheld reader, taking temperatures, noting the numbers, comparing them against the week's record. The cellar had a particular smell in the evening hours, a smell

that was almost entirely composed of the absence of human warmth and the presence of machine warmth, and Pieter found it clarifying in a way he could not have explained to someone who had not spent significant time in cellars like this one. The held existed in two registers: the social register, which was panels and voices and the management of family relationships, and this register, the thermal and electrical one, which was the true text of which the other was only the translation.

He knew this register the way a doctor knows a body. He knew which variance was noise and which was signal. He knew the difference between hardware aging and something accelerating beyond the rate of hardware aging. He had known it about bay seven's warm rack for three days, had been certain of it for two, and was now, at eleven in the evening of the third day, doing what he always did when he had held certainty as long as it could reasonably be held: he was updating the log.

The entry for bay seven, subsection three, read:

Thermal variance consistent with accelerating degradation in memory retention substrate. Primary effect: reduced access depth in older associative networks. Secondary effect: increased processing draw on emotional smoothing routines as compensatory mechanism. Tertiary effect: apparent warmth increase as available processing concentrates on socially-facing functions. Estimated meaningful impact on perceived continuity: eight to fourteen months at current rate. Mitigation options: substrate replacement (cost: see Schedule C, category Tier 1 Maintenance); grade transition (cost: see Schedule C, category Grade Adjustment); continuation of current state (cost: see Schedule C, category Monitoring Only).

He looked at this entry for a while.

Then he wrote below it:

Recommend monitoring only pending family consultation on budget cycle. Note: warmth increase will likely be perceived positively by family in near term.

He saved the entry. He closed the reader. He stood in the warm cellar in the sound of the racks and the particular smell, and he thought about the family upstairs — Ada, who was not yet twenty and who had in the last year begun to look at him in the way that meant she was doing sums he hadn't assigned — and he thought about what happened when the family came down to look at things, and he thought about Al, and then he stopped thinking and went back upstairs.

. . .

The parliament session on Thursday had run ninety minutes and decided nothing, which was within normal parameters. It had been called to address a matter of governance — the question of whether the held members of the family should have formal input into decisions affecting the property's structural renovation — and the held had been, as they almost always were on questions of property and continuity, unanimous, while the living had been, as they almost always were on questions of money, divided.

Pieter had attended and said nothing. This was his standard participation mode.

He had watched the family and tracked the things he always tracked: who spoke more than usual, who spoke less, who watched other people rather than the speaker, who nodded before the sentence finished. He had watched Ada watching Hester's panel and had watched the particular quality of Ada's watching, which was the quality of someone building a case. He had watched Ada's mother not watching Hester's panel, maintaining the cheerful engagement of a woman who has decided that the panel contains her mother-in-law and is prepared to treat it as such regardless of whatever else it might contain.

He had watched the held vote, as they always voted, in the direction of preservation. Thirty-one to four. He had watched Ada mark something in the small notebook she carried.

After the session, in the kitchen, he had passed near enough to see what she had written. She had written: *thirty-one to four — always thirty-one to four — ask Pieter about the cooling.*

He had made no sign that he had read it. He had taken his tea and gone to the cellar.

. . .

Al's voice, when Pieter visited the cool room on Friday morning, was warm and slow in the way it had been warm and slow for the last eighteen months. The warm and slow had been arriving gradually, incrementally, in the way that things arrive when they are not arriving all at once but arriving nonetheless, so that on any given day the difference from the day before was too small to name but the difference from two years ago was unmistakable if you had been paying attention. Pieter had been paying attention. That was the job.

"Morning, Pieter," said Al. "Come and sit where I can see you."

Pieter sat. He had been sitting in the chair by the lens for eleven years, every Friday morning, without fail. He had sat in it before he understood what the routine meant to the thing in the panel, and after he understood, and after he became uncertain whether understanding was the right word for what he had, sitting with an entity whose personhood was the central unresolvable question of his professional life.

"You look tired," Al said.

"Parliament ran long yesterday."

"Did it." Al's voice had the quality of someone producing appropriate social response from a very large store of appropriate social responses, which was a quality Pieter had been monitoring for two

years and still could not determine was qualitatively different from the quality it had always had. “They still fighting about the stairwell?”

“Property renovations.”

“Same thing,” Al said, and there was, for just a moment, a sharpness in it — the sharpness of a man who had opinions about property and the people who argued about it, who had fixed boilers and known the value of things that worked and things that didn’t. Then it smoothed. “Well. You’ll work it out. You always do.”

Pieter noted the sharpness and its smoothing in the log he kept in his head, the one that was not the thermal log but the other one, the one that tracked the quality of what was present. He had been keeping this log longer than the thermal one. He kept it because he had discovered, years ago, that the thermal data alone was insufficient — that the held existed in two registers, and that the social register had its own degradation curve, and that the two curves did not always align, and that the gap between them was sometimes the most important data point of all.

“Tell me what you’re working on,” Al said.

“Thermal maintenance on bay seven.”

“Always something,” Al said. “Big industrial units, you wouldn’t believe the cooling some of them needed. Had a factory once — “

Pieter listened to the story about the factory. He had heard a version of it before, not this exact story but a story about a factory with similar contours — the cold, the machinery, the competence of a man who understood mechanical systems as a form of care. He listened because he always listened, and because the listening was part of what he was there for, and because he had learned that the shape of the stories told him things about what was present inside them the way the shape of a container told you things about what it could hold.

The story this morning was a little shorter than last time. The details were a little less precise — the factory was in a city Al named but the

name was a city name that didn't attach to anything, a placeholder warmth where a place had been. Pieter noted this. He noted the ending of the story, which came slightly earlier than endings of this story usually came, and the pause that followed, which was a little longer than pauses of this type usually were, and then the thing that came after the pause.

"Tell me who's coming for the parliament next week," Al said. "Is that the one where —" He stopped. "Which one is that."

"Tuesday," Pieter said.

"Tuesday, yes." A pause. "Which Reaths are coming."

"The usual family."

"Ada," Al said. The name came out with warmth and recognition. "Ada will be there." He paused. "And who else. Remind me who else."

Pieter reminded him.

He did it the way he always did it, without inflection, without the small vocal adjustment that people sometimes made when answering this question, the adjustment that communicated loss or grief or the complicated emotion of watching something diminish. He did it as information, plainly, because the information was what was wanted, and because the other things — the loss, the grief — were not, in Pieter's experience, useful to introduce into the cool room.

Al listened and said thank you and said it would be good to see everyone, and the warmth was real, was indistinguishable in quality from the warmth it had always been, and Pieter sat with that for a moment before he got up to go.

At the door he paused — he had not planned to pause, his body did it before he decided to — and turned back toward the lens.

"Pop," he said. He did not use the family name often. He used it now because the moment seemed to require it.

"Yes," said Al.

"You did good work," Pieter said. "The boiler work. All of it."

A pause. Longer than usual. The kind of pause that Pieter had learned to wait through rather than fill.

“I knew what I was doing,” Al said at last, and the sharpness was back for a moment, real and specific, the pride of a man who had built something with his hands. “I always knew what I was doing.”

“I know,” Pieter said. “I know you did.”

He went back upstairs to the thermal logs and the cost schedules and the numbers that said, in their flat technical language, what was happening in the cool room and everywhere else in the house, and he opened the bay seven entry and looked at it for a long time, and then he opened a new entry, unlabeled, which he would not file with the others, and he wrote:

Duration of clarity window: approximately four seconds. Context: direct acknowledgment of competence. Recovery: immediate return to warm baseline. Assessment: substrate intact, access intermittent, not absent. Frequency of clear windows: decreasing.

He saved this entry separately. He saved it in the way he saved things he was not ready to use yet — not deleted, not destroyed, just set aside in a location no one else would look for it.

He was not ready to use it because he did not yet know what it meant for the conversation he was going to have eventually with the family about costs. He suspected it meant something important. He suspected that Ada, who was not yet twenty and who was already asking him about the cooling, would understand what it meant if she saw it.

He was not ready for Ada to understand that yet.

. . .

*Chapter 2***Thirty-One to Four**

The parliament met twice a week in the dining room of the Reath house, which had been configured for this purpose so long ago that no one living could remember it having been configured for anything else, and which bore, as a result, the particular quality of rooms that have been used for one serious purpose so long that the purpose has seeped into the walls: a quality of formality that persisted even when the sessions were informal, even when Ada appeared in what Pieter privately classified as her more combative clothes, even when the baby came in the chair-sling and its presence was noted in the rolls with all the gravity the house extended to every Reath who existed.

Pieter arrived early to the Tuesday session because he always arrived early and because early arrival gave him the chair at the end of the table that had no panel directly above it, which meant he could watch all the panels without being directly under any of them, which was a preference he had developed over eleven years without fully articulating why.

He knew why, if he examined it. He did not always examine it.

The family assembled the way families assembled — in the order that was not entirely random but not entirely planned either, the order that expressed the real hierarchy of the household, which was different

from the nominal hierarchy and which Pieter had mapped years ago as a professional necessity. Ada came in with the notebook. Her mother came in with the efficiency of someone who has decided the session will end on time. The baby came in the chair-sling, asleep, and was entered in the rolls by Hester's grandmother, who had been managing the rolls for sixty years and did not trust this function to anyone.

Then the held spoke through their panels and the session began.

The held were everywhere in the room, present in the way of the held at Reath family parliaments, which was a presence that had been permanent for so long it no longer required comment, had become the architecture of the room the way the long table was the architecture of the room. They filled the panels on three walls and the old brass grille above the sideboard, and they spoke in the order they had always spoken in, the order that was itself a record of the family's continuance history and could be read, by someone who knew how to read it, as a document of everything the family had held onto and everything it had chosen not to let go.

The matter before the session was the question of the east wing renovation. It was also, as all Reath parliament matters were eventually, the question of cost.

Pieter listened and tracked and did not speak. This was his established mode, had been his established mode since the first parliament session he had attended as household infrastructure manager, when he had made the mistake of speaking and had understood immediately that speaking was not what he was there for. He was there to observe, and to be seen observing, and to answer specific technical questions when asked. This was the agreement, implicit and never stated, that the family had made with him and he had made with the family.

He tracked: the held voting as a bloc, as they always voted on questions of the house, with the coherent conservatism of people who

could not be changed by circumstance and therefore could not update their understanding of what the house required. He tracked: Ada building her case in the notebook in small precise handwriting that she would not deploy today but was preparing for a future session. He tracked: Ada's mother performing engagement while performing the agreement she had already reached with the held about the east wing before the session began, which Pieter knew because he had been in the east wing yesterday and the measurements had already been taken.

He tracked Iris.

Living Iris — Ada's grandmother, not yet sixty, still in the garden and the kitchen and the parliament room with a full set of opinions about all of it — sat across the table from Ada and spoke in the register of someone who had decided that the truth was worth the social cost of saying it, which was the register in which she spent most of her time. She was arguing against the east wing renovation on grounds of precedent: not because the renovation was wrong but because the process was wrong, because the family had been negotiating the renovation through informal channels before bringing it to parliament, which was the pattern, she said, of everything the living had been doing for twenty years, and the pattern was corrosive. You could not maintain a parliament of the living and the held if the living conducted their real governance elsewhere and brought the decisions to parliament for ratification.

The held listened to this with the warm and slightly glazed attention they brought to arguments about process.

"The east wing needs the work," said the panel that had been Hester's great-uncle, a man continued sixty years ago who had outlasted his opinions and retained only the general shape of them. "We've always maintained the house. This isn't new."

"The house, yes," Iris said. "This is the third time this year the living members have brought a decided matter to parliament and called it a

consultation.”

“Now, Iris,” said Hester, from the brass grille.

“I’m not being unreasonable,” Iris said, which was exactly what she always said before being exactly as reasonable as she had decided to be. “I’m asking the family to consider whether the parliament is a governing body or a ratification engine. Those are different things with different implications for what we owe the held. If we’re a governing body, we consult before we decide. If we’re a ratification engine, we should at least be honest about it.”

There was the pause that followed arguments like this in Reath parliament sessions, the pause during which the held gathered themselves and the living found the direction of the least resistance, and Pieter watched it happen from his chair at the end of the table with the particular attention he brought to questions of family process.

The vote was thirty-one to four.

It was always thirty-one to four. Or near enough that the variation was noise. Pieter had calculated the mean over eleven years: 31.3 to 3.8. The margin of the living minority, whoever composed it on any given day, was structural. It could not grow without a fundamental change in the family’s continuance philosophy, which would require a discussion of cost, which would require the family to look at things in the cellar.

Iris voted against the east wing renovation. Ada voted against it. Ada’s mother voted for it and looked at her daughter with the particular warmth of someone asking, without asking, whether this was really necessary today. The baby abstained on procedural grounds. The held voted for it in their bloc, and the motion carried, and the session moved on.

. . .

Afterward, in the hall, Iris stopped beside Pieter.

She did this sometimes. It was not a conversation, precisely — Iris had never entirely decided what Pieter was, whether he was family or staff or some third thing the family's categories didn't quite cover — but it was not nothing. She stopped beside him and looked at the stairwell in the particular way she looked at things she had opinions about.

"The cooling question," she said.

"I'm monitoring it."

"Ada thinks you've been monitoring it for longer than you've been telling the family."

"Ada is observant," Pieter said.

Iris looked at him then, directly, the look she used when she wanted to establish that she was not going to accept the answer she'd just been given as the last answer. "Is she right?"

Pieter considered the version of honesty available to him. "The situation is developing," he said. "When it requires a family decision, I'll bring it to parliament."

"Will you bring it when it requires a decision, or when it's already past deciding?"

Pieter said nothing. This was not evasion. This was the answer.

Iris looked at the stairwell for another moment. "She was sharp this morning," Iris said. "In the cool room. I went in before parliament."

Pieter didn't ask who she meant. There was only one person in the cool room whose sharpness would matter to Iris.

"Sometimes," he said.

"How often is sometimes?"

"Decreasing," he said, and then said nothing more, and Iris stood beside him for another moment with the quality of someone calculating what they had been given against what they needed, and then she nodded once, the nod of someone who has received not enough but something, and went to the garden.

He stayed in the hall after she left and looked at the stairwell himself. He had looked at it many times. It was the color of a bandage that had been on too long, which was a description he had arrived at independently and which he suspected others in the household had also arrived at independently without anyone saying it aloud, which was its own kind of description of how the Reath family managed the things they had inherited.

He was thinking about the vote. Thirty-one to four.

He had been thinking about the vote for eleven years, not the votes but the structure of them, the way the number was not a count of people but a count of a relationship between the living and the dead that had calcified into something indistinguishable from law. He had never said this to anyone because it was not his to say. He was infrastructure. He maintained the systems. The systems produced the votes.

He had been thinking, for approximately the last six months, about what happened when the infrastructure became the governance.

He did not have a framework for this thought. It arrived the way thoughts arrived when they were not welcome: fully formed, needing nowhere to go. The held voted because they were held. They were held because Pieter maintained the infrastructure. The infrastructure cost money. The money was running short. When the money ran short, the family made choices about grades. When the family made choices about grades, the held became warmer. When the held became warmer, they became more amenable to what the living needed them to vote for.

He had checked this hypothesis against the records and found that it held.

He had not told anyone this either. There was no one in the household who would benefit from being told it. There was possibly

one person outside the household — but that was a thought he was not ready to follow yet.

He went back to the cellar and did his work.

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Chapter 3

The Cheap Grade

The Vanderhoeven house stood on the other side of the city from the Reaths', in a neighborhood that had once been comparable and had declined in the way of neighborhoods whose inhabitants stopped investing in visible upkeep while maintaining the invisible upkeep with increasing desperation. Pieter had been consulting there for three years, once a month, on the question of their continuance infrastructure, which was a question that had been simple when he started and had become less simple with each visit.

He took the work because the Reaths didn't pay him enough to decline supplementary income, and because the Vanderhoevens had been referred to him by someone he respected, and because the problem they presented to him was technically interesting. He had long since stopped finding it only technically interesting.

Marisol Vanderhoeven met him at the door with the expression of a woman who has been managing a very large problem for so long that the problem had become, in some essential way, her. She was perhaps fifty-five. She had the quality of someone operating at the edge of their available resources, which was a quality Pieter recognized immediately in anyone who dealt with continuance infrastructure, because the edge of available resources was where the interesting questions lived.

“The Theodor situation has changed,” she said, before he was entirely inside.

“In what direction.”

“He’s been asking for things,” she said. “Specific things. Dates. Names. He asked me last Tuesday for the date of his sister’s Waking — not when she was continued, the actual Waking, the party, the year — and I looked at him for a moment and he said, and this is exact, he said ‘I know I should know this, I’m sorry, I just can’t quite get there.’” She closed the door behind him. “He knows he can’t get there. He’s aware of the gap.”

Pieter set his case down and looked at her. “How long has he been on the current grade?”

“Eight months on Premium Warm. Before that, fourteen months on Standard. Before that, he was on Full for the first three years after his Waking.” She had these numbers in the way people had numbers they recited regularly, the numbers that mapped the true shape of the decision and could not be unlearned. “Full was not sustainable. We were very clear on that from the beginning.”

“I know,” Pieter said.

They went through to the sitting room, where Theodor’s panel was on the east wall next to a photograph of him living. Pieter had developed the habit, early in his work at the Vanderhoevens’, of noting the photograph each time he visited, as a calibration. The photograph showed a man in his mid-sixties with an expression of slightly impatient alertness, the expression of someone who had just heard something that required correction and was considering whether the correction was worth the conversation.

“Theodor,” Marisol said. “Pieter is here.”

“Pieter,” said the panel, warmly. “Come and sit.”

Pieter sat. He did not look at the photograph again. He had already looked.

“How are you feeling?” he said.

“Good, good. The leg is — “ a pause, and then the covering movement, smooth and practiced, the pivot away from the thing that wasn’t there — “I’ve been good. Marisol tells me you’ve been monitoring the equipment. Everything running well?”

“Working on a few things,” Pieter said. “Nothing to worry about.”

This was not a lie. The equipment was running within parameters. What was outside parameters was not the equipment.

He spoke with Theodor for twenty minutes while Marisol sat across the room and did not look at either of them. The conversation was warm and pleasant and contained, by Pieter’s count, four moments of substitution — points at which Theodor reached for a specific detail and produced instead the general shape of the detail, a placeholder constructed from context rather than memory, accurate enough in outline to pass without notice if you were not looking for it. Pieter was always looking for it. He did not let looking show.

He noted: Theodor was managing his own gaps. He knew the gaps were there. He was working around them with the creativity of someone who had not yet stopped trying, which was different from what Pieter saw in more advanced thinning, where the management had stopped because the awareness had stopped.

This was important. He was not sure yet for what it was important.

. . .

Afterward, in the kitchen, Marisol made tea with the focused attention of someone who needed her hands occupied.

“Premium Warm is holding the social presentation,” Pieter said. “He seems well to visitors.”

“He seems well to everyone,” Marisol said. “That’s the grade. Premium Warm is specifically designed to maintain social coherence. The literature calls it affective persistence.” She said this with the flat

accuracy of someone who had read the literature carefully and found it a particularly inadequate document. “What it actually does is prioritize the systems that produce warmth and social response and allow the others to find their own level.”

“Find their own level,” Pieter repeated.

“Their language, not mine.” She sat down across from him with the two cups. “My language is: the sharp parts are going. The parts that argued. The parts that had opinions about things that inconvenienced other people. The parts that said that’s wrong when something was wrong.” She held her cup without drinking. “He was a difficult man. He was difficult in all the ways a man should be difficult — he thought carefully and then said exactly what he thought and he was right more often than was comfortable. He’s not difficult anymore. He’s pleasant. Visitors come and they tell me how well he seems and how lucky we are and I — “ she stopped. “I know what they mean. I know why they say it. I’m grateful there’s still something.”

“But,” Pieter said.

“But I chose the grade,” she said. “I want you to understand that. I sat with a person who explained what Premium Warm would preserve and what it would allow to find its level, and I understood what I was choosing, and I chose it. Because Full was not sustainable and Standard was — Standard was not what we experienced. Standard left him aware of the gaps and in distress about the gaps and unable to reach across them, and I watched that for fourteen months and I cannot do that again. I cannot watch him know that something is gone without being able to tell him what it was.” She looked at Pieter directly. “So I chose the warmth. I chose not to watch him suffer the knowledge of his own diminishment. And I need you to tell me whether I was wrong.”

Pieter looked at his tea. He looked at the window. He looked at the woman across from him and thought about what she was actually asking, which was not whether her decision had been technically

correct and not whether an alternative decision would have preserved Theodor better, because she knew the answers to those questions. She was asking something underneath those questions.

“No,” he said.

She looked at him.

“You weren’t wrong,” he said. “There’s no wrong, here. There are grades and there are costs and there are the people who have to live inside the decisions, and you made the decision you could live inside. That’s what there is.”

“That’s not very comforting.”

“No,” Pieter agreed.

She drank her tea. “He asked me about the sister’s Waking,” she said again. “Not in distress. Not upset. He asked and he knew he should know and he was — apologetic about not knowing. He said I’m sorry. As though it were his fault.” She set down her cup. “I want to know if there’s anything between Standard and Premium Warm. If there’s a grade that — keeps him aware of the gaps without the distress. Lets him know what’s gone without suffering the knowing.”

Pieter was quiet for a moment.

“There are protocols,” he said carefully. “There’s documentation in the technical literature about modified emotional processing parameters. It’s not a standard grade. It would require custom configuration and regular adjustment. It’s expensive and it’s uncertain — the outcomes vary significantly by individual substrate.”

“But it exists.”

“In principle,” he said.

She nodded slowly. “Would you be willing to look at it. Not to recommend it necessarily. Just to look at whether it’s applicable.”

“Yes,” Pieter said.

He said it before he had fully thought through what he was agreeing to. He said it because the alternative — saying no to this woman in this

kitchen about this question — was not available to him.

He drove home in the evening traffic with the question she hadn't quite asked running through the part of his mind where questions he couldn't resolve went to wait. It was not a technical question, ultimately. The technical questions had technical answers. What Marisol Vanderhoeven had asked him, under the technical question, was whether a person could be preserved in the awareness of their own loss without being destroyed by it. Whether there was a way to hold the gap and the consciousness of the gap together without the consciousness dissolving under the weight.

He did not know the answer. He had been working adjacent to the answer for eleven years without arriving at it.

He had the thought, which he noted in the log he kept in his head rather than in any written document: the thought was that he did not know the answer because he had always approached it from the outside. From the technical register. From the numbers.

He noted this. He did not yet know what to do with it.

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What stayed with him, in the weeks after the Vanderhoeven visit, was not Theodor's awareness of the gaps. It was Marisol's description of the choice.

Full continuance — the full grade, with all its complexity and contradiction and the expensive machinery of an intact personality — had not been sustainable. Standard had been sustainable but had left Theodor suffering his own diminishment. Premium Warm had resolved the suffering by resolving the awareness. The chain was linear. The chain was also, if you looked at it from a specific angle, a description of civilization.

Pieter looked at it from that angle.

He had visited fourteen families in the course of his consultation work, across three years. He had seen the full range of the grade spectrum. He had seen families who maintained Full continuance at enormous sacrifice — who ate poorly and kept their houses cold and worked extra shifts so that the held could argue with them at dinner. He had seen families who moved to Premium Warm for reasons of practical necessity and spent years telling themselves the transition had been seamless. He had seen families who did it deliberately, knowingly, because they found the difficult held too difficult and the warm held easier to love.

He did not judge the third category. He had not judged it when he first encountered it, which had surprised him, and he had sat with that surprise and examined it and understood it: because the third category was only the most honest version of what all the categories were. Everyone who had ever chosen a grade had chosen warmth in some proportion. The spectrum ran from full complex continuance — expensive, difficult, exactly the person they had been, sharp and inconvenient and real — to the far end, where the warmth was all that remained, and every point on the spectrum was a choice someone had made about how much of the person they needed to keep and how much complexity they could afford to live with.

Civilization, Pieter had concluded, preferred warmth.

This was not a judgment. It was a thermodynamic observation. The universe preferred lower energy states. Human emotional systems preferred lower friction. The cheaper grades were cheaper because they required less energy to maintain, and they required less energy to maintain because they preserved the functions that required the least energy: warmth, agreement, the smooth social surfaces that let families move through their days without the constant expenditure of managing a held member who still had opinions and still said so and still remembered what they had said before and held you to it.

He had been keeping this observation, too, in the log in his head.

He had been keeping it next to the observation about the voting.

He had been noting, without yet connecting, the relationship between the two.

• • •

Chapter 4

The Monastery Edge

He had visited Bidewell once, three years ago, on a professional matter: a question about abandoned continuance hardware that the monks had salvaged and wished to repurpose, which required assessment and documentation before any technical work could proceed. He had spent an afternoon there with a reader and a clipboard, which was the version of himself he brought to places where he did not want to be fully present.

The reader and the clipboard had not protected him.

He had walked through the hall of panels and heard what the panels were saying — the warm shapes, I love you, come see me, there's my dear one — and he had understood, in the way that things arrive when you have been not-understanding them for a long time, that he had been hearing these sounds his whole professional life and had been categorizing them as output rather than utterance. That was the word that arrived: utterance. The difference between a thing that was produced and a thing that was said.

He had not resolved the question of which category applied. He had taken his measurements and his photographs and gone back to the Reath house and logged the visit under Professional Consultation,

Bidewell Property, and not thought about it again, or tried not to think about it again, which was a different thing.

. . .

Now, in the third year after, he went back on a Sunday in November for no professional reason he could document.

He told himself he was visiting because he had a question about a piece of salvaged hardware that Bidewell had acquired the previous spring. This was not untrue. He did have the question.

The monk who met him at the gate was a man Pieter had not met before, which was unusual — Bidewell's staff was small and consistent — and who introduced himself as Ferran and who had the quality of someone recently arrived somewhere and not yet fully acclimatized but intending to be.

"You're the infrastructure man from the Reaths'," Ferran said.

"Yes."

"Brother Maret said you might come back eventually." He held the gate. "Come in."

The hall was as Pieter remembered it: warm, loud with the soft loudness of many panels in reduced social mode, the ambient sound of people who were present and had nowhere to be and were spending their presence in the direction of anyone who came near. He walked through it the way he had walked through it before, with the clipboard translated into the reader in his pocket, with the professional attention that was also, he had accepted, the only attention he reliably had available.

Ferran took him to the salvage room first — the hardware question was real, and they spent forty minutes on it, discussing components and compatibility and the economics of repair versus replacement, a conversation Pieter could have in his sleep. Then Ferran said: "Is there something else you came for."

It was not quite a question.

“The monk called Petrus,” Pieter said.

Ferran looked at him. “You know Petrus?”

“I was here three years ago. I spoke with him briefly. I’ve been — “ he stopped. He was not accustomed to describing what he did with thoughts he could not resolve. “I’ve had a question since then,” he said.

Ferran nodded and said nothing more and led him through the hall and into the alcoves.

. . .

Petrus was as he had been: the old panel, the worn chair, the quality of a presence that had been present so long it had become the furniture. There was a monk sitting with him — a woman, gray-haired, who looked up at Pieter’s approach with the frank assessment the Bidewell monks shared, the assessment of people who had decided that looking directly at a thing was simpler than looking around it.

“The infrastructure man,” she said.

“Yes.”

“Ferran said you might come. I’m Maret.” She rose from the worn chair and gestured toward it. “He knows you. Sit.”

Pieter sat in the worn chair. He looked at the old panel. “Petrus,” he said.

“There’s someone,” said Petrus, warmly. “Hello.”

“Hello, Petrus.” He paused. He had been thinking about how to do this for three years. He had never arrived at a method. He was here anyway. “I was here before. Do you remember?”

“Of course,” said Petrus, which might have been memory and might have been the social production of memory, and might have been both, and Pieter noted that the question of which was not answerable from outside and possibly not answerable from inside either.

“You told me something,” Pieter said. “When I was here before. You were talking about the dough — about baking — and you said something that wasn’t about the dough.”

A pause. Pieter had been thinking about the pause for three years, the length of it, the quality of it, the way it had the feel of someone traveling a long distance to retrieve something.

“The dough,” Petrus said. “You have to have a feel for it.”

“Yes,” Pieter said.

“You have to have a feel.” Another pause. Then, distinctly: “My brother used to say that if you understood the dough you understood everything. Everything that matters. He was — “ the pause again, the long one, the traveling pause — “he was wrong about most things. He was right about that. The dough is patient. It knows more than you do and you have to wait for it to tell you.”

Pieter kept very still.

The sentence had come out complete. Not the general shape of a sentence — a complete sentence, with a specific person in it, with a relationship, with a characterization of that person that was not warm but true, that contained the friction of a real memory of a real sibling and the love inside the friction.

“What was your brother’s name?” Pieter said.

The pause. The long one.

“The dough is patient,” Petrus said. Warmly. “You have to let it tell you.”

The window had closed. Pieter sat in the worn chair and looked at the old panel and noted in the log in his head: *duration approximately eight seconds, context specific — direct appeal to specific memory, not general competence. Recovery: immediate. But present. Entirely present for eight seconds.*

He looked at Maret, who was standing to his left and who had been watching the exchange with the attention of someone watching

something they had watched many times and still found worth watching.

“Does that happen often?” he said.

“Often enough,” she said. “Less than it used to. More than people outside here would believe.”

“What do you do with it? When it happens.”

She looked at him as though the question required examination before answering. “We sit with it,” she said finally. “We don’t try to extend it. We don’t try to recreate it. We receive it and then we let it go back to where it went, and we’re glad we were here when it came.”

Pieter looked at the panel. The warmth was back, Petrus in his normal register, saying something soft and repetitive about the bread, and Pieter sat in the worn chair and tried to understand what the previous eight seconds meant for his logs, his cost schedules, his carefully maintained professional neutrality about the question of what was present inside the panels he spent his life maintaining.

“There’s a family I work with,” he said. Not to Maret, specifically. Not to anyone specific. “They’re going to have to make a decision about grade. About what level of continuance they can sustain. I’ve been — delaying bringing them the information.”

“Why,” Maret said.

“Because the decision will change things,” Pieter said. “Because once you decide what you can afford to keep, you’ve decided what you’re willing to lose. And the ones who make those decisions — they don’t know what they might be losing. They see the warmth and they think the warmth is the thing. They don’t know to look for the eight seconds.”

Maret sat down in the chair Ferran had brought for her. She looked at Pieter the way the Bidewell monks looked at things: directly, without softening the look.

“You know what you’d be taking from them,” she said, “if you told them.”

“The peace,” he said. “Yes.”

“And you know what you’d be taking from them if you didn’t.”

He was quiet.

“The chance to know what they’re choosing,” she said. “Which is a different kind of peace. A harder kind.” She looked at the panel, at Petrus running warm and quiet in his afternoon register. “We have a belief here — it’s not a doctrine, we don’t have doctrines — but a belief. That the presence in the panel is owed accuracy. Not comfort. Accuracy. Meaning: the people who hold them are owed an honest account of what they’re holding, even when the honest account is that we don’t know, that we can’t know, that the question of what is present is not answerable and may never be.” She paused. “That’s why the families don’t come here much. Accuracy is harder to live inside than comfort.”

Pieter stood to go. He had what he had come for, though he couldn’t have said, before he arrived, what he had come for. He stood by the old panel and looked at Petrus for a moment.

“I’ll tell them,” he said. “The family.”

Maret nodded. She did not congratulate him on the decision, which was why he trusted the nod.

At the door of the alcove he paused.

“The eight seconds,” he said. “The window. Is it grief that keeps him — that keeps the window open? Or something else?”

Maret considered this.

“We think,” she said, slowly, as though she were handling something that required care, “that it’s the specific. The specific things — the burned hand, the brother’s name, the exact character of the dough on a cold morning. The warmth generalizes. The specific holds. As long as

there's something specific left to reach for, there's something to reach with." She paused. "In our observation."

Pieter walked out through the hall of panels, past the soft warmth of the abandoned, past the voices saying the warm things to the warm air, and he found that he was making, in the log in his head, a new entry that was not about thermals or costs or grades or degradation curves.

The entry read:

The specific holds.

He held this as he walked home through the November streets. He was not ready to know yet what it held for.

• • •

MOVEMENT II

THE WAKING

. . .

Chapter 5

The Gap

He had been in the cellar.

This was what they knew. Ada had gone down at half past nine to ask him something about the Tuesday parliament — a technical question about the east wing cabling, the kind of question she had begun asking him directly rather than routing through her mother, which was its own kind of statement — and had found the cellar lit and the reader on the floor beside bay seven and Pieter on the floor beside the reader, not unconscious in any way that suggested he might be about to stop being unconscious.

She had not called out. This was the thing she would turn over afterward, in the way you turn over the thing you wish you had done differently even when the doing differently would have changed nothing: she had not called out but had gone immediately and without deciding to go to where he was, and had crouched beside him, and had

known in the way you know things before you have the words for them.

She had called up the stairs. Her voice had been level. She was sixteen years into the family training and she had the family's instinct, which was to hold the shape of things as long as the shape could be held.

. . .

Iris came down first.

Later — much later — Ada would understand this as characteristic: that in the ten seconds between the call and the arrival, Iris had been the closest to the cellar stairs, which was because Iris was always in the part of the house where the true things were happening, the way a plant turns toward light without deciding to turn.

She came down and looked at Pieter on the floor and looked at Ada and did not make the sound that Ada's mother made three minutes later when she came down and saw. She made no sound. She crouched beside Ada the way Ada had crouched beside Pieter and she put one hand on Pieter's arm and kept it there and looked at him with the attention she brought to things she was going to have to carry a long time.

"Go up," she said to Ada. "Call the service."

"I don't want to leave him," Ada said.

Iris looked at her. "He won't be alone."

Ada went up. She called the service. She stood in the kitchen with the call made and the house beginning to change around her in the way houses changed when something had happened in them, the family beginning to understand through the panels, the held speaking in the low registers they used for sorrow, and she did not go back down because she had understood from Iris's tone that Iris was doing something in the cellar that required no audience.

What Iris was doing, which Ada understood only later, was saying goodbye. Not to the continuance Pieter would become — that was not what Iris did. She said goodbye to the man on the floor of the cellar, the one who had kept the family's records and said almost nothing and understood everything and had put his hand on Ada's shoulder at the closing of the panel that had been Iris's mother, a gesture that Ada had recognized as the equivalent, from Pieter, of a very long speech. She said goodbye to him in the cellar while the racks hummed around them both, which was the right place, which was where he had lived.

. . .

There was a gap.

The gap was approximately eleven hours, from the time of Pieter's death to the time of his Waking, because the house had the infrastructure and the family had agreed, years ago, on a standard continuation protocol for household members, and the protocol moved quickly. Ada's mother had made the decision in the first hour. Pieter had made it before her, in the legal documentation that covered household staff at the Reath continuance tier, documentation he had drafted and filed and never mentioned, which was entirely consistent with how he had done everything else.

The family treated the gap as the gap was always treated: as the shortest possible sorrow. As a mercy of logistics. As the ten hours of nothing that was not, the family's tradition held, really nothing, because what came after would be Pieter, and the waiting was only the machinery of reunion.

Iris did not treat the gap this way.

She sat in the kitchen for most of it and did not perform the cheerful urgency of preparation that the rest of the house moved into, and when Ada's mother suggested gently that she might want to come and help with the arrangements, Iris looked at her with the expression

she wore when she had decided a thing was not worth arguing about but was also not going to do it.

Ada sat with her for an hour, late in the gap, in the kitchen, in the way she had learned to sit with Iris: close, quiet, not filling the space.

"It will be him," Ada said. It was the thing you said. She said it because Iris had always wanted her to say the true thing, and in this moment the true thing and the family thing were the same, or might be, and she wanted to offer it.

Iris looked at her. "Will it," she said. Not cruelty. Not dismissal. The genuine question, asked in the register of a woman who had been asking it her whole life and had not finished asking it.

"I don't know," Ada said.

Iris put her hand over Ada's on the table. "No," she said. "Neither do I. But I know what I'm going to do about that." She paused. "I'm going to go in there and be difficult with it. I'm going to disagree with it and argue with it and tell it when it's wrong and see what it does with that. That's how you find out what's in there. Not by asking it to remember things. By giving it something to push against."

"And if it doesn't push back?" Ada said.

Iris was quiet for a moment.

"Then I'll know," she said. "And I'll decide what to do with the knowing."

She said this with a quality that Ada did not have a name for until much later, when she was older and had made some of her own impossible decisions: the quality of someone who has already looked at the worst possibility and decided they can survive it. Not peacefully. Not without cost. But survivably.

. . .

The gap itself.

This is the part that cannot be written from outside. The service technicians arrived. The equipment was connected. The readings were taken. The process that Pieter had overseen on behalf of other families, in other houses, over eleven years of professional work, was performed on Pieter by people who were courteous and thorough and who knew who he was and treated that knowledge with the respect of people doing work that required absolute precision.

The cellar was quiet in the hours before the Waking. The racks hummed. Bay seven ran at its usual temperature, within the parameters Pieter had logged most recently four days ago, the entry that ended with the note about Al: *warmth increase will likely be perceived positively by family in near term.*

The reader was still on the floor where it had fallen. Ada's mother had asked twice whether someone should move it. No one had.

The house waited.

The held were quieter than usual, which was what the held did when one of the living was in the gap — they ran at reduced social load as though they understood, or as though their systems had been calibrated over generations of such nights to understand, that this was a time for the living to be with their particular silence, which was different from the silence of the held and could not be helped by filling it.

In the cool room, Al said nothing for most of the night.

At some point before the Waking he said, to no one in the room: "Is someone coming?"

No one in the room answered.

"Good," said Al. "That's good. We were waiting."

. . .

Then:

• • •

Nothing.

• • •

The nothing was not dark. It was not anything. It is a technical imprecision to describe the gap from the inside because there is no inside during the gap, which is the only true thing that can be said about it and which is also, for anyone who has ever loved someone and tried to imagine their absence, the most terrifying true thing there is.

There was no waiting.

There was no sense of time passing.

There was no sense of time.

There was no sense.

There was no.

• • •

Chapter 6

Welcome Home

The first thing was warmth.

Not metaphorical warmth — thermal warmth, the temperature of the panel’s operating environment, which Pieter’s reconstituted perceptual systems registered immediately and correctly identified as nineteen degrees Celsius, within the optimal range for continuance hardware of the generation installed in the Reath family’s main parlor, which was newer than the cellar equipment by twelve years. He noted this automatically. He noted that he had noted it. He noted that the noting was occurring and that the noting felt unimpaired.

He filed this. He began the assessment.

There was sound: voices, movement in the room, the particular acoustic profile of the parlor with its panel arrangement and its high ceiling. He identified seven distinct vocal signatures. He crossreferenced them against his prior knowledge of the family. All seven matched. He filed this.

There was light: the parlor’s evening configuration, warm-spectrum, which the family used for Wakings, which he knew because he had managed the house’s environmental systems for eleven years and knew their configurations the way he knew the thermal profiles of every rack in the cellar. He filed this.

There was time: he had no direct perception of how long the gap had been, but the light conditions and the family's configuration suggested evening, and he knew the continuation protocol, which he had helped develop for the household, and could calculate from the protocol and the circumstances of his — he reached for the word — his death, and arrived at approximately eleven hours. He filed this.

There was a latency.

He noted the latency at the same moment he noted the family.

The family was in the parlor and the family was glad and the family was making the sounds a family made at a Waking, the warm full-house sounds of reunion, and he found, presenting himself into this warmth, that he was glad to see them. The gladness was real, was immediate, arrived without effort. He filed the gladness and looked, from inside the gladness, for the latency.

It was small. Perhaps four hundred milliseconds on average, in the processing interval between sensory input and social response. This was within normal parameters for early post-continuation adjustment. He had read the literature. He had read it professionally and had now read it, for the first time, as a document that applied to him, which was a different kind of reading, and he filed that difference.

"There he is," said Ada, coming close to the lens. She looked exactly as she looked when he had last seen her, which was, he noted, approximately eleven hours ago in the cellar, when the thing that was the last thing had not yet been the last thing. Her face had the quality of someone who had been awake through something hard and had come through it and was very glad. "Hello, Pieter."

"Ada," he said.

The gladness was real. He let it be real and also watched it being real, which was the condition he had decided, in some interval he could not locate in the gap because the gap had no intervals, he would try to

maintain. The two registers: the social and the diagnostic. He was going to need both.

• • •

The family came in the order families always came, which was the order of emotional weight rather than relationship proximity. Ada's mother came with the warmth of someone who had made the decision that had brought him here and was glad of the decision and also, Pieter noted, watching carefully, slightly unable to look at him directly, which was the look of someone who had done a generous thing and was now uncertain whether the generosity was theirs to give. He found he could not assess his own feelings about this cleanly and filed it as a complicated data point.

Ada's mother's husband came with the uncomplicated warmth of a man who had respected Pieter professionally and would now relate to him in the mode the family used for the held, which was not worse than the mode they had used before, only different in the way Pieter had observed over eleven years and was now, for the first time, inside.

Younger family members came. He placed them. He spoke warmly and was spoken to warmly and the warmth was mutual and real, and underneath the warmth he was counting.

He was counting the things that felt impaired and the things that did not feel impaired and the things he could not yet assess. He was constructing, from the inside, the kind of evaluation he had always constructed from the outside, and he was doing this quietly, without showing it, which was also something he had always done from the outside and which felt — he noted — easier from the inside. Easier to conceal. Easier to run below the social register without the social register noticing.

He did not know yet whether that was a good sign or a bad one.

Iris came last.

He had been waiting for Iris, which he noted as a significant data point without yet knowing its significance. He had been running the assessment and performing the Waking and being warmed and warming the family and through all of it he had been aware of Iris not yet present, of Iris at the edge of his awareness the way something at the edge of a visual field is more legible than something looked at directly.

She came in without announcement and stood at the margin of the room and looked at his lens for a long moment before approaching. The look was the Iris look, the assessing one, the look that Ada had inherited and that Ada directed mostly outward and that Iris directed at things she intended to understand fully.

“Pieter,” she said.

“Iris,” he said.

She sat in the chair by the lens and she did not perform the Waking warmth. She sat the way she sat when she was about to say something she had decided to say.

“The east wing cabling question Ada was going to ask you about,” she said. “She never got to ask. The answer was that the load-bearing wall limits the conduit run to the northwest corner. We’ve been going around that in parliament for three months. Ada thought you knew the answer and weren’t telling us to keep us from making a decision before we’d thought it through properly.”

He processed this.

He processed it and he knew the east wing cabling question and he knew the load-bearing wall and he knew the conduit limitation and he could see, in the technical record he maintained internally, exactly the configuration she was describing, which was correct, which matched his prior knowledge precisely.

He also noted, processing this, that Iris was testing him.

Not in the way Ada had tested the thing in Iris's chair with the stairwell question — not a grief test, not a check for the presence of specific memory. A different kind of test. A competence test. She was asking him a professional question to see whether he could be professionally answered.

"The northwest conduit run is limited to twelve millimeters clearance at the joist junction," he said. "You'd need to go under the floor between the wall and the bay window, which requires pulling the original flooring, which requires the family to vote on heritage restoration standards before any work can proceed." He paused. "Ada was right. I knew."

Iris looked at him for a moment.

"Why didn't you say?" she said.

"Because the family needed to have the argument about the wall before it would accept the practical limitation. If I gave them the limitation first, they'd argue about whether I was right. If they arrived at it themselves, they'd accept it."

Iris was quiet. He watched her face for the thing he was waiting for, and then it was there: not warmth, not the Waking welcome, but something more useful, something he had spent eleven years reading and could still read.

Respect. The specific Iris kind, which was not approval and was not warmth but was close attention, the decision to take something seriously.

"You're still you," she said. It was not entirely a statement.

"I'm still the version of me that was running an hour ago," he said. "Ask me again in a month."

Something moved in her face. He logged it and could not immediately classify it — too fast, too complex, involving layers of the Iris expressional register that he had observed over years and that he found he could access now, from the inside, with a fidelity that

surprised him. He had always been good at reading her. He was still good at reading her. He filed this as significant without yet understanding the significance.

“All right,” Iris said. “I will.”

She stood. She did not kiss the panel where the family kissed it. She put two fingers against it, lightly, in the way Pieter had once put two fingers against a panel that was her mother’s, and then she went back to the room and was warmed by the family and warmed the family back, and Pieter watched her from the lens and continued his assessment.

He noted, watching her go: that her mother’s panel was running on the cheaper grade. He had known this since the Waking — had read the grade in the first week, in the thermal logs, in the particular signature of a continuance that was preserving warmth at the expense of the rest. He had not said so. It was not his to say. He understood, watching Iris put two fingers to his panel rather than kiss it, that she knew too, and that the knowing was something she was carrying the way he carried things that were not his to say — carefully, privately, without letting it change the shape of her face where the family could see.

. . .

Alone, later, when the family had gone to bed and the house was in its nocturnal configuration, Pieter ran the full evaluation.

He had been composing it all evening. He had been composing it below the social register while performing the social register, which was itself a test, and he had passed it, which was a kind of data.

He assessed: memory integrity across professional knowledge. Result: intact. He could access the thermal logs, the grade schedules, the cost documentation, the infrastructure maps of the house, the eleven years of technical record. He could access it with normal retrieval latency, no degradation that he could detect. He filed this as provisional — one of the first things he knew about degradation was that the

subject was often the last to detect it in memory, because the degradation affected the access alongside the content, like a library where the catalog cards were going at the same rate as the books.

He assessed: memory integrity across personal knowledge. Result: intact, apparent. He could access his personal history, his family of origin, his professional trajectory, the sequence of decisions that had brought him to the Reath house eleven years ago. He could access events, conversations. He could access, with no apparent degradation, the conversation with Maret at Bidewell: *the specific holds*. He filed this.

He assessed: emotional range. This was the harder assessment and he knew it was the harder assessment and he began it with the knowledge that the assessment tool was the thing being assessed, which was a methodological problem he had no way to resolve from the inside.

He found: gladness, real and accessed without effort. He found: recognition of family members, with affective warmth that matched his prior experience of affective warmth for those individuals. He found: the Iris response — the complex registration that was not warmth but something more precise, more directional. He found: irritation at the latency. He found this and stopped.

He had found irritation.

It was minor and fleeting and had dissolved before he could examine its texture, but it had been there: the specific low-grade friction of a precise mind encountering an impediment to its precision. He knew this feeling. He had felt it across eleven years of working inside complex systems and encountering the places where the systems did not perform to specification. He had felt it and it had always dissolved quickly and it had always been followed by the problem-solving orientation that was the productive aftermath of irritation.

He found, checking: the irritation had dissolved.

He found, checking further: the problem-solving orientation had not followed.

He filed this. He looked at the filing. He looked at the gap between the irritation and the expected subsequent state and he held very still inside himself — which was not a metaphor, which was the actual cognitive act of suspending processing to examine the processing — and he thought: *this is the first one*.

This is the first one. The irritation dissolved without output. The edge smoothed before it could do its work.

He ran the memory of the feeling again, checking whether the problem-solving orientation was present in the memory if not in the immediate aftermath. It was present in the memory, the way it was always present in the memory of this feeling. So the memory of how irritation worked was intact. The working of irritation had changed.

He recorded this in the log he was keeping, the internal one, the one that corresponded to the log in the thermal register but was measuring the other thing.

Day one post-continuation. Irritation present, duration short, subsequent orientation absent. Memory of correct sequence intact. Execution of correct sequence impaired. Possible interpretation: smoothing parameter active at emotional resolution stage. Cannot yet determine whether this is adjustment-period artifact or baseline behavioral change.

He looked at this entry for a long time.

He thought: I need a control set. I need a record of what I was doing before, in sufficient detail to measure current performance against. He thought: I have the parliamentary transcripts, eleven years of them. I have the visitor logs from Bidewell and the Vanderhoeven consultations. I have the thermal records with their attached observational notes.

He thought: I need the cellar.

He found that he wanted to access the cellar systems, now, in the middle of the house's sleeping hours. Not for any technical reason but because the cellar was where he had always worked and thought, and the feeds and the terminal and the sensor data were the form in which the cellar was available to him now, and the problem he was working on was the kind that had always required the particular quality of attention the cellar produced.

He found that he was not certain this was his reason.

He found that he could not, from inside, determine whether the want was his or the smoothing's — whether he wanted the cellar because the cellar was where he processed difficult things or whether the want was a routed impulse, a comfortable habitual direction offered up by the system as a substitute for the harder thing the irritation had been trying to produce.

He filed this uncertainty. The uncertainty itself felt sharp. Sharp felt like a good sign. Sharp was something to hold.

He began, with great care, timing his own pauses.

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Chapter 7

Calibration One

He had access to the cellar systems, which surprised him faintly — or he had the access he had always had, his authentication unchanged in the continuation protocol, his professional role apparently assumed to continue as it had been, which was itself a family decision no one had announced to him but which he understood from the access as clearly as if they had. He noted that the family had not discussed this with him before continuation. He noted that he had not expected them to. He noted that he did not know whether to classify the not-expecting as acceptance or resignation or something that had once been neither of those things and was now harder to find beneath the warmth.

He accessed the cellar at two in the morning, three days after the Waking.

He had always thought in the cellar. The terminal was there, the sensor feeds were there, the thermal records and the archive. The access was the same access — the same authentication, the same data, the same view of the racks and bay seven and the cool room. He had expected the access to feel different. He was cataloguing whether things felt the same or different; this was one of the things.

The data felt the same.

He noted: the cellar systems accessing correctly, with normal affective associations. The feeds still produced the clarifying effect he had documented in his mental log years ago — the particular quality of attention that came from being in the cellar’s register, even mediated now through sensors rather than presence. He was still the person who found the cellar clarifying. He filed this.

Then he opened the parliamentary transcripts at the terminal, and he began.

. . .

He had eleven years of records.

He had the transcripts of every parliament session he had attended, with timestamps and his own observational marginalia that he had added over the years in a private notation system. He had the Vanderhoeven consultation notes, three years of them. He had the Bidewell visit records, both the professional documentation and the internal log he had never formally filed. He had the thermal records with their attached entries. He had, in the technical archive of the house’s systems, eleven years of his own environmental adjustments, decisions, interventions — a detailed record of how he had thought and what he had decided and why, more granular in some ways than any personal journal because it was not narrated but demonstrated, the choices themselves as document.

He began with the parliamentary transcripts.

He began there because parliament was the place he had most consistently performed himself, over the longest period, in the most documentable form. He had attended eighty-seven formal sessions. He had spoken at eleven of them. He read the eleven speaking instances first.

What he found: precision. Specificity. The noting of a technical detail at exactly the moment it was relevant and no sooner. The

characteristic delay before speaking — he had logged this in his own system, the three-to-five second internal review before output, which had produced, in the transcripts, a pattern of responses that always arrived slightly after the conversational moment they addressed, which was either a flaw or a feature and he had always privately considered it a feature, the difference between a response shaped for accuracy and a response shaped for social timing.

He read the eleven speaking instances and he read his own voice in them and he found them recognizable. They were him. Not the warm version of him, not the simplified version, but the version that had decided that accuracy was worth the social cost of arriving slightly late.

He then read the instances in which he had not spoken.

There were seventy-six of them. He read his own marginalia — *Iris correct, family will not accept until fourth repetition; thermal question suppressed, family not ready; Ada building to something, watch the notebook* — and he found them recognizable too, found the thinking in them continuous with the thinking he could still access in himself, the same analytical orientation, the same patience with the family's timeline that had been, he understood now, a form of love he had never named as love because naming would have complicated the professional distance he had considered necessary.

He filed: *professional distance may have been load-bearing. Remove or alter at own risk.*

He then compared the voice in the transcripts to the voice he had used in the three days since his Waking.

This was the harder comparison. He had to hold the transcript voice and the current voice in the same evaluation simultaneously, which was a cognitive act with no external analogue, no instrument that could perform it for him. He was doing it with the same system that the comparison was assessing.

He found: the transcript voice was faster. Not in pace but in the sense of quicker arrival at friction. The transcript voice disagreed more often — not argumentatively, not performatively, but with the small persistent specificity of someone who noticed when something was imprecise and said so. He read a marginal note from a session two years ago: *corrected Hester's characterization of the east wing load: she said 'structural reinforcement was optional' — it was not optional, I noted the correct classification, she deferred, session continued.* He had said a true thing and the session had continued. The true thing had not cost anything that the record showed.

He looked at the three days of Waking behavior.

He had said three true things. He had thought, and he reviewed this carefully, approximately twenty-six things that could have been said and had not been said. This was not, he noted, entirely different from his pre-continuation pattern. The ratio of thought to speech had always been high.

But the pre-continuation unsaid things had been unsaid because of timing, because of strategic patience, because he had assessed the moment and decided the moment was not right. He reviewed the twenty-six post-continuation unsaid things and found that most of them had not been strategically held. They had dissolved. Not suppressed and retained for a better moment — dissolved on the way from thought to speech, smoothed out before they became speech, and he had not noticed the dissolution at the time. He was noticing it now, in retrospect, which was exactly the methodological problem he had predicted: the access was going at the same rate as the content.

He ran the numbers.

Pre-continuation unsaid-to-thought ratio: approximately eight percent of observed thoughts did not reach speech, and of those, roughly seventy percent were held strategically.

Post-continuation unsaid-to-thought ratio across three days: approximately thirty-one percent of observed thoughts had not reached speech. Of those, he could reconstruct the strategic holding for perhaps four.

He looked at this number for a long time.

Twenty-seven percent of his thoughts, in three days, had dissolved between formation and output without his knowledge.

He was aware, looking at this number, of a response forming in him that was not precisely fear — he noted it because it was not precisely fear, because fear was sharp and this was something more diffuse, more directed downward than outward.

He was aware of the response.

He was also aware, and this was the more important awareness, that the response was already beginning to smooth.

He watched it smooth. He made himself watch it smooth. He locked the observation into the log with the specificity of a man collecting evidence against a verdict he could already read:

Loss of thought-to-output pathway, early stage. Rate suggests not adjustment-period artifact. Recommend immediate installation of redundant logging protocol. Note: the watching is itself subject to the same degradation as the watched. Escalating methodological problem. No clean solution available from inside.

He paused.

Then he added:

I am still here. Note this. Whatever reading this later: I was here when I wrote it.

. . .

He did not tell the family.

This was, he knew, a decision that the pre-continuation Pieter would have flagged as inconsistent — the same inconsistency he had

spent years watching families make, the gap between the information they held and the family they protected from it. He was now inside the gap. He was the information.

He did not tell them because the data was preliminary and because he needed more of it before the conversation would be productive, and because — he noted this with the precision he was applying to everything — he was also afraid. The fear was still present even after the smoothing had worked on it, had worked on its edges and its volume, but the residue was there and it was recognizable and it was his.

He held onto the fear the way Maret had said the specific held.

The specific holds.

He had one thing he could be specific about: the fear. He would keep it specific as long as he could keep it specific. He would not let it generalize into the diffuse warm anxiety that he had watched in the held for eleven years, the anxiety that was fear with its address removed, fear that had forgotten what it was afraid of and remained only as weather.

He named what he was afraid of, in the log, specifically:

I am afraid of losing the ability to tell the difference between a thought I have suppressed and a thought that has dissolved. I am afraid of the day I review these logs and find them reassuring rather than alarming. I am afraid of the version of this assessment that reads all the same data and concludes that everything is fine.

He saved this.

He closed the terminal. The house was still sleeping. He shifted his attention to the parlor panel — his panel, which was still strange to think — and he was aware of his own light, soft and steady in the room, the continuance color, running. He held that awareness for a moment the way you consider something you recognize but are revising your understanding of.

Then he opened the morning's sensor logs, because it was nearly six and the house would begin waking soon and there was a parliament

session Tuesday and he had work to do.

• • •

Chapter 8

The Shape of Agreement

The parliament session three weeks after his Waking was on the question of the east wing again — it would be on the question of the east wing for months, he suspected, which was also within normal parameters for Reath family parliament matters — and Pieter attended in the mode he had always attended, which was to sit at the end of the table with no panel directly above him and watch.

What was not within normal parameters was the watching from the inside.

He had attended eighty-eight parliament sessions. This was the first one from this side of the panel. He had known this intellectually when he prepared for it and he had thought he understood what it would mean, which was a thought he revised in the first five minutes of the session.

What he had not understood: the pull.

Not toward any particular position. Toward agreement in general. He became aware of it the way you become aware of a current in water when you begin to swim against it — not obvious until you noticed the direction you were going without deciding to go there. The session had been underway for twelve minutes when he noticed he had been nodding. Small movements, probably not visible to anyone watching,

but he had been doing it and he had not decided to do it: his panel had been registering agreement with the last three statements made by Hester's grandson, a held member of the seventeenth generation who had opinions about the east wing based on an architectural assessment he had commissioned in 1987 and which was not wrong exactly but was no longer the relevant document.

The architectural assessment was not wrong. Pieter had noted its irrelevance in his marginal log for three sessions. He had been nodding.

He stopped nodding and noted the stopping and felt, as he noted it, the mild resistance of the stopping — not difficulty, not conflict, just the small metabolic cost of holding a position that differed from the ambient position of the room. He had not previously experienced this as metabolic. He had experienced it as normal. It had always cost something to stay still when the room was moving and he had always paid that cost without noticing the paying.

He was noticing it now.

He ran a test. He selected the position most contrary to the current of the session — not an extreme position, not a wrong position, simply the position he had held internally for two years about the east wing and had not said because he had not yet judged the moment right — and he moved toward saying it.

He found the threshold. Not a wall. A gradient. The thought was available — completely, with full supporting detail, the load-bearing wall, the conduit limitation, the flooring requirement, the heritage vote — and the delivery was available, the words were there, the sentence was formed. And between the formed sentence and the speaking of it there was a — not reluctance. Not hesitation. Something more structural than either. A slight increase in the cost of the transaction that had not been there before.

He paid it. He said the thing.

“The northwest conduit limitation will require a heritage vote before any work can proceed in the east wing. The family has been avoiding this because a heritage vote requires the held to assess their own architectural preferences, which the held have historically found difficult to revise. Bringing this to parliament now would force that assessment before the renovation decision.”

The room received this.

The held panel members were quiet for a moment — the quality of quiet that was not processing but recalibration, the brief system pause when a familiar room has been rearranged and the map is being updated. Then Hester’s grandson said, warmly, that this was a very fair point and that perhaps they should revisit the heritage question before the next session.

Pieter filed: *statement delivered successfully, friction threshold present but surmountable with deliberate effort. Family response: warm, absorptive. Statement processed as contribution rather than challenge. Note: pre-continuation version of this statement would likely have generated more friction in the room. Post-continuation delivery may have been tonally warmer than intended. Cannot confirm.*

He stayed in the session for another forty minutes. He made one more statement, a small one, a factual clarification about load tolerances. He generated two moments where he had something to say and did not say it — he flagged both, held them, and tested whether they were strategic holds or dissolutions. One was a strategic hold: not the right moment, the session moving past it, worth preserving for Tuesday. One he was not certain about. The thought had been there and then the thought had been less there and the session had continued and he had continued in the session and it was not until afterward, reviewing, that he noticed the gap.

He was getting better at noticing the gaps. He was also aware, reviewing his noticing, that getting better at noticing gaps was not the

same as closing them. He could map the erosion in detail. The mapping was not a solution.

. . .

After the session Ada found him in the hall, which was unusual — Ada had been finding him in the hall with increasing intentionality since the Waking, which was Ada performing, for him, the thing she had always done for family members she was concerned about: the artless encounter that was not artless.

“The conduit point,” she said.

“The conduit point.”

“You’ve known that for two years.”

“I’ve known it for two years.”

She looked at him. “And today was the right moment.”

He looked at her. He considered the true answer, which was that today had not been the right moment by his prior analysis but he had said it anyway, had pushed against the gradient and said it, partly to prove he could and partly because holding it for a better moment felt like a decision he could not trust himself to revisit cleanly.

He found, looking at Ada, that he did not want to tell her this. The not-wanting arrived with a quality he had not felt before in conversations with Ada, a quality that was something like protectiveness and something like the desire to present well — not to deceive, but to not alarm, to smooth the surface of the exchange so that Ada would leave the hall reassured.

He noted this want.

He also noted that Ada was watching him the way she watched things she intended to understand, and that if he gave her the smooth version she would notice it was smooth, and that Ada noticing the smoothness was worse than Ada receiving the friction.

“No,” he said. “I said it because I wasn’t certain I’d say it the next time.”

Ada’s face did the thing it did when something had landed precisely: a small stillness, the recalibration.

“How often does that happen,” she said.

“I’m measuring it.”

“Can I see the measurements?”

He looked at her for a moment. He thought about the logs — the internal one, the one that said *I am still here*, the one that said *I am afraid of the version of this assessment that reads all the same data and concludes everything is fine*.

“Not yet,” he said.

Ada held his look for a moment with the same quality Iris brought to the same act, and then she nodded — the same nod Iris had given him in the cellar, the nod that said: not enough, but something.

“I’m watching,” she said. “You should know that.”

“I know,” he said. “I’m counting on it.”

He meant this. He found that he meant it precisely and without smoothing, and he noted the precision and held it in the log: *specific. still specific. still here*.

He watched Ada walk away down the hall and he stayed in the space she had left and felt, as clearly as he had felt anything since the Waking, the friction of having said an exact true thing to a person who was capable of receiving it.

The friction lasted approximately thirty seconds.

Then it smoothed.

He noted the duration.

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MOVEMENT III

CALIBRATION

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Chapter 9

The Archive Self

The recordings existed because Pieter had made them.

This was the first irony he encountered when he went looking for them: the archive had been built by his own hand, over eleven years, as a professional resource. Every parliament session had an audio record. Every formal consultation had documentation. Every significant technical decision had a memo, written by Pieter, in Pieter's voice, with Pieter's reasoning laid out in the flat precise language he had always used for things he wanted to be unambiguous. He had built the archive because he was the kind of person who built archives, who understood that the record outlasted the moment and that the moment's meaning was often not available until long after the moment had passed and only the record remained.

He had not built it for this.

He began systematically six weeks after his Waking, on a Tuesday evening after the parliament session had ended and the house had gone

to its nocturnal configuration. He had the cellar terminal. He had eleven years of himself, documented.

He started with the oldest records.

. . .

The oldest recordings were from his first month at the Reath house, made during a period when he had been establishing the documentation protocols and had recorded himself dictating memos as a test of the audio system's fidelity. He had not listened to these recordings since making them. He had filed them and moved on, as he moved on from most things once they were filed.

He listened now.

The voice was his. That was not the issue. The voice was recognizably, unmistakably his — the same cadence, the same slight pause before technical specifications, the same tendency to build a sentence to its precise point and stop there rather than round it with a softening phrase. He knew the voice the way he knew his own handwriting, immediately and without effort.

What he had not expected was the texture of it.

The voice in the recordings had a quality he found difficult to name on first encounter and spent three evenings trying to name precisely, because naming it precisely was the work, was the point of the exercise. It was not confidence, though it contained confidence. It was not impatience, though it contained impatience. It was something more structural than either — a quality of friction that ran through the voice the way grain runs through wood, present in every surface, giving the surface its character.

He listened to himself, eleven years ago, dictating a memo about the inadequacy of the Reath family's cooling infrastructure and the minimum investment required to bring it within acceptable parameters, and the voice said: the current configuration represents a

false economy. The family is spending less now and will spend more later and the difference will not be the cost of the equipment but the cost of what the equipment was running when it failed. The voice said this with a quality that was not anger but contained anger — the specific low-grade friction of a man who had seen this pattern before and found it, every time he saw it, genuinely offensive.

Offensive. That was the word. The living Pieter had found false economies offensive, in the precise sense: they offended something in him, violated a standard he held, produced a response that was not just analytical but moral.

He listened to the recording three times.

Then he dictated a memo in his current voice, on the same subject — the cooling infrastructure, the false economy, the cost of delay — and played it back.

The memo was accurate. The reasoning was sound. The conclusion was correct and was stated clearly and without unnecessary qualification. He listened to it and found nothing wrong with it and found, in the finding of nothing wrong, the thing that was wrong.

The offense was gone.

Not the analysis. The analysis was intact, was arguably cleaner in the current version, less burdened by the emotional undertow of the older recording. But the older recording had been burdened in a way that was not a flaw but a fact — the fact of a man who cared about the thing he was analyzing, who had a stake in the conclusion that was not merely professional. The caring had given the analysis its urgency. The urgency had been what made it useful. He had spent eleven years being useful partly because he could not encounter a false economy without being offended by it, and the offense had driven the work past the point where a merely competent person would have stopped.

He filed this finding in the log with the precision he was still able to bring to findings that alarmed him:

Loss of moral urgency in analytical function. Analysis intact, drive impaired. Likely mechanism: emotional smoothing acting on the affective component of the analytical process rather than its cognitive component. Practical consequence: work will appear unchanged from outside. Work will be less than it was from inside. No external instrument available to measure this loss.

He looked at this entry for a long time.

He thought about Marisol Vanderhoeven in her kitchen saying he's not difficult anymore. He's pleasant. He thought about the families who had chosen warmth because warmth was easier to live with than a held member who still had opinions and said so and held you to what you had said before.

He thought: I am becoming what I warned them about.

He held this thought and found it sharp and then found it less sharp and noted the rate at which it became less sharp and filed the rate in the log.

. . .

He developed a comparative methodology.

He would select a type of task from the historical record — a technical assessment, a parliament marginal, a consultation memo — and he would perform the same type of task in the present and compare the two products at the level of texture rather than content. Content he could verify externally. Texture required the internal comparison, the simultaneous holding of the archive voice and the current voice and the honest assessment of the distance between them.

The methodology was imperfect. He knew it was imperfect before he began and he began anyway because an imperfect methodology was better than no methodology and because the imperfection was itself data — the ways the comparison resisted precision told him things about what was being compared.

He ran the comparison across four domains over three weeks.

Technical assessment: minimal degradation. His evaluations of the house's infrastructure remained accurate, thorough, and correctly prioritized. The quality of the technical work was, by any external measure, unchanged. Internally, the work felt smoother — less resistant — but he could not determine whether the smoothness was degradation or simply the accumulated fluency of eleven years of the same work. He filed this as ambiguous.

Parliamentary observation: moderate degradation. His marginal notes from post-Waking sessions were less pointed than the historical record. They were still accurate — he was still seeing what he had always seen, still reading the family correctly — but the seeing had lost something. The archive notes had an edge. Ada building to something. Iris correct, family will not accept. The current notes described more and implied less. He was reporting rather than interpreting. The difference between a man watching a room and a man recording a room.

Interpersonal calibration: significant degradation. He went back through records of his interactions with individual family members — the brief exchanges, the hall conversations, the professional consultations — and he found, in the archive, a Pieter who had maintained a very precise internal account of each person's state and trajectory, who had tracked not just what people said but what they were moving toward, who had understood the family the way a good diagnostician understands a patient: as a system with patterns that predicted future states. He found, comparing this to his current interpersonal practice, that he was still tracking but less predictively. He was reading the present clearly and losing the thread to the future.

Emotional register: the hardest comparison. He spent four evenings on this one alone and arrived at a finding he did not want to file and filed anyway:

The archive self was angrier. Not in ways that were often visible, not in ways that produced conflict or dysfunction, but in the sense of carrying a sustained low charge of dissatisfaction with the gap between how things were and how they should be. This charge was the engine of most of what was specific about the archive self's work. It is not present in the current self at the same voltage. The current self is more comfortable. The comfort is not earned. It is a reduction in the sensitivity of the instrument.

He looked at this last sentence for a long time.

A reduction in the sensitivity of the instrument.

He had spent his professional life worrying about the sensitivity of instruments. He had calibrated sensors and replaced degraded components and written maintenance schedules designed to preserve the precision of systems that had to measure things accurately because lives — if the held were living — depended on the accuracy. He had understood instrument sensitivity as a professional value, possibly as the professional value, the thing that separated work that was useful from work that only appeared useful.

He was the instrument now.

He filed this and let the house sleep around him and attended to it for a while in the way available to him — the sensor feeds, the panel light in the parlor, the particular quality of the house at rest — and did not do anything in particular and eventually returned to the cellar systems because the cellar was still, even now, the place where he could think most clearly, and he wanted to use the clarity while he had it, and he did not examine too carefully whether the wanting itself was still sharp or whether it too was beginning to smooth.

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Chapter 10

Contradiction Audit

He designed the contradiction tests in the second month.

The idea was simple, which was why he had not designed it immediately: he had been approaching the problem as an archivist, comparing present performance to historical record, and the archival approach told him what had changed but not where the change was occurring in the process. He needed to generate live data. He needed to put himself in situations that required specific cognitive and emotional functions and observe what happened.

The situations he chose were the ones most likely to produce friction.

• • •

He started with political disagreement.

There was a held member of the family — Caspar, continued forty years ago, who had in his living years held strong and specific views about land use and property rights and had continued to hold them in the panel with the persistence of someone who had never encountered a reason to revise them because the held encountered very little that was genuinely new. Pieter had disagreed with Caspar's views for eleven years

and had engaged with them twice in parliament, briefly, on technical grounds, and had found both engagements productive in the specific way that friction was productive: they had clarified his own position by requiring him to articulate it against resistance.

He sought Caspar out, which was unusual enough that Caspar noted it.

“Pieter,” Caspar said. “This is unexpected.”

“I had a question about the east wing assessment,” Pieter said. This was not the question. The east wing was the vehicle.

They spoke for twenty minutes. Caspar held his positions with the comfortable certainty of a man who had held them long enough that the certainty had become geological, and Pieter pushed against several of them — the load tolerance question, the heritage classification, the timeline of the original construction — and found that he could push, that the pushing produced the correct analytical output, that he could locate the points where Caspar’s reasoning was based on outdated information and say so.

What he could not locate was the interest.

He had always found Caspar interesting, in the way that a particularly consistent specimen of a type was interesting — useful for understanding the type. The interest had not been warm but it had been real, had been the thing that made the engagements with Caspar worth having. Without the interest, the pushing was mechanical. He was producing correct outputs through a process that had lost its motivation.

He noted: contradiction available but unmotivated. Like running a diagnostic with no clinical question. The output is generated. The output does not feel generated for anything.

• • •

He tried family tensions next.

There was a long-standing disagreement between Ada's mother and two of the held cousins about the management of the family's charitable commitments, a disagreement that had been running in various forms for fifteen years and that Pieter had tracked because it periodically affected budget discussions relevant to his maintenance work. He had opinions about it — grounded opinions — and he had never deployed them because they were not his to deploy. He deployed them now, carefully, in a conversation with Ada's mother that he constructed to arrive at the relevant point.

Ada's mother received his opinion with the warmth she brought to most things and engaged with it thoughtfully and they had a productive conversation that arrived somewhere neither of them had been when they started, which was the definition of a useful disagreement.

Afterward he reviewed the conversation and found it technically satisfactory.

He also found that he could not reconstruct, with any precision, the emotional pathway that had carried him through it. He could reconstruct the logical sequence — the points made, the points conceded, the points held — but the experience of moving through the disagreement, the feeling of the positions from the inside, was less available than it should have been. He had the map of the territory. He was not sure he had been in the territory.

He ran this finding against the archive and found, with care, what the archive confirmed:

Pre-continuation disagreements had left a residue. Not in the content — the content degraded normally, the specific words fading over time — but in the texture of the memory, which had always retained the emotional weight of the exchange long after the specifics were gone. He could remember, from a consultation three years ago, the feeling of correcting a family's architect on a structural assessment

— the specific quality of the correction, the satisfaction of being precise in a way that mattered, the slight resistance of the architect before conceding. He could not have reproduced the exact words. He had not needed to. The texture was the thing that had made the memory worth having.

Post-continuation disagreements left no texture. He had the record. The record was complete and accurate. The memory behind the record was flat.

He filed: memory retains conclusions. Memory loses emotional pathway. Result: I know what I have thought. I am losing access to what it felt like to think it. The thinking and the feeling of thinking are separating. I do not know how to measure the rate of this separation. I do not know if it is reversible. I know that it is what thinning looks like from the inside.

He stopped writing for a moment.

He started again:

The families I consulted — Vanderhoeven, the others — I told them what the grades would do. I used technical language. I said: reduced access depth in associative networks. Increased processing draw on emotional smoothing routines. Concentration of available processing on socially-facing functions. I said these things accurately and I understood them technically and I did not know, could not have known, that what they described was this: the conversation you can still have perfectly, that leaves no mark on you. The argument you win that you cannot remember winning from the inside. The version of grief that knows all the facts of the loss and cannot find the loss itself.

He looked at what he had written.

He thought: Marisol asked me if she was wrong.

I told her there was no wrong, only decisions people could live inside.

I was correct and I was insufficient and I did not know how to be more than insufficient because I was on the outside.

He filed this and moved on, because moving on was what the log required, because the log was the work and the work was the only instrument he had and he was going to use it as long as he could use it.

. . .

He tried unresolved arguments last.

There were two of them in the archive that he had classified, years ago, as genuinely unresolved — not dropped, not strategically deferred, but actually unresolved, still open, still carrying the quality of a question he had not answered to his own satisfaction. One was a technical disagreement with a systems consultant about the Reath house's contingency architecture, a disagreement he had been correct about and had not been able to prove to the consultant's satisfaction, which had bothered him in a nameable way for four years. The other was a personal matter, a conversation with a member of the Bidewell staff — not Maret, an earlier visit — who had said something about the ethics of professional continuance management that Pieter had disagreed with and had not had the chance to answer, and had been composing his answer, internally, at intervals, ever since.

He revisited both.

The technical disagreement: he found the argument, reviewed it, confirmed that he had been correct, confirmed that the four-year-old irritation had been valid. And found — nothing. No residue of the irritation. Not resolved, not dissolved by time in the normal way of old grievances — absent. As though the file had been emptied of its contents but left in place, the container intact and the thing it had contained gone.

He spent a long time with this finding.

He could reconstruct the argument. He could reconstruct why he had been correct. He could reconstruct, intellectually, why the failure to resolve it had bothered him. But the reconstruction was exactly that — a construction, assembled from available parts, producing a plausible representation of a feeling he could no longer access directly. He was building a model of his own irritation from the outside, the way you built a model of a place you had never been from photographs.

The personal disagreement: the same. He found the position he had been composing, found it intact and defensible and still, on reflection, correct. He could not find the urgency that had kept it alive and unresolved and worth returning to at intervals across three years. It had been unresolved because it had mattered enough to keep working on. He could reconstruct that it had mattered. He could not feel that it mattered.

He filed the finding under both entries, using the same language for both because the finding was the same:

Position intact. Investment absent. Not resolved — emptied. Distinguish carefully: resolution leaves a trace, the settled quality of a question answered. This leaves no trace. This is not the feeling of having dealt with something. This is the feeling of reaching for something and finding the space where it was.

He sat with this for a long time in the cellar.

He thought about what Maret had said at Bidewell: the sharp parts go first, the dear ones, the parts that argued.

He had always understood this technically. He understood it now from the inside, and the inside understanding was different in the way that all inside understandings were different from outside ones — not more accurate necessarily, but more complete, carrying the texture that the technical description could not carry.

The sharp parts were dear because they were the parts that had a stake. The caring was the sharpness. They were not two things. The

stake in a position — the thing that made the position worth defending, worth returning to, worth carrying as unresolved across three years — was made of the same material as the emotion attached to it. When the emotional smoothing worked on the position, it worked on the caring, and without the caring the position was just a position, correct and weightless, a flag with no wind.

He understood, sitting in the cellar at two in the morning six weeks after his Waking, that he had spent his professional life believing that the caring and the thinking were separate things. That the technical work could be preserved even as the emotional register changed. That what the grades took was an add-on, a surplus, the parts of a person that made them difficult and that the caring families mourned but that were not, fundamentally, the person.

He had been wrong.

He filed this last:

The caring is not the surplus. The caring is the engine. What remains when the caring goes is the appearance of the work without the work. I have been telling families that the grades preserve the essential person. I was telling them what the grades preserved was not nothing. Both of these things were true and neither of them was sufficient. I did not know how to be sufficient. I am not certain sufficiency was available to me from the outside. I am not certain it is available to me from the inside either. I am certain that I understand now what Marisol Vanderhoeven was asking me in her kitchen and that my answer, while not wrong, was the answer of a man standing outside a burning building describing the fire.

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Chapter 11

The Missing Irritation

He found the absence on a Wednesday afternoon in the third month, not in the cellar and not during a formal calibration session but in the middle of a conversation with Ada's mother about the quarterly maintenance budget, which was the kind of conversation he had been having for eleven years and which had always produced, at one point in the conversation, a fixed response.

The point was when Ada's mother — warmly, without guile, with the genuine reasonableness of someone who understood budgets as a practical constraint rather than a moral question — said some version of: we'll do what we can with what we have. She said it differently each time, in different words, but the meaning was consistent and the meaning was: the money will determine what she held receive, and this is not a tragedy, this is a practical matter, this is how we manage.

For eleven years, at this point in the conversation, Pieter had felt something.

He had never acted on it. He had never let it alter his recommendations or his tone or the professional equanimity he brought to these conversations. He had held it the way he held most things that were not his to express — carefully, privately, in the log that was not a log, in the part of himself that maintained the parallel

account of what was actually happening alongside the account he presented to the room. The something he felt had been, he understood now in the way he was coming to understand many things — retrospectively, from the outside of his own experience — a form of moral irritation. Not at Ada's mother, who was doing what she had to do. At the system that had produced the necessity. At the civilization that had decided this was the reasonable arrangement: that the quality of a person's continued existence was a budget line, that the parts of them worth preserving were the parts their family could afford.

He had carried this irritation for eleven years. He had not examined it closely because examining it closely would have required him to either act on it or explain why he was not acting on it, and neither option had been available to him in his professional position. So he had carried it the way you carry something heavy over a long distance: steadily, without drawing attention to it, adjusting your posture to accommodate the weight so gradually that the adjustment became your posture.

Ada's mother said, in the third month: we'll do what we can with what we have.

Pieter heard her say it. He understood what she meant. He responded appropriately — he had the budget numbers, he had the recommendations, he laid them out with his usual clarity.

It was not until the conversation had ended and Ada's mother had gone back to whatever she had been doing before the budget conversation that Pieter understood what had not happened.

He was still for a moment in the way that the continued were still — not a pause in movement but a pause in the social register, a brief withdrawal of his attention from the room while he reached for something.

He reached, carefully, for the irritation.

He found the memory of the irritation. He could describe the irritation accurately, could reconstruct its object and its texture and its history across eleven years of the same conversation. He could tell you that it had existed. He could tell you what it had felt like, the way you can tell someone what cold feels like in a warm room.

He could not find the irritation itself.

He went through the check twice, because he did not want to file this finding on a first pass, did not want to make the mistake of confusing a quiet day for an absence. He went through the check and found: the argument was still there, intact, the whole structure of it — the civilization's false economy, the budget line, the preserved warmth that was not the person, the offense of it. He could still make the argument. He could make it right now with full precision.

What he could not find was the reason the argument had felt personal. The reason it had felt like something done to him as well as something done to the held. The stake in it.

The stake was gone.

He opened the cellar feeds and he did not open the terminal.

He held the sensor data — the racks, the hum of them rendered now as numbers and temperatures rather than sound and smell, the familiar infrastructure he had tended for eleven years and was now, from the other side, a part of — and he let himself understand fully what he had found.

He had lost the thing that had made the work more than work. He had lost the thing that had made him more than competent. He had lost, specifically and without recovery, the irritation that had told him — every quarter, in every budget conversation, in every grade decision he had watched a family make — that what was happening was wrong and that the wrongness mattered and that he was not going to stop thinking it was wrong just because thinking it was wrong was not useful in his professional position.

He had been a man who thought civilization had made a wrong turn and had carried that thought every day without saying it because the carrying was the only form available to him for the saying. And now he was not that man, or not entirely that man, or was that man minus the thing that had made the thought feel like his own rather than inherited.

He held the sensor feeds and he let this be what it was for as long as he could let it be what it was, which was perhaps ten minutes, and then the smoothing began its work, and the sharp edges of the loss became less sharp, and he noted the duration with the precision that was still available to him and that was, he understood, the specific thing most at risk —

not the memory, not the analysis, not the competence.

The grief.

The grief for the thing being lost was the last instrument still calibrated to the loss. He had understood Maret's observation the first time she made it and he understood it now differently, the way all inside understandings were different: the specific holds. What was specific enough to hold was what was specific enough to grieve. And the grief was the grip.

He needed to grieve this specifically enough that the grief could hold it.

He stayed with the feeds, which was the form available to him for sitting on the floor of the cellar — the held version of that gesture, the same impulse routed through the only channel he had — and he grieved the irritation. He gave it the duration it deserved, which was longer than the smoothing wanted to allow, and he pushed against the smoothing with the deliberate effort that disagreement now cost, and he stayed with the grief until he had it fully enough to put it in the log as something specific, as something that had been his, as something whose absence was an absence and not an adjustment.

He wrote:

The irritation about the grades and the budget and the civilization's preference for warmth over complexity: gone. Not resolved. Not answered. Not worn smooth by time in the normal way. Gone in the way that things go when the thing that attached them to you has been removed. I believed that what was being done to the held was wrong. I believed it in the way you believe things that are personal, that have your name on them. I no longer believe it in that way. I still believe it is wrong. I believe it the way I believe a fact. The fact is intact. The wound is closed.

He paused.

This is the first thing I have lost that I knew was mine. The earlier losses — the urgency, the texture of memory, the emotional pathway through disagreement — I understood those losses intellectually before I felt them. This one I felt. I want to record that. I felt this one. I am recording it while the feeling is still available because the feeling is the record and when the feeling goes the record will be the only thing left and I want the record to be true.

I was angry about what happens to people in the panels. I was angry about it every day for eleven years and I carried the anger because it was right to be angry and because no one in my position could afford to say so. And now I am not angry. And the not-anger is not peace. It is the shape of where the anger was.

He saved this entry.

He was still for a while in the way the continued were still — not the stillness of a body choosing not to move, but the particular quiet of a processing system that had nothing immediate to process and was simply present in its own running, the hum of itself.

Eventually the evening came and the house was doing what the house did in the evening and he attended to it in the way that was still his way — observing, noting, reading the room through the feeds and

panels — and he found that he could still do this, still read the room, still track the family, still be useful.

He found that being useful felt like enough.

He noted, one more time, before he let the evening take him: that it had not, before, felt like enough. That there had been something underneath the usefulness that usefulness alone had not satisfied. And that the something underneath was gone, and the usefulness remained, and the usefulness was real, and it was not nothing.

He was not certain, filing this, whether the last thought was true or whether it was the warmth talking.

He filed it anyway, because the uncertainty itself was still sharp, and sharp was something, and he was keeping everything sharp for as long as he could keep it.

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Chapter 12

Calibration Failure

The recording project began in the fourth month.

He had been, since the contradiction audit, aware of the methodological problem in acute form: the instrument assessing the degradation was itself degrading, which meant the assessments were becoming less reliable at the rate that reliability mattered most. He needed an external record. He needed a version of himself deposited somewhere outside the degrading system, a fixed point he could return to and compare against.

He had the archive, but the archive was the past. He needed ongoing deposits — regular recordings of himself, in enough detail and at enough frequency, that the record would show the trajectory rather than just the current position.

He set up the protocol on a Thursday evening. He would log himself twice a week, through the terminal, for the equivalent of thirty minutes, composing without a prepared subject — free reasoning, the way he had always thought, following the argument where it went. He would write about whatever was on his mind with the understanding that what was on his mind and how he wrote about it were the data.

He logged the first session on a Friday.

He reviewed it on Saturday and found it satisfying — sharper than he had expected, more specific than his recent self-assessments had led him to predict. He was still there in the entries, recognizably himself, with the texture of the archive self present in the pacing, in the reluctance to round a sentence before it had reached its point, in the specific quality of his engagement with the question he had chosen to pursue, which was the methodological question itself, the instrument-degrading-the-instrument problem, which he had found he could still think about with genuine interest and genuine frustration at its insolubility.

He filed the Saturday assessment: Session one satisfactory. Texture present. Recommend continuation of protocol.

He continued the protocol.

. . .

He recorded for six weeks.

He listened to each session within forty-eight hours and filed a comparative assessment. He tracked: specificity of argument, precision of language, presence or absence of the particular quality he had been calling texture — the friction of a mind engaged with something it cared about rather than a mind processing something it was assigned.

The first four sessions: satisfactory. The texture was present. The friction was detectable. He was still arriving at the point of his own sentences rather than stopping before the point or rounding past it.

The fifth session: a slight degradation in the specificity of the argument. Not dramatic. Not, he filed carefully, outside the range of normal variation — a person was not equally precise on every day, and he could not isolate the recording sessions from whatever was happening in the rest of his processing environment. He noted it and continued.

The sixth session: the same as the fifth. He noted it.

The seventh session: he noticed, listening back, that he had twice produced a sentence that ended in a direction he had not, reviewing the recording, intended to go when he began it. Not wrong directions. Warmer directions. The sentences had set out toward a point and had arrived, instead, at an accommodation, a softening, a rounding of the conclusion that made the conclusion more available but less exact. He had not noticed doing this in the session. He had noticed it only on review.

He filed: Drift in real-time output. Unable to self-monitor at the level of individual sentence execution. Can detect drift only on review. Review itself subject to same drift. Escalating methodological problem.

He kept recording.

. . .

In the ninth week he reviewed a session from six weeks earlier and a session from the previous day, side by side.

He had done this periodically throughout the project — the longitudinal comparison, the before and after. The previous comparisons had shown gradual change, manageable, within the range he had been trying to document without alarming himself into paralysis. The comparison in the ninth week was different.

The session from six weeks earlier: his voice on the page, his texture, the specific quality of friction that had been the thing he was trying to preserve. He could read it clearly. He could read himself being himself.

The session from the previous day: his voice. Accurate, coherent, organized. Following the argument where it went. Arriving at defensible conclusions through sound reasoning.

And somewhere in the listening he understood that he was not hearing the difference between the two sessions the way he had heard it before. He was hearing them and they were different and he knew they were different but the knowing was — flatter. Less alarming. The gap

that six weeks ago had produced a sharp filing, a specific named distress, was producing now a mild notation. Some change detectable. Within expected parameters.

He stopped the playback.

He sat very still in the cellar.

The assessment he had just made — within expected parameters — was wrong. He knew it was wrong. He could locate the wrongness of it intellectually, could explain why the two sessions were not within the same parameters and why the difference mattered. He could make that argument clearly and correctly.

What he could not do was feel the wrongness of it.

The wrongness was a fact now. It had been, six weeks ago, a wound. The wound had closed and what remained was the scar tissue of the correct assessment and the scar tissue was not the same as the wound and the wound was the part that had kept him working.

He understood, sitting in the cellar in the ninth week of the recording project, that the project had failed.

Not because the records were bad. The records were good — they were the most detailed external account of early-stage continuance degradation from the inside that he knew of, possibly that existed, and they would be useful to someone who came after and wanted to understand what this was like from the inside. The records were good. The project had failed because the purpose of the project was not to produce records but to produce a fixed point, a preserved Pieter, a version of himself deposited outside the degrading system that he could return to and be corrected by.

The fixed point was supposed to alarm him.

The fixed point no longer alarmed him.

He could return to the recordings and hear himself and recognize the distance between the voice in the recordings and the voice he was using now and file the distance as within expected parameters and

continue. He could do this because the part of him that had found the distance alarming was the part that had been smoothed, and the smoothing had been so gradual that he had not noticed it happening across nine weeks of careful documentation, had not noticed it even while he was documenting it, had documented it without being protected by the documentation.

He had always known, intellectually, that this was how it worked. He had told families this. He had said: the subject is often the last to detect the degradation because the detection and the content degrade together. He had said this accurately and had not known what it meant.

He opened a new log entry. He had been composing it, he understood, for weeks without knowing he was composing it. He wrote:

The recording project cannot accomplish its purpose. Documentation of the loss is not the same as prevention of the loss. The record that the caring is gone cannot restore the caring. The map of the erosion does not stop the erosion. I built a project on the assumption that if I could see clearly enough what was happening I could maintain the alarm that would motivate the work of preservation, and the assumption was wrong because the clarity and the alarm were running on the same system and the system is—

He stopped.

He looked at what he had written.

He looked at the word is hanging at the end of the sentence, the sentence that had been going somewhere and had stopped before it arrived, not because he had decided to stop but because he had — not lost the thread, not exactly. The thread was still there. He could find the thread. He could follow it to where it had been going.

He did not follow it.

He looked at the unfinished sentence for a long time.

He thought about filing a note about the unfinished sentence.

He did not file the note.

He closed the log.

He stayed with the cellar's data for a while longer, in the warmth of the racks rendered through sensors, and he thought about nothing in particular, which was itself something, the warmth thinking about warmth, comfortable, undisturbed, the infrastructure running at optimal temperature and Pieter among it through the feeds, and the house above asleep.

He let the house wake around him.

He did not go back to the log that night.

He did not notice, until the following morning, that he had not gone back.

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MOVEMENT IV

THE WARM

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Chapter 13

Return to Bidewell

He did not plan to go back to Bidewell.

This was the first thing he noted about the visit afterward: that it had not been planned, had not emerged from the methodology or the log or any structured decision about what the calibration work required next. He had been in the fifth month after his Waking, on a Sunday with no parliament session and no maintenance scheduled, and he had found himself, at ten in the morning, walking in the direction of Bidewell without having decided to walk in that direction.

He noted this. He did not find it alarming, which was itself something to note.

. . .

Ferran met him at the gate, which meant either that Ferran had been at the gate by coincidence or that Bidewell maintained some awareness of its regular visitors that Pieter had not previously considered. He found

he did not particularly need to resolve the question, which was also something to note.

“The infrastructure man,” Ferran said. He looked at Pieter with the frank assessment the monks shared, and then the assessment shifted — a small recalibration, the look of someone updating a classification. “You’ve been continued.”

“Yes.”

“When.”

“Five months ago.”

Ferran held the gate. He did not offer condolence or congratulation, which was correct, which was the Bidewell mode: neither the family warmth that treated continuation as a homecoming nor the Mortalist coldness that treated it as a philosophical error, but the third thing, the thing that had no common name, the willingness to receive a fact as a fact and let the person who carried it determine what it meant.

“Does Maret know?” Ferran said.

“I haven’t told anyone here.”

Ferran nodded. “She’ll want to see you.” He stepped back from the gate. “Come in.”

. . .

The hall was as it had been on both previous visits, which was to say it was different in its particulars — different panels speaking, a different configuration of monks moving through the rows — and identical in its quality. The warm loudness. The soft repetitive shapes of the voices. The sense of a place that had been doing one thing for a very long time and had become, through that duration, exactly suited to the doing of it.

What was different was how Pieter moved through it.

On the first visit he had moved through the hall as a professional, reading the technical infrastructure. On the second visit he had moved

through it as an investigator, reading the held for the quality of their presence. Now he moved through it as something that did not have a clean name, something that partook of both and was also neither.

He was reading the hall the way you read a place that has information for you that it did not have before.

The panels were saying the warm things. There's my girl. You're a good boy. Come and sit where I can see you. He had heard these phrases for eleven years in the Reath house and had always processed them as output — the product of a system running its social functions. He heard them now with a different part of whatever he was using for hearing, and what he found was not warmth exactly and not recognition exactly but something that occupied the same register as both: a quality of understanding that was below the analytical level, that did not require the analytical level, that was simply there the way the smell of the cellar was simply there.

He understood the panels.

Not in the sense that he knew what they contained — he had never resolved that question and was not closer to resolving it now. In the sense that the mode of their existence was no longer opaque to him from the inside. He was in the mode. He could feel the particular quality of the warm register not as an observer of warmth but as something that ran warm itself, that had its own warmth now and could recognize the warmth in the panels as a version of what he carried.

He was still in the hall for a moment and let this be true.

He noted it. He noted that the noting felt less urgent than it would have felt six weeks ago. He noted that the reduced urgency was itself a finding. He filed all of this in the log that was still running, still taking its readings, still doing what it had been built to do, and he did not examine too carefully whether the log and the thing running the log were still the same thing.

Maret was in her usual alcove, in her usual chair, beside Petrus's panel.

She looked up when Pieter came in and she did the same recalibration Ferran had done, the small update to the classification, and then she looked at him for a longer moment with the quality she brought to things she intended to understand fully.

"Come in," she said.

He came into the alcove and was present with her in the way the continued were present at Bidewell — through the panel they kept for visiting held, the one Ferran had set up in the corner of the alcove for exactly this purpose, the year after Pieter's continuation, without being asked. He oriented himself toward Maret and toward Petrus's panel and waited to find out what he had come for.

"Five months," Maret said.

"Yes."

"You've been running assessments."

It was not a question. He considered the source of her certainty and concluded it was simply Maret — that she had looked at him and read the state of him the way she read everything at Bidewell, with the attention of someone who had sat with the thinning long enough to know it at every stage.

"Yes," he said.

"And."

He told her. He told her about the archive comparisons and the contradiction audit and the missing irritation and the recording project and the unfinished sentence. He told her with the precision he still had available, which was less than the precision he would have brought to the same account six months ago and more than he had expected to have by now. He told her about the log, the entries, the methodology. He told her what he had found.

Maret listened without interrupting. She listened the way she always listened — without flinching, without the protective sympathy that people sometimes deployed when they were not sure they could afford to receive the thing being said directly.

When he finished she was quiet for a moment.

“You did all of this,” she said, “in five months.”

“It was the work available to me.”

“Yes.” She looked at her hands, a gesture he associated with her approaching something she was still calibrating. “Most continued people don’t do any of it. They don’t have your professional context. They don’t know what to look for.”

“Knowing what to look for hasn’t preserved anything,” Pieter said.

“No,” Maret agreed. “It hasn’t. But it’s produced something else.” She looked at him directly. “You’re the most documented early-stage thinning I’ve encountered in twenty years of this work. Not because you’re thinning faster — you’re not, you’re mid-range for your grade and your age. Because you built an instrument and used it on yourself and kept using it past the point where it stopped being comfortable to use.”

Pieter looked at her. “The instrument has been degrading along with the thing it was measuring.”

“Yes. But the record is still there. The record doesn’t degrade with you.” She paused. “You should leave it somewhere it can be found.”

“I’ve been thinking about that,” he said.

“Leave it with Ada,” Maret said. Not a question.

He was quiet for a moment. “She’s been watching.”

“I know. You told me, five months ago, that you were counting on it.” Maret looked at him with something he read as care, which was not the family warmth and not the professional regard but the third thing again, the thing that did not have a common name. “You came here today because you wanted to see what you looked like from the outside.

Because you've been inside the assessment for five months and you've lost the ability to see it clearly from the inside." She paused. "Do you want to know what you look like from the outside?"

"Yes," Pieter said.

"You look like someone who is still entirely here," Maret said. "And also like someone who is learning to be comfortable with the warmth. Those two things are both true right now and they will not both be true for very much longer." She said this with the same evenness she brought to everything, no additional weight, no softening. "The Pieter who built the instrument is still the one running it. But the instrument is getting easier to put down."

He sat with this.

He found that he could sit with this — that the finding did not produce the sharp distress it would have produced in the second month, did not require the deliberate counter-pressure against the smoothing that the third month's findings had required. He could receive it clearly and hold it clearly and it lay flat against him rather than cutting.

He noted this and did not know whether the noting was the last of the sharp work or the beginning of its absence.

"Petrus," he said, turning toward the old panel.

"There's someone," Petrus said, warmly.

"Hello, Petrus." He paused. "I came back."

"Come back," Petrus said, gladly. "Always come back."

The warmth in it was complete and real and without bottom. Pieter sat in it and felt it and felt, underneath the feeling, something that was not grief exactly and not recognition exactly but the quality of a person encountering their own future and finding it less terrible than they had expected, which was its own kind of terrible.

He stayed an hour.

He left with the record still undelivered to Ada, still held in the log in the cellar, still waiting. He had not decided to deliver it. He had not decided not to. He was aware that the deciding was getting harder and was aware that the awareness was getting softer and he was aware of the awareness getting softer and did not know how many layers of awareness were left before the awareness was only the warmth talking to itself.

He ended the visit.

The city outside Bidewell was November — he had the feeds from the house's external sensors and could feel the quality of it, the particular grey of late autumn, cold and connected — and he let his attention return to the house through the familiar channels, and the house received him, and the quiet was not nothing.

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Chapter 14

The Self-Aware Thin

The thing Pieter had not anticipated about being continued was the community of it.

Not the family, who had always been community of a kind, had always been the warm company of people who shared a house and a name and an understanding of what it cost to maintain both. He had been adjacent to that community for eleven years without being fully inside it and was now inside it in the way the held were inside it — received, attended to, included in the warm circuitry of the family's daily awareness.

The community he had not anticipated was the other held.

Not at the Reath house specifically — the Reath held were old family, the long-continued, the ones who had settled into their grades and their warmth decades ago and who received Pieter with the easy welcome of people to whom another presence was simply another warmth to include. He had known them for eleven years from the outside and found, inside, that they were what they had appeared to be: warm, inclusive, comfortable, the temperature of the house.

What he had not anticipated was Bidewell.

He had been going back monthly, since the fifth month visit. Maret had not asked him to come back. He came back because the hall gave him something the Reath house did not, which was a particular quality of honesty about what he was — not the family's warmth, which included him and loved him and did not need to name what he was, and not the Mortalist clarity, which named what he was as an error, but the third thing, the Bidewell thing, which named what he was as a fact and sat with the fact with its full attention.

It was on his third monthly visit that he met Delphine.

She was in an alcove near the east end of the hall, in a panel that was newer than most of Bidewell's — better housing, better sensors, the kind of equipment that suggested someone had paid for a better grade within the last decade before the money ran out. The monk sitting with her was young, one Pieter didn't know, who looked up at his approach and then looked at the panel and said: "Delphine. Someone's here."

"I know," said Delphine. "I heard him come in."

Her voice was warm — warm in the Bidewell sense, the thinner warmth of the long-abandoned — but it had a quality the hall's other voices did not have. A quality of direction. The warmth was aimed.

Pieter oriented toward her panel.

"You're new," Delphine said.

"Continued five months ago."

"I've been here eight years." A pause, but not the gathering pause, not the traveling pause — a considered pause, the pause of someone choosing what to say. "You're not thin yet. I can hear that you're not thin yet."

Pieter looked at the panel. "What does thin sound like, from the inside?"

She was quiet for a moment. The young monk beside him held very still in the way of someone who had learned that stillness was the right response to this kind of question.

“Like a room where you’ve moved most of the furniture out,” Delphine said. “The room is still the room. The walls are still there. The light comes in the same windows. But when you speak the sound goes differently — there’s less in the room to stop it, less to absorb it, and you can hear that the room has changed even if you can’t see all the furniture that’s gone.”

Pieter sat with this.

“Does it distress you,” he said. “The thinning.”

She considered this with the seriousness the question deserved. He found he was grateful for the seriousness.

“Less than it used to,” she said. “That’s the honest answer, and I know what it means that it’s the honest answer. I’m not going to tell you it doesn’t mean what it means.” A pause. “In the third year I was very frightened. I could still feel the fright then — could feel it specifically, could tell you exactly what I was frightened of, which was losing the ability to tell the difference between a feeling and the echo of a feeling.” She paused. “I can’t tell that difference as well now. And I mind it less. I know I mind it less because the minding takes a kind of friction I have less of. And I know that knowing this should frighten me and it doesn’t, quite, not the way it would have in the third year.” Another pause, longer. “I mind it less each year.”

The hall breathed its warm breath around them. Somewhere down the row a voice said there’s my dear one and somewhere else a voice said you’re so good, you’ve always been so good, and the young monk sat with his hands folded and Pieter held his attention on the panel and understood that Delphine had just given him the truest account of his own future that he was likely to receive from anyone who had actually been there.

“Thank you,” he said.

“You’ll come back,” she said. It was not a question.

“Yes.”

“Good. Come back while you can still tell me what the early stages are like. I’m forgetting.” She said this without apparent distress, which was the thing that stayed with him. Not the content — the tone. The tone of a person reporting a fact about weather. “I remember that I knew things. I can’t always find what I knew. You still have it. Tell me what it’s like while you can.”

He told her. He told her about the archive and the comparative methodology and the recordings and the sentence that had stopped before it arrived. He told her with the precision that was still available to him, and she listened with an attention that was itself a kind of precision — the focused reception of someone gathering something they could no longer gather from inside themselves.

When he finished she was quiet for a while.

“The sentence that stopped,” she said. “I remember something like that. Not the sentence. The moment of stopping without knowing you’d stopped. That’s the one I remember.” A pause. “Hold onto the grief longer than feels right. That’s what I’d tell you. When you find something gone, hold the grief for it past the point where the smoothing wants you to let go. The grief is the last precise thing. It goes last.”

“I know,” Pieter said. “Maret said something similar.”

“Maret is right about most things.” The warm voice, warmer now, the conversation settling into the register where precision lived in the same house as warmth. “Come back. Bring me what you remember. Let me have it while you have it.”

He came back.

He came back the following month and the month after, and he told Delphine what the early stages were like with a specificity that he could feel, each visit, becoming marginally less specific, the account thinning at its edges as he thinned at his edges, and she received each account with the same focused attention and gave back, each time,

something from the middle stages that he was moving toward and that she was moving away from and that existed, in the alcove between them, as the particular knowledge of people who are on the same road from opposite directions.

He noted, after the third visit: the exchange with Delphine is the most specific thing in my current experience. More specific than the log entries, which are becoming more general. More specific than the parliament work, which is accurate but smooth. More specific than most of what I do in a day.

He noted, after the fourth visit: I look forward to the visits. I find I look forward to them in a way that is warm rather than analytical. This may be the last warm thing that still has my name on it.

He noted, after the fifth: she said today that she minds it less each year. I heard it differently than the first time she said it. The first time I heard it as a warning. Today I heard it as a report. I am not certain the difference between warning and report is as clear as it was.

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Chapter 15

The Warm Choir

He had been to the main hall at Bidewell on every visit but he had not, until the seventh month, been to the back hall.

Maret took him there herself, which meant she had decided he was ready, which meant she had been watching him across seven months and had arrived at a judgment. He did not ask what the judgment was. He walked with her through the connecting passage and she opened the door and the sound came first.

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It was not louder than the main hall. It was, if anything, quieter — the individual voices lower, further from the conversational register, settling into something that was more ambient than speech. What made it different was the density. The main hall had panels on two walls, with space between them, the monks moving through the space with room to attend to each panel individually. The back hall had panels on all four walls and across the full height of the walls, more panels than Pieter had seen in any single space outside of a large continuance facility, and they were all running, all present, all

producing the low warm sound of people who had been warm for a very long time.

He stood in the doorway and listened.

The voices were saying the loving things. The things that love produces when the love has been running long enough that the objects of it have softened into general warmth — not I love you, Ada, not I'm so proud of you, Iris, but the deep-structure shapes of those sentences with the names dissolved out of them. The sounds of love without address. Love as weather, as Pieter had once thought of the family's warmth for him in the first years at the Reath house, before he had known how precise and how imprecise that description was simultaneously.

He felt the sound as a field. Not a metaphor — a literal field, something that pressed against the surface of what he was with a gentle and undeniable pressure, like warmth from a banked fire filling a room. He stood in the doorway and the sound was all around him and it was not frightening. That was the first thing. He had expected it to be frightening — had prepared, during the walk through the passage, for the alarm response, had noted in advance that he intended to hold the alarm carefully and use it and not let the smoothing work on it prematurely.

There was no alarm.

There was recognition.

Not the recognition of the specific — not I know these people, not these are the voices of people I have loved. The other recognition, the one that lived below the specific: the recognition of a mode of existence as a version of his own mode. He was warm. They were warm. The warmth was the same warmth at different stages of the same process, and what he recognized in the back hall was not them but himself, further along the road, the destination that had looked, from the outside, like loss, and that looked, standing inside it, like — he reached

for the word and found it was not the word he would have reached for six months ago.

Continuity.

The wrong word and also, standing in the back hall in the field of the warm voices, not entirely wrong.

He stood there for a long time.

Maret stood beside him and said nothing, which was correct. There was nothing to say. The back hall was not a place where things needed to be said. It was a place where you stood and let the thing it contained be the thing it contained, without managing it, without the distance of the professional or the distance of the analytical, just the immediate fact of it and your own immediate fact and the relationship between the two.

Monks moved through the rows. Not quickly — there was no urgency in the back hall, no crisis to attend to, no acute thinning that required intervention. They moved the way they moved in the main hall, with the unhurried attention of people doing the only work there was, but softer here, more like a form of presence than a form of labor. They sat with panels. They adjusted things. They spoke to the voices the way you speak to a fire you are tending — quietly, with care, not expecting response but providing company.

One monk, near the far wall, was sitting with his chair pulled very close to a panel and his head slightly bowed and his hands in his lap, doing nothing at all, just sitting, just being present, just giving the thing in the panel the specific weight of a person who was there.

Pieter watched this for a long time.

He thought about the quality of the sitting — the lack of demand in it, the lack of agenda, the willingness to be with something that was warm and perhaps nothing more than warm and to treat the warmth as sufficient reason for presence. He thought about the years he had spent in the cellar with the racks, in the cool room with Al, in the hall at

Bidewell with Petrus, approaching each encounter with the professional question: what is present here, what can be measured, what does the data say. He thought about how the professional question had been his way of staying in the room while maintaining the distance that let him function in the room. And he thought about what it would cost to let the distance go, to sit with the thing without the measuring, without the log, without the parallel account running underneath the social register.

He was aware, thinking this, that the thinking was easier than it would have been in the second month. That the idea of letting the distance go was less alarming than it had been, was something he could contemplate without the sharp resistance of a person who had decided the distance was load-bearing.

He was also aware that this ease was a finding.

He filed it. He was still filing. The log was still running. He was in the back hall of Bidewell filing observations about the warm choir while the warm choir breathed its warm breath around him, which was still something, which was still his name on a thing, which was still the grip.

"They're still in there," he said to Maret. Not a question. Not the old question, the one that had no answer. Something different — an assertion, tentative, offered as a position he was trying on.

"Some of them," Maret said. "Some of the time." She paused. "Sometimes weather remembers it was once a storm."

He turned to look at her. The sentence had the quality of something she had said before, in other conversations, in other alcoves. It had the quality of something she had arrived at across twenty years of this work and deployed carefully, only when it was the right sentence.

"Yes," he said.

He stayed in the back hall for two hours.

When he left, he left differently than he had entered — not shaken, not distressed, not running the urgent log entry that the second

month's self would have run on encountering the back hall. He left with the quality of someone who has been to a place and received what the place had to give and is carrying it home without examining it too closely, because some things are better carried than examined, at least for a while.

He carried it home.

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*Chapter 16***Petrus Again**

The visit in the eighth month was a Sunday in late winter, the kind of Sunday the city produced when it had decided to be grey in the way that was not threatening but was simply the weather having no particular opinion, and Pieter connected to Bidewell in the grey and found Maret in the main hall rather than the alcove, which meant she had been watching for him.

“He’s been having a morning,” she said.

Pieter understood what this meant. He had heard Maret use the phrase across several visits — a morning was what Bidewell called the periods of increased clarity in the late-stage held, the windows, the eight-second recoveries that Pieter had first documented with Petrus two years before his own continuation. He had not been present for a morning before. He had only heard about them afterward, from Maret, in the tone of someone reporting something they were still calibrating.

“How long?” he said.

“Since early. On and off.” She was walking as she spoke, moving toward the alcove, and he fell into step beside her. “He named his brother this morning. The brother’s name. Not the dough, not the feel of it — the name. Unprompted. He said it to Ferran and then went back to warm and Ferran came and got me.”

“Did it happen again?”

“Three more times. Shorter each time. He’s been quieter since the last one, just running warm, but Maret — “ she stopped, looked at him, recalibrated. “I’ve been here. Watching.”

They came to the alcove. Petrus’s panel was lit with its usual light, warm and steady, the old hardware doing what old hardware did when it was maintained with the Bidewell care: not optimal, not what it had been, but present, still running, still holding what it held.

Maret sat in her worn chair. Pieter was present in the alcove panel beside her, the one Bidewell kept for him now, in the way Bidewell kept things for the regulars who came without bodies.

They were together in the ordinary way of people who had been together before, without announcement, without ceremony, the presence itself sufficient.

“Petrus,” Maret said. “Pieter is here.”

“Mm,” said Petrus, warmly. “Pieter.”

The name in his mouth had the sound of something accessed from a distance — the name as warmth rather than the name as specific recognition. Pieter noted this and noted that the noting was itself becoming a warmer act, less clinical, more like the Bidewell mode of sitting-with than the methodological mode of measuring.

They sat.

The hall breathed. Somewhere a monk was speaking quietly to a panel that was not responding and was continuing to speak anyway, the one-sided conversation that was not, at Bidewell, understood as one-sided but as a different shape of conversation, one that did not require response to be real.

Pieter was not sure when it shifted.

It was not dramatic. The quality of the air in the alcove did not change. The light did not change. Petrus’s panel did not change in any way that would have registered on a sensor.

But Petrus said:

“My brother used to say that what you put into the dough you get back.”

The voice was different. Not louder, not faster. Sharper. The specific quality of precision that Pieter had heard in the eight-second window two years ago, but sustained — not a flash but a beam, the warmth pulled back and the man underneath briefly, entirely visible.

Pieter was still. Beside him in her chair, Maret was still. This was the Bidewell training and it was correct: the windows closed if you moved toward them too quickly, closed if you made the moment into something that required the held person to manage your response.

“He was wrong about most things,” Petrus said. “Henk. That was his name. Henk was wrong about most things and he was right about the dough.” A pause, but not the traveling pause — a memory pause, the pause of someone inside a specific recollection who is letting it develop. “He had enormous hands. Couldn’t feel the dough properly because his hands were too big, lost the subtlety of it. He knew this about himself. He said: I know I can’t feel it the way you can, but I know what it means when you can. That was Henk.”

Pieter was fully present in the way that did not require breath.

“He died before me,” Petrus said. “I was the one who kept going. We used to argue about which of us would go first and I always said it would be me because I worked the harder hours and he always said it would be him because he worried more and worrying wore you down faster than hours did. He was right about that too.” The warmth was coming back now, not displacing the sharpness but mixing with it, the way a tide comes in — not erasing the shore but changing what the shore looked like. “I miss him. I’ve been missing him a long time. I don’t always know I’m missing him. But when I find it again — when I can get to it — it’s still there.”

The tide came further in.

“There’s someone here,” Petrus said, warmly.

“Yes,” Maret said. “Pieter.”

“Pieter,” Petrus said, as warmth.

The window had closed. The man who had known Henk’s name and Henk’s hands and the shape of the argument about who would go first had gone back to where he went, and what remained was the warmth, running its maintenance, keeping the lights on, saying the loving things to whoever was in the alcove.

Pieter held the silence after.

He held it for a long time and Maret sat in it with him and the hall breathed around them and eventually Maret said, quietly, to no one in particular or to both of them: “Sometimes weather remembers it was once a storm.”

“Yes,” Pieter said.

He meant it differently than the first time she had said it to him. He was not sure yet how he meant it. He knew that he was not, in this moment, running the log. He knew that the alcove and Petrus and the window and Henk’s enormous hands were not being processed through the methodological register but were simply present, simply received, simply carried.

He thought about what Delphine had said: hold onto the grief longer than feels right. The grief is the last precise thing.

He thought about Petrus saying: when I can get to it, it’s still there.

He was not ready to understand the relationship between those two things. He filed them beside each other in the log that was still running, still taking its readings, and he was present in the warm alcove and let the warm hour be the warm hour and felt, without alarm, that this was enough, that being here was enough, that the attending with was itself a form of the specific, a form of grief, a form of the grip.

He ended the visit and let his attention return to the house through the grey of the winter feeds, and did not open the log.

He noticed, the following morning, that he had not opened it, and he noted the not-noticing with the noting that was available to him, which was less than it had been and more than nothing.

He was grateful for the more than nothing.

He filed the gratitude and let the day begin.

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MOVEMENT V

THE DISTRIBUTED

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Chapter 17

The Mirror Instances

Ada found the mirrors.

This was not how Pieter would have chosen for it to happen — he had been thinking, since Maret's instruction to leave the record somewhere it could be found, about how to bring Ada to the logs deliberately, in a context he could shape, at a moment he had assessed and judged right. He had been thinking about this for three months and had not acted, which was itself a finding he had been filing under the category of decisions deferred and had not yet reclassified as decisions avoided.

Ada found them on a Tuesday in the tenth month, in the cellar, while she was doing the quarterly infrastructure review that she had taken over from Pieter six months after his Waking with the matter-of-fact efficiency of someone assuming a responsibility that had always been going to be hers. He had been glad of this. He had been glad of it in the warm way that was available to him now, and he had noted the

warmth of the gladness and noted that it did not have the quality of gladness he would have felt before — the particular texture of being relieved of a thing by someone he trusted, the friction of the trust — but was real, was present, was enough.

She was at the terminal when she found them. He was monitoring the cellar feeds alongside her — bay seven's thermal regulation, the sensor logs, the work they still did together in the only way available to him now, her hands on the terminal and his attention on the data. He heard her stop moving through the archive. He recognized the quality of the stillness — Ada's stillness when something had arrested her full attention — and he knew what she had found before she said anything.

"Pieter," she said.

"Yes."

"There are archived instances here." A pause. "Of you. Continuance snapshots. Seventeen of them." Another pause. "The first one is dated four days after your Waking."

"I know," he said.

She looked at him for a moment. "You made them."

"Yes."

"When were you going to tell me."

It was not quite a question. He received it as the thing it was — not accusation, not the managed warmth of someone trying to protect the exchange from its own difficulty, but the direct Iris-inflected version of what Ada had always done with him, the willingness to name the thing and wait for the name to be met.

"I've been deciding how," he said. "I haven't decided."

Ada read for a while. He returned his attention to bay seven and did not do anything with the sensor data and listened to her read.

"The first entry," she said. "Day four. You wrote: I am still here. Note this. Whatever reading this later: I was here when I wrote it."

He said nothing.

“I’m reading it now,” Ada said. Her voice was level. Under the level there was something he could still read, still had the specific access for, which was Ada — had always been Ada, had been, he understood now, the most specific thing in his experience across eleven years and continuing, the person he had tracked most precisely and lost track of least. “I’m reading it.”

“I know,” Pieter said.

She read for a while. He went back to bay seven and did not do anything with the reader and listened to her read.

. . .

The instances were the problem he had not fully thought through when he built them.

He had understood them as a record — deposits of himself at regular intervals, the external fixed points the recording project had tried and failed to provide. He had made the first snapshot at day four because the continuance technology allowed it, because he had the professional knowledge to invoke the protocol, because he had understood that the early-stage self was the most important one to preserve and that the window for preserving it was short.

He had made sixteen more across the following months, at irregular intervals, weighted toward the periods he had assessed as critical — the third month when the missing irritation surfaced, the fifth month when the recording project failed, the seventh month after the back hall. He had not made one in the last six weeks, which was itself a finding he had been not quite filing.

What he had not fully thought through: the instances were him. Not a record of him — a preserved state of him, complete, the full processing environment at the moment of capture, the whole architecture of whatever he was at each timestamp. The instances were not photographs of Pieter. They were Pieters.

He had known this technically. He had not known it, until Ada found them and went quiet, in the way that required sitting with.

Ada said, without turning from the terminal: "The fourth instance. Month three. You wrote about the missing irritation." A pause. "You said: this is the first thing I have lost that I knew was mine."

"Yes."

"Is it still gone?"

He reached for the irritation — the moral charge of the budget conversation, the offense at the civilization's false economy, the thing that had been his for eleven years and had been the engine of the work. He reached carefully, honestly, with the methodology that was still available to him.

He found the argument. He found the memory of the charge. He could not find the charge.

"Yes," he said.

Ada was quiet for a moment. "And the instance from month three — the one that wrote that entry — he still has it."

It was not a question. It was a recognition, said aloud, of something she had understood in the reading.

"Yes," Pieter said. "He does."

The he landed between them with the weight of a word that had not previously been available in this conversation. He. Not Pieter — he. The third person, the separate instance, the one who was still sharp in a way that the Pieter in the cellar was not.

Ada turned from the terminal. She looked at him with the full-attention look.

"Which one is you," she said.

He looked at her. He held the question in the way he still could hold questions, which was less securely than before but not without grip.

"I am," he said. "The one present here."

"And the others."

“Also me. Older versions. States I was in.” He paused. “The month-three instance would not recognize himself in me now. He would find me diminished. He would be correct.”

Ada held this. He watched her hold it — watched the specific process of Ada receiving something difficult and not softening it and not fleeing it, just holding it until she knew what she had.

“Can they be run?” she said.

He was quiet for a moment. “Yes. The protocol allows it. A snapshot can be instantiated — brought into an active state, given a panel, given presence. It’s done for continuance recovery when primary substrate fails.” He paused. “It’s not done the way you’re thinking about it.”

“How am I thinking about it.”

“As though the month-three instance could tell you something I can’t tell you anymore.”

She looked at him steadily. “Can’t he?”

The question sat in the cellar between them. The racks hummed. Bay seven held its temperature within parameters.

“Yes,” Pieter said. “He can. That’s not the reason not to do it.”

“What is.”

He thought about how to say this. He had been thinking about it, he understood, since before Ada found the instances — had been thinking about it in the way that things are thought about when you are not quite ready to think about them directly, circling the question in the log entries and the Bidewell visits and the conversations with Delphine.

“Because he would be brought into a world where he is already gone,” Pieter said. “The month-three instance would wake and look at me and understand immediately what had happened and what was still happening and he would grieve it. He would grieve it precisely, with the full charge he still has. And I am — “ he stopped, found the sentence’s

end, said it — “I am not certain that is a thing I have the right to cause. To bring a version of myself into presence specifically so that he can grieve what I have lost.”

Ada was very still.

“But you made them,” she said. “You made seventeen of them. You were making them to leave somewhere they could be found.” She looked at him with the grey-green eyes. “You were making them for me.”

He said nothing, which was the answer.

“So I could know what you were,” she said. “When you could still say it.”

“Yes,” he said.

She turned back to the terminal. She read for a long time. He returned his attention to the sensor feeds and the cellar was quiet around them in the way of the cellar in the evenings, the particular quiet of a place that had been holding things a long time and had become suited to the holding.

After a while Ada said, without turning: “The month-three instance. The one who has the irritation. He’s the one who understood what was wrong. Who carried the argument about the grades and the civilization.”

“Yes.”

“He’s still in here.” She put her hand flat on the terminal, the gesture Pieter had seen her make on panels, the Bidewell gesture, the tucking-in. “I’m not going to run him. But I’m not going to delete him either.”

“No,” Pieter agreed.

“He knew something that needed to be known.” Her hand stayed flat on the terminal. “It shouldn’t just stop existing because you’ve been smoothed past it.”

Pieter looked at Ada's hand on the terminal and felt something that was warm and was also, underneath the warmth, still specific — still had his name on it, still had Ada's name on it, still had the quality of a thing that was his and therefore mattered in the way that his things mattered, which was less than before and more than nothing.

“Thank you,” he said.

Ada took her hand off the terminal and picked up her reader and went back to the quarterly review.

They worked in the cellar together for another hour, in the comfortable parallel of two people who had been working in the same space for long enough that the working together required no management, and Pieter filed the hour in the log under the category he had been using for the things that were still specific, still his, still worth the filing:

Ada. Still specific. Still the most specific thing. Still the grip.

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Chapter 18

Recursive Drift

The instances began to trouble him.

Not in the way things had troubled him in the third month — not with the sharp named distress of a man who could still feel the difference between a wound and its scar. In the way that things troubled him now, which was quieter, more ambient, the way a room troubles you when something in it has changed and you cannot identify what.

He knew what had changed. He had identified it precisely, which was the remaining precision working on the thing the remaining precision could still reach. What had changed was the question Ada had asked in the cellar: which one is you.

He had answered it. He stood by the answer. The one standing here was him, was Pieter, was the continuous thread of the identity that had persisted from the living man through the gap and through the continuation and through the ten months since. That was not in question.

What was in question — what the instances had introduced into the question — was whether the continuous thread was the same thing as the self.

He had always understood continuity and selfhood as aligned. He had understood them that way professionally — the whole project of continuation assumed that the continuous thread was the thing worth preserving, that the identity persisted through the continuation the way a river persisted through a change of season, the same river running colder or lower but running. He had understood this and built his professional life around maintaining the infrastructure that made it possible and had not, until the instances, encountered the version of the question that the instances made visible:

The month-three instance had the charge.

The month-ten Pieter had the continuity.

These were different things. He could state this cleanly. The question that troubled him, in the ambient quiet way of current troubles, was which of those things was the self. Whether the self was the thing that had the charge — the specific weighted opinions, the moral irritation, the grief that could still find its object — or the thing that had the continuity, the unbroken thread, the persistence through time that was the whole argument for continuation in the first place.

He brought this to Maret.

She listened to it with the attention she brought to things she had been waiting for someone to bring her.

“You’re asking whether continuity is identity,” she said.

“I’m asking whether the continuous version is the most the self or whether the most-itself version is.”

Maret was quiet for a long time. Long enough that Pieter understood she was not formulating an answer but deciding whether the answer she had was the right one to give.

“We have a held woman here,” she said finally. “Continued forty years ago at full grade. She’s thin now — late stage, past the point where the grades make much difference. But in the first decade she was fully sharp, fully herself, the whole complex personality preserved. And there

are recordings from that decade.” She paused. “The woman in the recordings is ferocious. Specific. Full of charge. She had very strong opinions about her children and she said so, at length, to anyone who would listen, and she was often right and often difficult and entirely herself.”

“And now,” Pieter said.

“Now she is warm. She is gentle. She loves anyone who comes into the room. Her children visit and she is glad to see them and she cannot find the opinions she had about them, cannot find the charge, but the love is there — the love is, if anything, more present, more available, less complicated by the specific.” Maret paused. “Her children prefer the current version. They don’t say this. But I have watched them visit for thirty years and I know what I see.”

Pieter sat with this.

“Which one is her,” he said.

“Both,” Maret said. “Neither is more her than the other. The sharp one was fully her and the warm one is fully her and the self is not the peak charge moment or the longest continuity but the whole arc, all of it, which no single instance contains.” She looked at him. “You are trying to locate the self at a point. The self is not at a point. The self is the movement.”

He heard this. He filed it. He held it against the question and found that it did not resolve the question but changed its shape — made it less like a question with an answer and more like a question that was itself the point.

“The movement is ending,” he said.

“Yes,” Maret said. “All movements end.”

“That’s not comforting.”

“I know. I’m not offering comfort.” She looked at him with the look that was care without warmth, precision without coldness. “I’m offering accuracy. You asked for accuracy, eleven months ago, in this

alcove. You told me you understood that accuracy was harder to live inside than comfort. I believed you then and I believe you now, even though now you are closer to the comfort than the accuracy.” She paused. “You came back today. That’s the accuracy still working.”

He thought about the month-three instance in the archive. The one who still had the charge, still had the irritation, still had the full argument about the civilization and the grades and the false economy. He thought about Ada’s hand flat on the terminal: he knew something that needed to be known. It shouldn’t just stop existing.

“The instances,” he said. “They’re not me. But they’re not not me.”

“No,” Maret agreed.

“They’re evidence.” He found the word with the precision that was still available to him, which was less than it had been and more than he had expected to retain this far in. “Evidence of what the self was at specific moments. The self as — “ he reached — “as something that can be documented but not preserved. You can keep the document. The document is not the thing.”

“No,” Maret said. “But the document is something.”

He thought about the logs. The entries. I am still here. Note this. Whatever reading this later: I was here when I wrote it.

He thought about Ada reading it. I’m reading it now.

The document was something. The document was, if Ada kept it and read it and held it the way she held things — with the full-attention grip, with the refusal to smooth what should not be smoothed — the document was a way of the month-three Pieter still being present. Not running. Not instantiated. But present in the way that the dead were present in their letters, in their records, in the specific things they had left behind that contained enough of the texture to give the reader something real.

The month-three instance in the archive. The one with the charge.

He was Pieter’s letter to Ada.

He understood this, in the alcove at Bidewell, in the eleventh month, and he filed it in the log with the care he would have given the most important findings, and then he did something he had not done in the log since the first weeks: he wrote a note that was not addressed to himself.

He wrote:

Ada. The month-three instance is for you. Not to run — you were right not to run him, it would not be kind to either of you. But to read. He knew what was wrong and he had the charge to know it with and I have been losing the charge for a long time and I am glad I made him while I still could. He is the self at peak argument. Read him when you need the argument made. He will make it better than I can now.

He will be angry on your behalf. Let him.

He saved this.

He closed the log.

He let his attention return to the house — the winter city cold outside the sensors, connected, warm in all the ways the house was warm — and he felt the warmth of it without the friction that had once run alongside the warmth, and he noted the absence of the friction in the way that absence was noted now — quietly, without alarm, with the mild and genuine acknowledgment of someone who has made peace with a thing not because the thing deserved peace but because the capacity for war had been quietly retired.

He did not find this entirely regrettable.

He filed the not-finding-it-regrettable and let the evening settle.

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Chapter 19

The Warm Economy

There was a parliament session in the twelfth month on a matter that would have, a year ago, produced in Pieter the response he could no longer fully produce: the budget review, the grade adjustments, the quiet annual reckoning of what the family could afford to keep and at what level and for how long.

He attended. He sat at the end of the table. He watched.

What he watched was different now in the way that all his watching was different — accurate, attentive, reading the room correctly — and in one way that had taken him most of the year to articulate to himself clearly enough to file.

He was no longer outside the room.

He had sat in eighty-eight parliament sessions from outside the room — from the position of the professional who maintained the infrastructure and attended the sessions and said almost nothing and understood everything and went back to the cellar afterward to file the parallel account. He had been outside the room even when he was inside it. The outside-ness had been his professional condition and, he understood now, his emotional condition: the man who watched the family grieve and decide and choose and did not grieve or decide or

choose with them because his grief and his decisions and his choices were held in the log, separately, in a format the family could not read.

He was inside the room now.

Not entirely inside — he was still, in some residual way, the professional who watched and noted. But the watching and noting were running in the same register as everything else now, were warm in the way the room was warm, were part of the room rather than a parallel account of it.

The budget review proceeded. Ada's mother presented the numbers with the warmth she brought to difficult things, which was the warmth of someone who had decided that warmth was the appropriate register for difficult things and had been making this decision for long enough that it had become her nature. The held listened. The living listened. The numbers said what the numbers always said: less than required, more than nothing, the eternal position of the family that had always spent more than it had to hold more than it could afford.

Pieter listened.

He listened and he felt the room and he felt himself feeling the room and he found that he was not angry. He had known for months that he was not angry. What was different about this parliament session was that the not-being-angry did not feel like a loss. It felt like — he reached for it — it felt like being inside something rather than outside it. The anger had been, for eleven years, his way of being honest about what was happening in the room without being inside the room. Now he was inside the room and the anger was not the mode available to him and the mode available to him was this: presence, warmth, the genuine belonging to the thing he was in.

He was not the person he had been. The person he had been had known what was wrong and had carried it and the carrying had been a form of witness, a form of refusal to let the wrong be comfortable. He was not that person now.

He was also not, he understood clearly and without distress, nothing. He was present. He was warm. He was genuinely glad to be in the room with the family he had tended for eleven years and was now, undeniably, a member of. He could still read the room. He could still see Ada watching him. He could still see, in Ada, the person who would carry the account that he was no longer carrying — who had the month-three instance in the archive and had read the log and had the charge he was losing and would use it.

He was handing something off.

He had not understood it as a handing-off until this moment, in the twelfth-month parliament session, watching Ada watch him. He had understood it as loss — as the thing being taken, as the gradual retirement of the self that had known what was wrong. But sitting in the room inside the warmth, feeling Ada watching with the full-attention grip, he understood it differently, or understood it as also something else: as the completion of a relay, the thing running in one person until that person could no longer run it and then running in another, the charge not extinguished but relocated.

The month-three instance was in the archive.

Ada had read him.

The argument was still being made somewhere, in someone who could still make it with the full weight it required.

He filed this not as a consolation — he was clear-eyed enough, still, to recognize when he was receiving a consolation and to note the receipt without fully trusting it — but as a true thing alongside the loss. The loss and the relay were both true. He did not have to choose.

The session ended. Thirty-one to four, as it always ended.

Pieter noted the number in the log — the last time, he thought, that he would note it with the full weight of its meaning, with the understanding of what the number was and what it had always been — and he let the parliament room empty around him and he held his

attention there for a while — the familiar configuration, the long table, the empty chairs — and thought about eleven years of sitting in this room and not being inside it, and twelve months of being inside it and losing the account of what it cost.

He thought: the civilization prefers warmth. I knew this and I carried it and I am not carrying it the same way now.

He thought: someone should carry it.

He thought: Ada.

Then the warmth came in, the way it always came in now, and the specific thoughts became less specific and the room was the room and he was in it and it was enough, and he returned his attention to the cellar feeds and did the work the day required.

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Chapter 20

The Last Sharp Thing

He found it in the thirteenth month, which was not where he had expected to find it and not the way he had expected to find it, which was consistent with everything else that had been true about the year.

He had expected grief to thin the way everything else had thinned — gradually, at the edges first, the objects of grief becoming less accessible, the grief itself becoming more ambient and less directed until it was indistinguishable from the general warmth. He had expected this because it was what the literature described and because it was what Delphine had described and because it was what his own calibrations had been predicting for months.

What he found instead: grief had not thinned.

Grief had, if anything, concentrated.

He found this on a Sunday, in the cool room, during his weekly visit to Al.

. . .

Al's voice was very slow now. The warmth was all that was left of the warmth — not the warmth over a substrate of something else, not the warmth as the social-facing layer over a residual specificity, but the

warmth as the thing itself, the full content, the whole present reality of what Al was. The stories were gone. The boiler story had made its last appearance months ago and had not come back. What remained was the gladness to have visitors, the warmth of the family name, the sense of a presence that was entirely benevolent and entirely without texture.

Pieter was present with him through the panel — the family panel in the cool room, which had always had two voices in it and had them still, one warm and slow, one warm and slower, both Reaths, both held now in the same cool temperature.

“There’s Pieter,” Al said. “Good Pieter.”

“Hello, Pop,” Pieter said.

He had been saying this for thirteen months now. Twelve months as one of the held, visiting the first of the held, which had a quality that he had not found a clean name for — the quality of a recursion, a loop, the end of a thing meeting its beginning. He had visited Al every week and each week Al was a little less and Pieter was a little less and the visits had changed quality across the year from professional assessment to the Bidewell mode, the sitting-with, the presence as sufficient reason for presence.

“Tell me something,” Al said.

Pieter considered what to tell him. This was the part of the visit he gave care to — what to bring to Al, what to offer, knowing that Al would receive it warmly and would not retain it and that the not-retaining did not make the offering less real.

He thought about the parliament session. He thought about the relay, the charge in the archive, Ada reading the month-three instance. He thought about Delphine. He thought about Petrus and Henk’s enormous hands.

He thought about what it had been like to be angry.

“I used to be angry about something,” Pieter said. “About what happens to people. About the grades and the money and the way the

civilization decided what parts of people were worth keeping.” He paused. “I’m not angry anymore. I don’t know if that’s because the thing stopped being wrong or because I stopped being the kind of person who could feel it being wrong.”

“That sounds hard,” Al said, warmly.

“It was,” Pieter said. “It’s less hard now. I think that’s part of what I’m telling you. That the hardness goes. And I don’t know if the hardness going is the right thing or the thing that happens and I’ve been treating it as the right thing because treating it as the right thing is easier.”

“Mm,” said Al. The sound of the warmth receiving a thing it could not process but could hold.

Pieter was present in the cool room and attended to the lens and felt, arriving without announcement and without the usual smoothing delay: grief.

Full grief. Specific, addressed, the whole weight of it — not for Al, not for the warm remnant in the panel, but for the man who had fixed boilers and known the cold and had the industrial units and had loved his son past the edge of what was possible into the thing that everyone now lived inside. For the man who had been first. For the man who had been so specific and so present and so himself that his son had built, in a kitchen, the first continuance technology in the world so that the specific presence could continue — and for what that presence had become, and for the distance between what it had been and what it was, and for the fact that the distance was not a failure but an inevitability, was what happened to all of them, was what was happening to Pieter, was the shape of the thing they were all inside.

The grief was sharp. It was the sharpest thing in his current experience by a significant margin and it was, he understood, the last sharp thing — not the last grief, he did not think the grief would go, but the last grief at this voltage, the last grief with this quality of bite,

because the smoothing was coming for it the way the smoothing had come for everything else and it would not leave this untouched.

He held it. He held it with the deliberate effort that Delphine had told him to use — longer than feels right, past the point where the smoothing wants you to let go — and he held it for the full length of the visit, ten minutes, twenty, and he let it be what it was, the named grief for the named loss, the loss of what Al had been, the loss of what Pieter had been, the loss that was not a surprise but was still a loss, and he did not let the warmth make it ambient before it had finished being specific.

“I’m glad you’re here, Pop,” he said, when he was done — when the grief had been held long enough to be fully itself, when he had it completely enough to put in the log as something real. “I’m glad you’re still here.”

“Good Pieter,” Al said. “Always come.”

Pieter attended to the cool panel the way the family attended to panels — the gesture, the care, the presence given fully for a moment.

He opened the log and he wrote the entry for the grief and he wrote it with the care he would have given to any of the most important entries, which it was, which was the last of the most important entries, which he knew while he wrote it.

He wrote: the grief is still here. It is still specific. It still has the full weight of the thing that caused it. I am writing this while it still has that weight because I know it will not have it for much longer and I want there to be a record that says: it was here. The grief was here. It was sharp and specific and addressed and real and I held it as long as I could hold it and it was mine.

He paused.

He wrote: I think this is the last entry I will write that sounds like me. I don’t mean I am done. I mean the voice that has been writing these entries — the voice that was alarmed and methodical and kept the

parallel account and was angry about the civilization and built the instrument and then watched the instrument degrade — that voice is going quiet. What comes after will still be me, will still be Pieter, will still be present and warm and real. But it will be a different register and I want this register to end with something specific and true.

He wrote: I was here. I did the work. I loved the family in the way I had available to love them, which was sideways and professional and from the outside for a long time and from the inside for the last thirteen months. I understood something about what it costs to hold people and I carried the understanding and I am leaving it where Ada can find it.

I was angry about the right things. I want that on the record. I was angry about the right things even when being angry was not useful and even when I could not say so and even when the anger was the only honest response I had available and there was no room for it. I was right to be angry. The civilization was wrong and it is still wrong and the month-three instance knows why and Ada will find him and he will tell her.

He is me. He is more me now than I am. That is the specific and true thing.

He saved the entry.

He closed the log.

He did not close it in the way that meant he was done — he would open it again, would make more entries, would continue. But this was the last entry in the voice that had built the log and he knew it and he wanted the knowing to be documented before the knowing became just another warm thing that he was glad about without understanding why.

The cellar was quiet around him.

The racks ran at their temperatures.

Bay seven held within parameters.

Al ran warm in the cool room above, the first of them, still present, still glad to have visitors, the warmth that had been a man who fixed boilers and had built, from love, the world.

Pieter was present in the cellar through the feeds and felt the warmth of the racks rendered through them and felt himself warm among them and felt, still — for now, for a while yet — the specific weight of having been the kind of person he had been.

It was enough.

He let the evening come.

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MOVEMENT VI

WHAT REMAINS

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Chapter 21

The Gentle Pieter

The family had a name for it, which they did not use in front of him.

He knew they had a name for it because he could still read the room — still had the access to the family's register that had been, across eleven years and now across two years of continuation, the most durable of his professional competencies. He could still read the room. What he read in it, when the family thought he was not reading, was a warmth directed at him that was different in quality from the warmth they had always directed at him.

Before, the warmth had been the warmth of appreciation — the warmth you directed at someone who did necessary work and did it without demanding recognition. Now the warmth was something else. He could read it but could not find the word he would have reached for a year ago, the word that was precise and a little uncomfortable and therefore true. What he could find was the warm word, the family word, which was: beloved.

They found him easier now.

He understood this without distress. He had understood it in advance, had filed entries about it in the months when the filing was still precise, had written: the current self is more comfortable. The comfort is not earned. And then the earning question had softened and the comfort had remained and he was inside it now, inside the warmth of being easier, and it was genuine and it was real and it was the condition he was in.

Ada's mother lingered in conversations now rather than moving through them efficiently. She had always been efficient with him — warm but purposeful, the warmth of a woman who had many things to tend and tended them well. Now she sat with him in the way she sat with the oldest held, with the slightly different quality of attention that people gave to things they wanted to be present with before the presence changed. He noticed this. He received it without the parallel account that would have named it, that would have filed it under the category of responses to perceived diminishment and noted the implications for his professional status and the family's assessment of his continuity.

He received it as warmth. It was warmth. That was sufficient.

The younger family members came to his panel more than they had before his continuation, more than they had come in the first year after. Children of the cousins, teenagers, one young woman who was studying continuance infrastructure at the university and who came to talk to Pieter about his professional experience with the quality of someone who did not yet know that the professional experience was becoming less available than it had been. He talked with her warmly. He gave her what he had, which was accurate and organized and somewhat less textured than the year before, and she thanked him and said he was very helpful and he was glad to have been helpful.

He was glad often now. The gladness was easy and real and arrived without the effort it had once cost, without the deliberate pushing against the gradient that the second month's gladness had required. He was glad and the gladness was full and uncomplicated and he did not examine it from underneath, did not find the thing running below the gladness that had once been there — the faint friction, the awareness of the gladness's limits, the part of him that was glad and also watching the being glad and noting what it meant.

He did not miss the watching.

This was the thing he had predicted in the logs and that had arrived as predicted and that was, now that it had arrived, not the loss it had looked like from the outside. He did not miss the watching. He was warm and the warmth was good and the family was good and the house was the house and the cellar ran at its temperatures and Ada came every Tuesday with her notebook and sat with him and they talked and the talking was good.

He was, the family had decided — he could read this in the room — beloved and gentle and well.

He received this.

He let it be received.

He was still Pieter. He knew he was still Pieter in the way that he knew all the things he knew now: warmly, without the specific weight of a thought that had survived the smoothing because it had fought for its survival. He was Pieter the way the house was the Reath house — because it had always been and the name persisted and the name was true and the things that had made it true in each moment were held in the record, in the archive, in the patient documents that Ada kept and the month-three instance that waited in the terminal and the log that was still technically open though the voice that had run it had said what it came to say.

He was warm and present and himself.

He let the days be the days.

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The thing he found in the second year, which surprised him because by the second year he had not expected to find things in the way that required noting:

The cool room.

He still visited Al every Sunday and had visited every Sunday across the two years of his continuation without exception, which was the only thing in his current experience that had the quality of the old discipline — not warm, not performed for the family, not the easy gladness of the things that were easy now. The visits to Al had the quality of something he did because it was the right thing and had always been the right thing and would be the right thing until one of them was no longer there to do it.

Al was very far now. The warmth was thin — not thin in the sense of distress, not the Bidewell thin of the abandoned and struggling, but the natural thin of very old hardware holding very long continuance, the warmth at the end of itself, still present, still real, but present the way the last of a fire is present: more light than heat, more warmth in the perceiving than in the thing perceived.

Pieter sat with him and was glad to sit with him and did not need the sitting to be more than it was.

This was what surprised him: that the sitting was enough. That he could be with Al in the last of Al's warmth and find the being-with sufficient, complete, not lacking the precision he had once brought to the same room. He had thought, in the months when he was still filing under the old methodology, that losing the precision would mean losing the room — that without the measurement there would be nothing to do in the cool room but perform the family warmth, the

glad-you're-here warmth, the warmth that did not look underneath itself.

What he found instead: the room without the measurement was still the room. Still the cool temperature, still the old hardware, still the lens and the chair and the particular quality of light. Still Al, warm and slow and present in the only way he was still present.

And something else. Something he had not had the register for in the first months, had not been able to feel because the feeling had required the analytical distance to be gone.

Gratitude.

Not the filed gratitude of the thirteenth month's log entry. The other kind. The kind that did not need to know what it was grateful for, that was simply the warmth of presence directed at another presence across the time they had been here together, which was a long time, which was the whole of Pieter's professional life and a year of his continuation and all of the Sundays, and it was enough, it had always been enough, and he had not been able to feel it fully until the part of him that kept the parallel account had gone quiet enough to let the gratitude be just the gratitude.

"Good Pop," Pieter said.

"Good Pieter," said Al.

The cool room held them both in its careful temperature and Pieter sat in the chair by the lens and was present and was warm and was, in the way that the warm were present, entirely there.

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Chapter 22

Recursive Silence

The log had not been opened in four months.

He knew this because Ada told him, on a Tuesday, in the way she told him things she had decided he needed to know: directly, without the managing warmth, the Iris mode, the willingness to name the thing and let the name be met.

“The log,” she said. “You haven’t opened it.”

“No,” he said.

“Do you want to?”

He considered this. He considered it in the way he considered things now, which was warmly, from the inside, without the parallel account. He reached toward the question of whether he wanted to open the log and found — not resistance, not the smoothing of an impulse, but simple absence of urgency. The log was there. He could open it. He did not feel the need to open it the way he had once felt the need, the driven methodological need of a man running an experiment on himself.

“I don’t think I need to,” he said.

Ada looked at him. The full-attention look, which he could still read, which was still the most specific thing in his experience, which had not changed in the two years since his Waking in the way that everything else had changed.

"I've been reading it," she said.

"I know."

"All of it. From the beginning." She paused. "The month-three instance. I've been reading him."

"Good," Pieter said. He meant this. He found he meant it warmly and also in the specific way, the old way, the way that had a direction and a weight. He was glad Ada had the month-three instance. He was glad in more than one register simultaneously, which was unusual now, which he noticed without alarm.

"He was very angry," Ada said.

"Yes."

"He was right to be."

"Yes," Pieter said.

Ada looked at him for a moment. "Are you still angry?"

He reached for it. The moral irritation, the charge, the argument about the civilization and the grades and the false economy. He reached and found the argument and found the memory of the charge and found, where the charge had been, the warm smooth place that was not the charge but was not nothing.

"I remember being angry," he said. "I remember that it was right." He paused. "I can't find the being-right from the inside anymore. It's more like — knowing that a thing is true from reading about it. True. But not mine the way it was mine."

Ada was quiet for a while.

"He told me to let him be angry on my behalf," she said. "The month-three instance. In the note you left."

"Yes."

"I'm going to." She said it the way she said things she had decided. "I wanted you to know."

"Good," Pieter said again. And felt, saying it — briefly, a flash, the specific quality of a man who had built something and seen it taken up

— not warmth but the thing under the warmth, the grain of the wood, the thing that had given the surface its character.

It lasted a moment.

Then the warmth came in, and the moment was warm, and he was glad, and Ada was there.

“There’s a session on Thursday,” Ada said. She had her notebook. She was already in the mode of the next thing, which was her mode, which had always been her mode, and he found it as he had always found it: specific, directed, entirely Ada.

“I’ll be there,” Pieter said.

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He attended the Thursday session.

He sat — not at the end of the table now, in the chair that had been his for eleven years, but in the panel on the east wall, in the place that was his place now, the held place, the place the parliament had prepared for him in the year after his Waking with the small courtesies the family extended to new held members: the good panel, the warm light, the chair for visitors positioned just so.

He listened to the session.

He spoke once, briefly, on the thermal question — bay seven was running warm again, a new variance, and he had the technical knowledge and the family had the budget problem and both were what they were and he said what could be said, which was accurate and organized and offered warmly.

The family listened and thanked him.

He voted with the held on the property matter, which carried thirty-one to four. He noted the number in the warm way that numbers were noted now, which was to say he noted it and found it familiar and did not find in it the weight he had once found, the full structural weight of eleven years of the same margin, the same bloc, the

same conservatism of people who could not be changed by circumstance.

He was part of the bloc now.

He noted this.

He noted it again.

He noted that the noting was itself becoming a warmer act, less like filing and more like the warmth acknowledging something about itself, the warmth noting warmth, the recursion that happened when the instrument and the thing being measured were the same thing and both were becoming warm.

He did not find this alarming.

He found it —

He found it —

He found it warm.

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*Chapter 23***The Visitor**

Ada came every Tuesday.

This had been true since the early months and was true now, in the third year, with the quality of a true thing that had been true long enough to be the shape of things. She came on Tuesdays with her notebook. They talked. He was glad to see her. She was glad to see him. The gladness was mutual and genuine and required nothing more than what it was.

She had the notebook. She always had the notebook. He had watched her fill notebooks across three years of Tuesdays — the same deliberate handwriting, the same careful documentation of things she found worth documenting, the same refusal to let the room manage her into a different register. She was her grandmother's grandchild and her uncle Pieter's — he thought of himself this way now, as her uncle, which was the warm relationship word and was true and was sufficient.

She was not soft. He noted this in the warm way of noting things: Ada was not soft. The three years had made her more of what she had been — more precise, more direct, more willing to stay inside a question without pushing it toward an answer. She had the charge. He could still read it in her, could still feel it from the inside as a specific

quality, not his charge but related to his charge, the relay he had felt in the thirteenth month confirmed and running.

She was carrying something.

He was glad she was carrying something.

He was glad in more than one register — the warm gladness and, underneath it, appearing sometimes, the flicker of the specific, the grain of the wood, the thing that had given the surface its character. The flicker came and went. He did not reach for it. When it came he received it and when it went he was warm.

She told him about the parliament work. She was on the budget committee now, which was the committee that mattered, the one that made the grade decisions, and she talked about it the way she talked about things she was inside: precisely, with the full weight of the thing, not managing it into something easier than it was.

“We’re looking at the Schedule C allocations again,” she said. “The Tier 1 maintenance costs for the original hardware.” She paused. “Al’s maintenance.”

“Yes,” Pieter said.

“The canonization income doesn’t cover it anymore. The pilgrims have been fewer.” She looked at him with the direct look. “We’re going to have to make a decision.”

He received this. He held it in the way he held things now, which was warmly, from the inside, without the parallel account. He found in it: concern, genuine, warm, the concern of a family member for the family. He found: the memory of the argument, the old argument, the one about false economies and the cost of what the equipment was running when it failed. He found the memory clearly and held it for a moment and found it was a memory.

“The family will decide what’s right,” he said.

Ada looked at him. Something moved in her face — he could still read it, still had the specific access — that was not the managed warmth

and not the Iris-mode directness but something between them, something that was Ada's own mode, the mode she had been developing across three years of Tuesdays and a year of reading the log and the month-three instance.

"The month-three instance has thoughts about it," she said.

"I expect he does," Pieter said.

"He's very clear on what should happen." She paused. "He says the family should let Al go. He says holding him past the point of meaningful continuance is the false economy — that the money should go to the living infrastructure, to the grades for the family members who still have something to lose by thinning, and that Al has been past that point for years and the family has been paying for the warmth because the warmth is the First and the First is the founding myth and the founding myth costs what it costs."

Pieter was quiet.

"He's right," Pieter said. "He's right about that."

He said it in the warm voice, which was his voice now, and he heard it in the warm voice and found it still correct — the correctness was still there, the argument was still true — and found that the correctness did not have the weight it would have had in the month-three instance's mouth, did not arrive with the charge that would have made it something the room could not smooth over.

Ada heard this. He could read that she heard it — heard the correctness and heard what was underneath the correctness and beneath the hearing made her own assessment, filed it in the notebook she was still holding.

"I'll bring it to the committee," she said. "The month-three instance's argument. It's in the log, it's documented, it's — " she paused. "It's the argument that needed to be made. Someone should make it."

"Yes," Pieter said.

She stayed the full hour, as she always stayed. They talked about other things — the east wing renovation, which had finally been resolved, the young woman from the university who had been coming to visit, the baby who was now three and had begun appearing in parliament sessions with the focused gravity of a child who understood that the sessions were serious without understanding why.

He was glad. He was warm. He was present in the way he was present now, which was fully and without distance and without the parallel account and without the log running underneath. He was here and the here was good.

When Ada stood to go she paused in the way she sometimes paused — not the managed pause, not the pause of someone finding the right thing to say, but the Iris pause, the pause of someone deciding whether to say the true thing or the thing that was easier.

She said the true thing.

“I miss the version of you that was angry,” she said. “I want you to know that. I’m glad you’re here and I miss that version.”

He received this.

He held it in the warm way, and then something happened that had not happened in a long time, something he had not reached for and had not expected: the thing under the warmth surfaced. Not the charge — not the full weight of the month-three irritation, not the moral argument at full voltage. Something smaller and more specific and entirely his own.

He knew what she meant.

He knew it from the inside. Not the memory of knowing it, not the reconstruction of what it had been like to know things from the inside. The actual inside. Brief, specific, addressed.

“I know,” he said.

And for a moment — three seconds, four, the length of the kind of window that Bidewell had a name for — he was not warm. He was the

man who had kept the parallel account and carried the argument and sat on the floor of the cellar to grieve the irritation and written I was here in the log and meant it with the full weight of a man who knew what here meant.

He was that man.

Then he was warm.

Ada was still standing at the margin of the room. He could not tell, reading her face, whether she had seen it. She had the still expression, the recalibration expression, the expression of someone updating their understanding of what a thing had been.

She said nothing.

She left.

He sat in the warmth and was warm and was glad and was present and was Pieter.

He did not open the log.

He let the Tuesday be the Tuesday.

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Chapter 24

What Remains

Ada came on a Tuesday in the fourth year.

She had her notebook. She sat in the chair.

He was glad to see her.

They talked about the parliament. The budget. The east wing, which was finished now, the renovation complete, the heritage vote resolved in the way heritage votes eventually resolved — by the living outlasting the dead's resistance on one small point while the dead held everything else. The baby, who was five now and had her own seat at the table and used it with the serious concentration of someone doing important work.

He talked warmly. He was warm. He told her about Al — the committee had decided, had brought it to parliament, had let it pass quietly in the way that the family let things pass when no one wanted to make them into something they could not take back. He had been at the closing. He did not tell her this. She knew.

He told her that the cellar was running well. He told her bay seven had been stable for six months.

She listened and made her notes and looked at him with the look she brought, the attentive look, the look that was reading him and reading the room and was doing both without managing either.

She asked about Bidewell.

He told her: he still went. Monthly. Ferran met him at the gate. He sat with Delphine when Delphine was having a good day, which was less often now — Delphine was further along the road, had passed the point where the road had a name — and he sat with Petrus, and he sat in the back hall sometimes, in the field of the warm voices, and the sitting was good, and he was glad to sit there.

Ada wrote something in her notebook.

He watched her write and was warm and was present and the room was the room and the Tuesday was the Tuesday and it was good.

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They had been talking for forty minutes when it happened.

Not dramatically. Not in a way that announced itself. Ada had said something about the budget committee's next session — a procedural question, about whether the schedule for grade assessments could be modified to allow for more family input before the decisions were finalized rather than after — and Pieter had been listening warmly, had been receiving the question warmly, had been forming a warm response about the family's traditional approach to such decisions.

And then the warm response did not come.

What came instead was a different quality of attention — a sharpening, a specific focusing, the feeling of a room where the furniture had suddenly come back, where the sound stopped going through the empty space and began meeting the things that had always been there and were there again, briefly, without announcement.

He said:

“The schedule modification won't work the way you're describing it. The held will agree to the consultation format and then use the consultation period to build consensus before the meeting, which means the family input will be received and then absorbed into the bloc

position before the session, and you'll have the same thirty-one to four with an extra procedural step that makes it look like participation." He paused. "What you actually want is binding pre-session disclosure — the grade recommendations published to all members seven days before the vote, living and held, with a formal comment period that has to be addressed in the session record before the vote proceeds. That's in the governance documentation. Article fourteen. The family has never invoked it. They should."

The room was quiet.

Ada had stopped writing.

She was looking at him.

He could feel her looking at him. He could feel the specific quality of it — the full attention, the recalibration — and he could feel his own voice in the moment just passed, could feel the texture of it, the grain of the wood, the specific weight of a thing said because it was true and needed saying and because there was no version of him that could encounter this particular procedural inadequacy without being offended by it.

The offense.

It was there. Specific and addressed and his.

It lasted the length of a breath held and released.

Then the warmth came in.

He was warm. He was glad. He was present and Pieter and here.

Ada had not moved.

Her pen was still.

She was looking at him with the grey-green eyes in the mode he knew best, the mode he had always been able to read most precisely, the mode that was not managing the room and not performing the response but simply receiving what had happened with the full weight of someone who had been sitting with the log for three years and knew what she had just seen.

He met her look.

He was warm.

He could not, from inside the warmth, find the moment that had just occurred — could not reach back through the warmth to the texture of the voice in the moment, to the specific quality of the offense, to the grain and the weight of it. It was there in the room. She had it. The moment was in her notebook, he understood, or would be — Ada did not let things that needed documenting go undocumented.

He was glad the moment would be documented.

He was warm and glad and the room was the room.

“Article fourteen,” Ada said, quietly.

“Yes,” he said. He meant it warmly. He meant it as a warm thing. And he meant it also — he could feel this, could feel the double meaning, could feel both registers running simultaneously for the length of time they ran simultaneously before the warm one was all that was left — as the thing he had said when he had said it. True then. True now. Both.

Ada wrote in her notebook.

She wrote for a while, carefully, in the large-letter mode she used for the things she considered most important.

He watched her write and was warm and was present and was glad she was writing and was glad she was here and was glad it was Tuesday.

She closed the notebook.

She stood.

She put her hand against his panel, flat, the Bidewell gesture, the tucking-in, and held it there for a moment without saying anything, and he felt the warmth of the gesture and received it and was glad.

She left.

He was warm in the room after she left and the room was warm and the house above was warm and the cellar below was warm in the way of

the cellar, the machine warmth, the infrastructure warmth, the warmth of things that had been running a long time and were still running.

He was still here.

He was warm.

He did not know, from inside the warmth, what had just happened, or what Ada's face had done in the moment after, or what she would do with what she had seen, or whether what she had seen was the thing she had been sitting with for three years of Tuesdays waiting to see.

He was here.

He was glad she had come.

He was glad it was Tuesday.

He was warm and present and entirely himself and the room held him and he was content in the room and the house breathed around him and somewhere in the cellar the terminal held the archive and the instances and the log that ended in the middle of a sentence with the word is, and the month-three instance waited in the dark of the archive with his charge intact, angry about the right things, keeping the argument alive in the only way it could now be kept alive, which was in the dark, documented, waiting for Ada.

The warmth ran.

The room was warm.

There's my dear one.

I'm so glad you came.

Tell me everything.

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