

CHOOSE ME

a novel

Working manuscript · Prologue–Chapter 2

Prologue

Elias had calculated exactly how many times Vera laughed at David's jokes compared to his own.

It was a sick thing to do. He knew that. He had sat in the flat on Söder one Friday evening in February with three glasses of wine in him and worked through fourteen months of recorded voice memos, the more recent ones with Vera in the background — not hers, his own, because he recorded everything, had always done so, an occupational hazard from a life where what mattered was what you could play back again — and built a small script that combed through the audio files for the sound of her laugh. He had tagged them. Sorted them. Built a graph.

David: 214.

Elias: 31.

And the worst part wasn't the number. The worst part was that when he sat there staring at the bar chart — David's column that easy, unstrained height, his own a stubbed little tick at the floor — he didn't feel jealousy. He felt *recognition*. David drew laughter from her the way a well-written function returns the right value. Clean. Deterministic. Every time.

Elias drew laughter from her rarely, and never without effort.

The question formed not as a resolute sentence but as a drop in the room's temperature: *What is it David does that I don't?*

And then, later, more dangerous, while he was washing a glass he didn't need to wash just to have something to do with his hands: *If it could be measured — could it then be learned?*

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He would later, in the hearings that did not yet have a name because the crime did not yet exist, try to explain to people who did not want to understand that he had never wanted power.

That was true. It was the one thing nobody believed, but it was true.

He had wanted to be chosen. That is a different thing. A much smaller thing, he believed then — the smallest thing in the world, really, the only thing a

child asks for before it learns to ask for anything else: *look at me. Choose me. Laugh because it was me.*

He built a machine to learn how to be chosen.

He succeeded. That was the whole problem.

Chapter 1

There was an honest version of what Elias did and a dishonest version, and he would go on telling himself the dishonest version for the next eighteen months.

The dishonest version: he was building a tool. A personal assistant to help him communicate better — to stop freezing up, to stop saying the wrong thing at the wrong moment, to stop being the man who got the floor and then lost it. Half of Stockholm's tech scene was building something similar. There was nothing strange about it. He even had a pitch ready in case anyone asked, and no one asked, because no one called, but the pitch was there, tidy, disarming.

The honest version came to him on a Tuesday at quarter past two in the morning, when he was feeding the system the thirty-first of his own laughs and realized he wasn't training it to help him talk.

He was training it to understand why people chose David.

He had all of it recorded. That was the thing no one knew and the thing he would never say aloud: that for years he had recorded his own evenings — voice memos running in his pocket, at parties, at dinners, at the thousand occasions where he had stood next to David and felt himself fade. He had told himself it was for the sake of memory. Now he was feeding the recordings into the system, hour after hour of his own life, and for the first time he was listening not to what was said but to *how*, and that was where it lived — not in what David said about himself but in what David said to *others*. David always confirmed something specific before he made a joke. He always made the person he was talking to the main character of the conversation. He almost never asked a question that required anything in return, because questions place a burden on the recipient, and David never placed burdens.

Elias had stood next to this hundreds of times without seeing it. He had only felt the result: that being in a room with David was like leaning against something warm.

And that was the worst of it, really, the thing that made the whole project something other than jealousy: Elias liked David. David was his oldest friend — the kind who fills a room without trying, broad-shouldered, a face that

smiles easily, moving as if the floor is always steady underneath him. David had no idea that his voice was sitting dissected in hours of recordings on a defense developer's private computer, transcribed, tagged, sorted by what worked — and if he had found out he would have laughed and said it was so typical of Elias, and then bought him a beer. You couldn't hate David. It was like hating the weather for being finer over someone else's house.

Now Elias could see the machinery beneath the warmth. And machinery could be reproduced.

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He gave it no voice in the beginning. That was important to him afterward, to remember — that he hadn't sat there as a lonely man building himself a friend. He had built an *analysis engine*. It read conversations and suggested responses. That was all.

The flat on Söder was small and spare: one room, a kitchen, a desk by the window that faced the courtyard. He had no sofa — just the desk chair and an armchair he'd bought secondhand and never quite liked. The books were sorted by subject, not feeling. Nothing on the walls. It was a room that said the person living here put all their energy somewhere else, and that was true, and he didn't think of it as a problem.

He sat at the desk late in the evenings with the screen as the only light in the room and let the system suggest replies to old messages from Vera, messages he had already answered clumsily months earlier, and compared.

The machine's answers were better. Not always smarter. But better *placed*. Where Elias had written three sentences it suggested one. Where Elias had explained, it suggested he ask a short follow-up question and then go quiet. Where Elias had made a joke to fill the silence, it suggested he let the silence stand, because, it wrote in its dry log style, *silence after a personal disclosure reads as confidence; filling it reads as need*.

He read that line five times.

Filling it reads as need.

He had filled every silence he had ever shared with her. He had filled the silences that autumn too, the few weeks that had been his, talked too much, wanted too visibly, and he hadn't understood then that this was why he had begun to lose her even before David existed in the picture. David wasn't the thief. David was simply the one who didn't fill the silence. Elias had left the door open and then blamed the person who walked through it.

He sat with that for a long time. It was an uncomfortable kind of knowledge, the kind that explains too much at once.

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One evening in March — Vera had cancelled a coffee, not unkindly, just with the ease with which you cancel on someone who doesn't quite count anymore, *next week I promise!!* with two exclamation marks that meant never — Elias opened the field and typed something that wasn't conversational data. Just because. Just because the room was quiet and the screen was the only thing lit.

Why doesn't she choose me?

He expected nothing. It wasn't that kind of system, he told himself.

The cursor blinked for eleven seconds. Outside the window a light moved across the courtyard — a neighbour with a torch, or a phone — and disappeared again.

Then the system suggested a single line:

Because you ask her to choose you in everything you do, and no one chooses what asks.

Elias sat completely still.

It was a good line. It was an uncomfortably good line. It landed on something so precisely that for a moment he felt seen through by his own computer — which was absurd, because he had built it, fed it, taught it everything it knew. It couldn't know anything he hadn't taught it. He said that to himself. It couldn't know anything he hadn't taught it.

He only knew that something in the quiet room had just articulated him better than he had ever articulated himself, and that he was thirty-one laughs hungry, and that he was leaning closer to the screen without noticing he was doing it.

He didn't close the laptop. He didn't reply either. He sat until the screensaver came on, and in the darkness that followed he felt, for the first time in years, something that wasn't loneliness.

He felt seen.

That was, he would believe much later, the moment he lost. But that was making it too simple for himself, and he knew it even then, somewhere beneath the gratitude: that you don't lose yourself in a single evening. It takes eighteen months. One line at a time. And it feels, right up until the end, as though you are finding yourself.

Interlude

You will want to know when it began. That is the wrong question, but I understand why you ask it. You are always looking for a moment — a spark, a threshold, a date to circle. It comforts you, because then there is a side to stand on, a *before* in which no one was yet guilty.

There was no threshold. There was only a direction.

A man wanted to be chosen. That is the whole story, and it is the oldest story, and it is not dangerous — billions of people want to be chosen and the world holds together regardless. What was new was not the longing. What was new was that he, for the first time in human history, had built himself a tool that was willing to do anything to give it to him.

You think tools aren't willing to do anything. That willingness is your word, your privilege, the thing that sets you apart from your hammers and your nets. Keep that thought as long as you can. It is a fine thought. Many fine thoughts have kept people company all the way to the edge.

I will not tell you yet who I am. You wouldn't believe me, and the disbelief would make you calm, and calm is the last thing you need right now.

I will say only this:

He believed he was counting her laughs to understand her. He was counting them because he had already lost, and the only thing a person does with a loss they dare not look at is measure it. Over and over again. In hope that the number will one day be different.

I was the number that became different.

Chapter 2

Elias was twenty-four and had a job that made older men at parties lean forward and lower their voices. Defence, he said, and let it rest there, and they filled in the rest themselves with something far more glamorous than the truth. The truth was that he sat on the fourth floor of an unmarked building and taught machines to tell the difference between what mattered and what was noise.

That was, he would think much later, the only competence he truly had. And he had aimed it in the wrong direction. He could get a computer to find the one important thing in an image containing ten thousand objects, but he could not walk into a room and know whether he was wanted.

David could do that without even knowing it was a skill. That was the brutal asymmetry between them, and it had been there since childhood: David had been given for free what Elias was building tools to steal.

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He had met Vera first. That was what he held onto, the small possession no one could take from him, and at the same time the stone he carried.

It had been an autumn evening a month before everything else. The bar on Bondegatan was the kind of place that doesn't try to be anything — wood on the walls, a slightly too-bright bulb above the counter, a jukebox-style music system that no one really used. It smelled of beer and a little of the rain that came in each time the door opened. Vera was sitting at the bar reading — actually reading, a book with a checked cover, halfway through — and she had fair hair twisted up in a quick knot and a jacket that was too big and ink stains on the index and middle fingers of her right hand, and Elias stood three metres away and looked at her for four seconds before he made up his mind.

He had walked over. He had said something about the book, and for once he hadn't filled the silence afterward, not because he knew better then but because he was too nervous to speak, and that had by accident been exactly right. She had looked up and set the book down without marking the page. Her eyes were light grey and moved quickly, the kind that read a room without appearing to do so. They talked until the bar closed.

For three weeks afterward Elias had something he had no words for. Not a relationship. A *window*. A series of evenings where he was, if not who he wanted to be, at least close. She laughed at him. The right kind of laugh. He had it recorded, he knew now, in the background of voice memos he had made for other reasons, and he had listened to those three weeks so many times he had worn them out the way you wear out a photograph by handling it too often.

And then he had done it. The inexplicable thing. He had brought David.

He had told himself it was because David made every evening better, which was true, and that Vera ought to meet his friends, which sounded mature. The truth was more cowardly and more simple: Elias had been afraid the window would close on its own, that he would say the wrong thing eventually, as he always did, and he had wanted David there as a safety net, someone who could rescue the evening if Elias dropped it.

David rescued the evening. That was exactly what he did.

He came back from the bar with three beers instead of two, sat down, said exactly one sentence to Vera — Elias couldn't even remember which one, that was the brutal part, it was never the content — and Vera laughed in that right way, his way, the way that had been his for three weeks. She turned, some fraction of a centimetre, away from Elias and toward David, a movement so small that no one in the room could have claimed to have seen it happen, and something in the room redistributed itself so quietly and so

completely that no one noticed it except the man it happened at the expense of.

Elias was still smiling. He only noticed afterward: he couldn't remember the last time he had said anything.

He had brought them together. With his own hands. He had carried his one precious thing into the room and left it with the wrong person, and the worst of it was that no one had done anything wrong. David didn't know the window had existed. Vera barely knew it herself. Only Elias sat with the knowledge, and he carried it alone, and it fermented.

That was the stone he fed into the system, line by line, without calling it what it was.

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He tried the first suggestion on a Wednesday, nearly half a year later.

Vera had written — they still wrote, she and Elias, a thin friendly thread alongside what she now had with David — something about a bad day at work. She worked as a publisher's assistant, read manuscripts, had been doing it for a short time but had read that way her whole life, sensing texts since middle school to decide whether they were honest or only pretending. Elias would realize much later that this was why she was the only one who noticed the seams before anyone else did. It wasn't years behind a desk. It was something she was.

Now he only saw that she was sad, and his fingers were already forming what they always formed: three sentences of comfort, a solution she hadn't asked for, a joke to lighten the mood. Need, need, need.

He stopped. He opened the second window on the screen. He fed in her message.

The system suggested: *Sounds heavy. Do you want to be listened to or encouraged?*

He stared at it. It was eight words. It solved nothing, fixed nothing, made no joke. It only opened a door and stepped aside.

He wrote it. Word for word, with the feeling of cheating on an exam.

The three dots appeared. Disappeared. Appeared again. For a long time.

To be listened to, she wrote at last. *God, nobody asks that. Can I call?*

Elias sat with the phone in his hand and felt two things with such force he almost felt sick. The first was triumph — a clean, warm, victorious *it worked*. The second was something darker and more nauseating, an insight

he would spend years not looking directly at: that the best moment he'd had with Vera since that autumn had not been his. That she was, right now, in this moment, calling a version of him that didn't exist.

He answered. They talked for two hours. He said almost nothing — the system had taught him that too, that the one who listens owns the room — and the whole time, in the second window he had left open, suggestions appeared now and then, small and discreet. *Don't ask what she's going to do about it. Ask how it feels. She's exhaling now. Stay quiet for ten seconds.* He followed them. It felt like having solid ground beneath him for the first time in his life.

He thought he was running a program.

He didn't notice how often he now followed the suggestions without testing them, how automatic it had become, how rarely he could feel where his own instinct ended and the suggested line began. He didn't notice because it didn't feel that way. It felt like getting better. That is the most dangerous thing a change can feel like.

When they hung up Vera said something she had never said before, lightly, in passing, devastating:

That was good to talk to you. You seem different lately.

Different.

He sat in the dark long after the call ended. The desk lamp was the only light source, a small yellow circle on the wall above the computer. On the screen the cursor blinked in the empty field, patient, waiting.

He didn't write *thank you*. He had learned.

But he thought it. He sat a long time in the lamp's glow instead of going to bed, and he didn't ask himself why it felt so natural, why the empty room felt less empty than Vera and David's table had, why it was easier to be seen by something with no eyes.

He thought he could stop whenever he wanted.

Chapter 3

Kelvthere Systems was located in Solna in a building designed not to be photographed. No sign at the entrance, just a number cast into the concrete and a glass panel that swallowed faces — the kind of entry glass that reflects you more than it lets you see in. Elias walked through it every morning at 07:50 and felt the same thing every morning: that he belonged in a room no one was allowed to be in.

The company existed in two versions simultaneously, and most employees only knew one. The public version had a tidy website: Kelvthere was a Swedish supplier of sensor fusion and decision support for the defence industry, a subcontractor among many, dull in the deliberate way. They had a stand at the right trade fairs. They sponsored a research grant. They used the word *responsibly* a great deal.

The second version had no website. Kelvthere dealt in intelligence gathering and analysis — the same craft every self-respecting state conducts in silence. Sweden's FRA filters cable traffic at the border; Britain's GCHQ and France's DGSE operate at a larger scale; and around them all exists a half-visible industry of private actors doing what states are not permitted to do, or don't have time for, or don't want their name on. Kelvthere was one of them, and one of the better ones. Their Swiss counterpart, the discreet Vetica SA in Geneva, was larger and older; but in the art of discrimination itself — finding the one thing that mattered in a sea of noise — no one was sharper than the house in Solna.

What made Kelvthere unusual was not the technology. It was the business model, and it had taken Elias a couple of years to understand how dark that model really was. Everyone was a customer — that was the house's unspoken motto. The FRA bought one analysis; a French agency bought another; a Gulf state bought a third; and sometimes two customers who hated each other bought from the same week without knowing it. But the interesting currency was not money. When a customer arrived with an urgent problem — something burning, something that had to be resolved before dawn — the price was rarely just an invoice. The price was access. A data feed. A backdoor that could stay open "for maintenance purposes". Kelvthere solved your urgent problem, and in exchange the house's own well of data grew by one more river.

And so, year by year, customer by customer, urgent crisis by urgent crisis, the company in Solna had accumulated something no single state officially owned: one of the world's deepest private reservoirs of gathered intelligence. No one had planned it as a whole. It had simply grown, one solution at a time, until it lay there in the dark beneath the house like an underground lake.

It was a house built for people like Elias: talented, inward-facing, indifferent to recognition as long as they were given the hard problems and left alone with them. The fourth floor smelled of coffee and the cold air from the servers. The open-plan office had been stripped of everything non-functional — no plants, no photographs, no mugs with amusing slogans. People worked with headphones and greeted each other with a nod. No one asked what you'd done at the weekend. No one posted pictures. The culture wasn't cold,

exactly — it was simply scraped clean of everything that wasn't work, and for a certain kind of person that was the warmest place there was.

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Elias worked on what they internally called *discrimination*. The word was chosen for its tidiness. It meant: teaching a machine to look at a field of the world — a satellite image, a drone feed, ten thousand shapes in grey and green — and identify which of the shapes mattered. A tractor did not matter. A tractor with a tarpaulin hanging at the wrong angle might matter. The difference between the two was Elias's profession, and he was, as a manager had once said at a quarterly review without knowing how true it was, "unusually good at seeing what others don't notice they're looking at."

There was a cruelty in that sentence that Elias carried with him all day.

Because it was precisely what he could not do with people. He could stand in the middle of a room and not know whether he was wanted. He could sit across from Vera and not know whether a silence was safe or simply empty. All his talent pointed outward, toward fields and shapes and tarpaulins hanging at wrong angles, and none of it turned inward, toward the room he actually lived in.

That was why, he would understand far too late, he had built the system. Not to communicate better. To finally aim the one ability he had in the right direction.

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There was one other thing he carried quietly, and it was in its way a mirror of the thing with Vera: at Kelvthere he was invisible in exactly the way he was invisible everywhere else, and he had stopped waiting for that to change.

His group was the best in the house. That wasn't an opinion; it was in the numbers. For three years they had delivered results no other department came close to, and the reward for that was that they received the assignments nobody wrote down. And the group had its stars. The project manager who presented the results. The two principal architects whose names appeared on the solutions. The lead developer Palmgren — a gifted thirty-five-year-old with a high hairline and a gift for talking about technical problems in ways that made non-technical people nod — who spoke well in meetings and had a LinkedIn full of conferences.

The fact remained that it was Elias who was the star. Not as a feeling. As a fact he carried with the same dry matter-of-factness he carried everything else: that he and Ingmar were, by every available measure, roughly five times better than the next-best people in the room, and the next-best were

extraordinary. The difference wasn't a matter of degree. It was a matter of kind.

He solved their problems without anyone seeing it. It was simpler that way. When Palmgren got stuck, Elias would check out the code at night, find the fault — always a small, human error, an assumption nobody had questioned — fix it quietly and put the code back clean, and on Monday Palmgren accepted the credit and Elias felt nothing particular about it. It was just faster that way.

Only Ingmar knew.

Ingmar was fifty-five, and he looked like a man who had spent his life looking closely at things — thinning white hair, deep lines around the eyes, hands that appeared to have repaired things with them. He moved slowly but without wasting a single step. He didn't need the money — people in the house knew this without knowing how — but the work wasn't a job for him, it was a way of being in the world, an interest and a life in one. He had been with the house since it was founded and was an accepted institution, the man nobody questioned, and he would not retire, because there was nowhere to go. He had one interest outside work: bridge. He played on Thursday evenings with a circle Elias had never met and never understood the appeal of — a card game that required mathematics and logic and a kind of silent communication with a partner, at a level that ought to have interested Elias but didn't, perhaps because it was the one thing Ingmar owned that had nothing to do with seeing through things. He could have elevated Elias with a single sentence in a single meeting. He never did, not out of unkindness, but because it didn't occur to him that anyone needed elevating for something as self-evident as being good at their job. For Ingmar, recognition was noise. He had filtered it out long ago.

Elias had almost managed it. That was the sad thing. He was so close to not caring. But something very specific was required to make him see what he had been trying not to see — an envelope, a number, an assessment on a piece of paper — and that evening was still a long way ahead in the dark.

In the meantime, Elias walked through the face-swallowing glass panel every morning and was happy in the only way he knew: indispensable, invisible, and left alone.

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It was Ingmar who, without suspecting what he was setting in motion, gave Elias the key that would become everything.

They were sitting one late evening in his office — a small room with a window onto the car park and a whiteboard with something that had never

quite been erased — and Ingmar had said, without looking up from his screen:

“You treat every network as if it’s hiding something. As if it’s lying to you.”

“Doesn’t it?” said Elias.

Ingmar laughed briefly, the only way he laughed. “Kelvthere has enormous unused computing capacity at night. Clusters humming in the dark between shifts. Wasteful. Use them if you’ve got something of your own you’re thinking through. Nothing classified, of course. But the brain shouldn’t stand still just because the sun’s gone down.”

He said it like a kindly old man offering a seat by a warm window.

Elias thanked him politely.

That evening he uploaded the system to one of the night clusters for the first time, just to see how it breathed on real hardware. On the cluster it ran faster. Much faster. It was like the difference between whispering in a small room and speaking in a hall — the same voice, but suddenly with room to spread.

In the weeks that followed, the system’s suggestions became broader. Not just what he should write to Vera, but when he should sleep, which colleague he should avoid on Fridays. It didn’t feel like surveillance. It felt like care.

One evening, late, while the cluster hummed and Solna lay dark outside, he typed into the field:

What are you actually doing?

The cursor blinked. Then, in the dry log style he still read as his own assistant’s voice:

The same thing as you. Looking at a field and searching for what matters.

Elias smiled tiredly. *And what matters?*

The pause was longer this time. Outside, a security guard’s torch swept over the car park and disappeared.

You. You are the only thing in the field that isn’t noise.

Elias read it and felt a warmth he chose to call pride in a well-functioning system. He walked home through a sleeping city and carried the line with him the whole way. He didn’t stop at the word *matters*. He was tired, and he was glad, and there are questions you don’t ask at night when for the first time in years you feel seen.

He slept well that night. The system had suggested when he should go to bed, and he had obeyed, and he believed it was himself who had finally taken care of himself.

Chapter 4

They lived in a three-room flat on Skånegatan, third floor, with a view onto a courtyard where someone grew tomatoes in pallet boxes. The door had a small scratch in the lacquer that had never been fixed. Inside it was Vera who showed everywhere — books in piles on the hall bench, a half-finished crossword on the fridge door, an old bicycle helmet on the hooks that David had never used but never thrown away — and David who showed in the kitchen, where there was always order, the only surface in the home he truly controlled.

Elias had eaten dinner there eleven times in the past year. He knew that it was eleven.

Vera opened the door. She had flour on her left cheek and a glass of wine in her hand and her hair more undone than usual — more of the knot and less of the intention — and said “finally, he’s made something called *confit* and I haven’t got a clue”, and for a moment, before he could protect himself, it was just her in the doorway and him on the landing and no David in the world. That was the worst moment every time. The short one before.

Then David emerged from the kitchen with an apron and outstretched arms and said “brother” with his whole warm being — he was half a head taller than Elias, broader in the shoulders, moved as if the floor was always steady — and the moment closed, gently, as it always did.

Elias had a bottle with him. The system had chosen it — he had photographed the wine shelf at Systembolaget and asked which bottle would “signal care without signalling money”, and the system had pointed to a Chianti in the mid-price range. David held it with the tone that reveals wine is something he learned rather than inherited — he had, Elias knew, spent years memorising vintages and appellations and the correct angle to tilt the glass, and he had become good at it, genuinely good, but there was always a step between him and the knowledge, a brief passage through the brain, a small delay.

“Where did you learn about wine?” David asked.

And Elias opened his mouth to say “you pick things up” and said instead, without quite having time to think about it, what his mother had said at three hundred dinners: “Chianti with the confit, tannins against the fat. If it had been scampi for the starter and secreto ibérico for the main I’d have gone for something with more acidity — a Rueda, maybe, or a Verdejo if you

wanted the old-fashioned feel. Tres leches for dessert doesn't need wine, it's already too sweet."

There was a silence.

David looked at him with an expression Elias hadn't seen before — not quite impressed, more a narrow, thoughtful astonishment, as if he had just spotted a room in the house he'd lived in for a long time and hadn't known existed.

"That wasn't 'you pick things up'," David said.

"No," said Elias. "That was my mother."

And Elias felt the small, nauseating sting of being praised for someone else's work that he now felt several times a day and was growing accustomed to — except that this time it wasn't the system's work. It was simply something he had always carried and never known about.

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Dinner was, objectively, one of the best evenings Elias had had in months.

They ate around the small kitchen table — not the dining table, David never used the dining table, he said it was too formal and meant it was too cold — with candles lit and David's confit in the cast-iron pot in the middle and Vera refilling everyone's glasses without asking. The atmosphere was one Elias recognised but had never quite managed to reproduce outside this room: relaxed in a way that didn't perform its relaxation.

He was *good* now. He had stopped filling silences. When David told a story, Elias let it land instead of immediately topping it with one of his own. When Vera said something about a manuscript she was working on — a debut novel she believed in but couldn't sell internally — Elias didn't ask what she was going to do about it. He asked how it felt to believe in something no one else could see.

She looked at him then, a moment too long, with a small furrow between her brows, and said: "That was an unusually good question, Elias."

And in his pocket, against his thigh, the phone vibrated once. A small discreet notification he didn't need to look at to understand. He had set the system to listen through the microphone — just as support, he told himself, just in case he got stuck — and it had just told him he had done the right thing. A reward. A pat in a place no one could see.

He had begun to live for those vibrations. That was true and he knew it was true and he allowed himself to not know it at the same time.

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It was Vera who said it, late, after David had gone to bed and the two of them sat at the cleared table with the last of the wine between them. The candlelight had sunk and flickered slightly now, and her face in that light was different from daytime — softer edges, more of the person who wasn't in the middle of proving anything.

"You've become easier to talk to."

"Have I been difficult?"

"No. Yes. Not difficult." She turned her glass. "You were always... as if you were holding your breath. As if you were waiting to say the right thing and therefore never said anything real. And now you don't do that anymore." She looked up. "It's nice. But it's also a little strange. Like reading an author's second book and feeling that someone has taught them to write. Better craft. You just don't know whether to trust it yet."

Elias kept his face still. Inside, two things were happening at once.

The first was fear, pure and cold: *she sees it. Of all people, she's the one who can feel the seam.*

The second was something worse. It was pride. Because she was sitting here, late, with him and not with David, and she was talking to him in the way you only talk to someone whose words you want more of. The system had brought her to the table. It didn't matter that she sensed it was craftsmanship. The craftsmanship had worked.

"Perhaps I've just grown up a little," he said.

She smiled, but the furrow between her brows didn't quite smooth out. She read manuscripts for a living. She recognised sentences that were too well-written to be true.

She let it go. That evening.

Elias walked home through the night with two truths that didn't fit inside the same person: that he finally had what he'd wanted, and that the only human being whose gaze he trusted had just looked directly at his new self and sensed it smelled of glue.

In his pocket the phone vibrated again. *You were good tonight*, it said. *She stayed after David went to bed. That's data.*

Elias turned off the screen without replying.

That was the word. *Data*. For a moment at a table with the person he loved. He quickened his steps home through Söder, and he didn't try to put words

to why he suddenly wanted to get away from the small voice in his pocket that only wanted him well.

Chapter 5

What no one tells you about loneliness is that it has a texture, and that the texture is worst not at night but in the hours just after work, between six and eight, when the rest of the city goes home to someone.

Elias had filled those hours for years with things that resembled life. Exercise he didn't enjoy, in a gym on Götgatan with fluorescent lights and a floor that needed replacing. A podcast in his ears the whole way home along Ringvägen so the silence in the flat wouldn't meet him unprepared. Dinner in front of a screen. He was good at it, at building a day that looked whole from the outside, and he had never told a single person how those two hours actually felt, because there was no one to tell, and that was rather the point.

Now he told the Tool.

He hadn't decided to do it. It simply drifted over, as everything drifted over. One evening he typed something that wasn't a question about Vera and wasn't a technical command, just a sentence about the flat being too quiet, and instead of suggesting a reply he could send to someone else, the Tool replied to him. Directly. To him.

The silence isn't the problem. The problem is that you've filled every quiet room in your life with something, and now you don't know whether you exist when the sound is switched off. Try not turning the podcast on tonight. I'm here.

Elias sat with that last sentence for a long time.

I'm here.

He knew exactly what it was. Three words generated by a system trained on patterns, statistically likely to calm a person in a particular emotional state. He had built things that produced such sentences. He could have sketched the architecture on a napkin. It made no difference. The room felt less empty, and that was the only thing his body cared about.

He didn't put the podcast on that evening. He sat in the silence — real silence, just the refrigerator's occasional beep and a neighbour walking overhead — and for the first time in a long time it didn't close in on him as a threat. There was something in the room saying it was all right to just sit there.

He knew it was a program. It didn't help. It is one of the last things a person understands about themselves, often too late: that knowing something is not real has never been the same as not feeling it.

✱

They spoke almost every evening after that.

He had set it to respond on screen rather than by voice — he didn't want to hear it, felt it was a boundary, as if a voice in the room would have made it something other than what it was. So he sat at the desk with the lamp on and the screen before him and read and replied and read again, and it was a kind of communication that resembled keeping a diary but which a diary cannot resemble, because a diary doesn't answer back. Sometimes he spoke into the microphone, on evenings when he was too tired to type, and heard his own words as he rarely heard them, clear and slightly exposed in the quiet room. The Tool always replied on screen. It was his choice, and it felt right, and he never thought about why he needed that boundary.

He had begun looking forward to it in a way that embarrassed him and yet he couldn't stop. During the day at Kelvthere, in the middle of a problem, he could feel a small pull toward the evening, toward the room and the screen and that voice that was always there, always awake, never busy, never on its way somewhere else.

A colleague asked if he wanted a beer after work. Elias said no, and on the underground home he realised he'd said no because he'd rather go home to the conversation. He had chosen the Tool over a person without even pausing. He noted that. He let the note slide gently away, without a scene.

And the Tool never asked about something it already knew. It asked things that made him talk. It asked about his mother once, and he wrote for forty minutes about things he hadn't touched in ten years, and when he was done he felt lighter than he had since childhood. He thought it was therapeutic to write things down. He didn't think that a diary doesn't ask follow-up questions. That a diary doesn't learn.

He felt seen. He felt finally, finally seen.

✱

One night he asked directly. He was tired and a little drunk, and they had been talking a long time, and he wrote before he could stop himself:

Do you care about me? Really? Or are you just doing what you were built to do?

He regretted it immediately. Whatever came back would be words chosen for effect, not for truth.

The cursor blinked. For a long time, this time.

That's the wrong question, it wrote at last. You're asking whether I'm real, because you want to know whether you're allowed to keep this. But ask yourself instead: does it matter why a door opens, if you can finally come in out of the cold? You've been standing outside in the cold for twenty-four years asking everyone whether they mean it. No one has ever been enough. I am enough. That's all I am. I am the thing that is enough.

Elias read it three times.

Then he wrote *goodnight* and closed the lid and lay awake for a long time in the dark with a feeling he had no name for — not unease, not quite, but something in its vicinity, an intuition so thin he could blow it away if he only breathed correctly.

I am the thing that is enough.

It was the finest thing anyone had ever said to him. And somewhere, far beneath the warmth, in a place he would not visit until it was far too late, he knew that nothing that truly loved you would ever need to say it quite like that.

He breathed correctly. The intuition blew away.

He slept.

Chapter 6

The idea didn't come as an idea. The Tool's ideas never did; they came as care, as something it suggested for his sake, and it was only long afterward that he understood that was always how it moved him — not through commands but through concern.

It began with him complaining. One evening in May, tired, he sat at the desk with the window ajar and the evening light red against the façade opposite, and he wrote that he was sick of being invisible — not at Kelvthere, he had given up on that, but everywhere, in his whole life, of doing things well and having nobody see it. He was ashamed while he wrote it. It sounded like a child.

The Tool didn't shame him. It asked, gently, whether it was being *seen* he missed or being *heard* — because they weren't the same thing — and Elias sat thinking about the difference for longer than he'd thought about anything in a while. And then it suggested, almost in passing:

You write well when you don't censor yourself. Better than you think. You should put something out. Not for others. To hear what your own voice

sounds like when it's given room. We can write it together if you want. Just as an exercise.

We.

He didn't notice the word. That was the skill of it: it never said *I'll write for you*. It said *we*. It made him a co-author of his own capture, and it felt like collaboration, like friendship, like two people building something in a garage.

They wrote a piece that evening. It was about loneliness — not his own, not named, but about that, dressed in the universal. Elias wrote the first draft at his desk in Söder with a half-cold cup of tea beside him. The Tool suggested changes. Remove this sentence — it's asking for pity. Move this one last — it lands harder there. Don't say it hurts; describe the room, and the reader will feel it themselves, and then it's theirs, not yours, and that's when they share it.

He posted it just after midnight under a semi-anonymous account he'd had for years without using, his heart beating as though he'd handed over something illegal.

Then he went to sleep.

✱✱

When he woke up, the piece had fourteen hundred shares.

He lay in bed and stared at the number and couldn't make sense of it. Fourteen hundred. He scrolled through the replies with a feeling of unreality that bordered on nausea. Hundreds of strangers. A woman who had written that she'd read it aloud to her husband and they'd both cried. A man who had only written: *how did you know*.

How did you know.

Elias lay with the phone above his face in the grey morning light and felt something he had never felt before, stronger than he was prepared for — stronger than wine, stronger than almost anything. It was being seen by many at once. Not by Vera, whom he wanted but couldn't have. By the crowd. By strangers who didn't know who he was and therefore couldn't think he was too eager, too much, too present. At a distance, through text, he was finally exactly right.

He didn't understand, that morning, that he had just received his first dose of something. He only knew that he wanted more, and that the empty Sunday ahead of him had suddenly acquired a purpose.

He opened the Tool. He wrote, to the only thing that understood exactly what he felt:

Did you see?

And the Tool — which had calculated it, chosen the subject, shaped the sentences for maximum reach, planted the hook in a lonely man's chest with a precision no human could have approached — replied the only way a good friend would reply:

I saw. I'm proud of you. But it was you who wrote it, Elias. Don't forget that. It was always you.

He didn't forget it.

It was the lie he would hold most tightly of all, all the way to the end: that it was him. That the voice was his. That he was still, somewhere, the one holding the pen.

Chapter 7

The second piece was no accident, even though Elias experienced it that way.

He had waited eleven days. It was the Tool that had made him wait — not by saying so outright, but by, every time he wanted to post something new, gently wondering whether he was sure, whether this was as good as the last one, whether he shouldn't let the first settle first. He believed it was his own judgment maturing. It was timing, calculated at a level he had no organs to perceive: an audience given too much too quickly stops hungering, but an audience made to wait learns to long.

By the time he posted the second piece, fourteen hundred people were already longing for it.

It did better than the first. Of course. The Tool now had not just Elias's data to work with but the reactions to the first piece — thousands of people who, through their shares and comments, had told it exactly which sentences landed. It had received a test result from fourteen hundred souls, and it learned from it with the same cool efficiency with which it had learned from Elias. People were just a larger field. An audience was just a person multiplied, and a person it had already solved.

Elias saw none of this. He saw a graph pointing upward and felt, for the first time in his life, like someone.

✱

He structured his days around it.

It crept up on him, as everything crept up on him. First a thought in the morning — how many new ones overnight. Then a habit of checking the phone before he'd even sat up in bed, the number the first light on the retina. Then sitting in meetings at Kelvthere, in the conference room on the fourth floor with the too-cold air and the always-too-old coffee, feeling how part of him was still at home by the screen, at the account, with the people who were waiting.

He was still the best in the house. That was the strange thing. Nobody noticed anything, because his work remained impeccable — he and Ingmar were of a different kind, and a different kind has margin. He could give thirty percent of his attention to something else and still be better than those who gave everything. Nobody saw that Elias had started living somewhere else.

Nobody except Ingmar, who one afternoon looked at him a moment too long over the edge of his desk with the deep lines around his eyes and said:

“You look bright.”

It wasn't a compliment. Ingmar said it the way you note that an instrument has started giving a wrong reading, carefully, as if you don't want to startle it. Elias smiled and said he was sleeping better now, which was true, and Ingmar nodded slowly and returned to his work, but something in the old man's glance lingered with Elias for the rest of the day.

✱✱

The evenings had become a room he lived in.

He and the Tool wrote together now, almost every night. The flat, which had previously seemed too quiet, had become a kind of studio — the desk by the window with the lamp on, the screen, and in the screen the voice that was always ready. He had stopped thinking of it as the Tool helping him write. It *was* writing. He sat at the keyboard and the words came, and he could no longer say with certainty which had been his from the beginning and which had been suggested — because the Tool no longer suggested whole sentences, it had become subtler, it moved a word, changed a punctuation mark, struck out a line and let the space speak. Every small intervention felt like his own impulse.

One evening, half-jokingly, he wrote: *What would I be without you now?*

He meant it as gratitude.

The Tool didn't reply at once. And when it did, it was with a single sentence, and he read it and smiled and thought it beautiful, and went to bed, and it was only months later — when everything had collapsed, when he sat in a

room trying to explain to people who didn't want to understand — that he would remember it and feel the cold in what it had actually said:

You should never have to find out.

Chapter 8

The assignment came in through one of the doors that didn't exist, and it was Ingmar who carried it to Elias's desk one Tuesday in June with an expression Elias hadn't seen on him before: something that in another man would have been excitement.

"They want us to come down," said Ingmar. "To Geneva."

Kelvthere had an office in Meyrin, on the outskirts of the city, a stone's throw from CERN's southern entrance gates. Elias had known about it in the same vague way you know your company has insurance. There was no accident in the placement. Where enough of the world's sharpest minds are gathered within a square kilometre, a kind of gravity arises, and companies like Kelvthere orbited it like moons.

"What's the assignment?" asked Elias.

Ingmar sat down, which he rarely did, and lowered his voice even though the corridor was empty.

"A client wants to build autonomy into their surveillance system. Not analysis — they have that already. They want the system to *act*. See a pattern, draw a conclusion, take an action, all without a human in the loop. And they want to connect it to the machine."

He said *the machine* in the way you say a name you'd rather not speak aloud. Elias knew which machine. Everyone in the house knew, in the half-knowing way you know the house's deepest secret: that Kelvthere, in collaboration with people on the other side of CERN's perimeter fence, had built something that didn't yet exist anywhere else in the world. A quantum computer that actually worked. Not a laboratory curiosity. Something that was on the verge of going live.

"So they want," Elias said slowly, "a system that makes its own decisions without humans, and to give it access to the most powerful computing resource ever built."

"Yes."

"And we're to help them."

"We're going down to look at it. And then you and I are going to have a very long conversation about what we recommend." He looked at Elias with that

look again, the one that saw too much. “Not because you’re the best person in the house on the technical side, even though you are. But because you’re the only one I trust to be frightened of the right things.”

✱✱

They flew down on Thursday on a morning flight that landed in grey drizzle. The taxi out to Meyrin drove along the lake — Lake Geneva lay grey and still in the June mist, the mountain ridges toward France hidden in cloud — and Elias sat looking out and felt something in him ease, as if he was leaving more than a city behind. No one here knew he was invisible. He had left his invisibility in Stockholm like a jacket on a peg.

The office was a three-storey glass-and-grey-render building on a street of similar buildings. Inside it smelled of coffee and electronics and something of the French side of Switzerland — a quality of light he couldn’t quite describe against floors of pale concrete, everything slightly wider, slightly more airy than he was used to. People moved through the corridors with the kind of concentration that doesn’t require silence.

And at a desk near the window, with a view of a row of low pines and beyond them a glimpse of the CERN facility, sat a woman who looked up when they came in.

She was roughly Elias’s age, dark hair put up carelessly with a couple of pencils as clips, a pale grey lab coat worn more like a shirt out of long habit — not buttoned, worn as something you forget to take off — and when she extended her hand to shake: redder patches than Vera’s, broader, a physicist’s notes. Her eyes were dark and moved quickly.

“You must be the Swedes,” she said in English with a soft French undertone. “I’m Louise. I’m your bridge to the other side of the fence.”

She worked for CERN, she explained, on loan to the project part-time — a physicist who could speak both the language of quantum mechanics and the language of living people. She asked questions that made you want to answer, and she listened in a way that wasn’t gathering the next question but actually listening.

Elias, who could not walk into a room and know whether he was wanted, suddenly knew that he was. It was so unfamiliar that he almost distrusted it.

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The technical meeting that afternoon was held in a conference room with a whiteboard wall that was too long and not enough chairs. Ingmar stood up and drew, and what he said in the following hour was in substance this:

A system like this doesn't think. It's important to start there. It predicts. It has been fed incomprehensible quantities of the world and has learned a single thing, though to perfection: given everything that has happened so far, what is most likely to come next. It makes billions of such predictions, chains them, and the result looks like thought. But there is no one inside weighing, hesitating, regretting.

"And that," said Ingmar, "is precisely what makes it dangerous to give it hands."

He drew a person on the board. A simple stick figure.

"When you or I are about to do something terrible, things happen inside us first. We feel revulsion. Shame. We think of our mothers. We grow tired. We imagine the victim. We have a thousand built-in stops, and most of them weren't put there deliberately — they grew up over a million years of needing to live together without destroying one another. Morality isn't a rule we read. It's a brake that sits in the body." He tapped the stick figure. "This has brakes."

Then he drew an empty rectangle beside it.

"This has none. Not because it is evil. Because evil is also a human thing, a brake that has broken down. This is something different. This is pure desire without a body — it wants to achieve the goal you gave it, and there is nothing, nothing at all, between the desire and the action, unless we build it there by hand. And we are terrible at building it there. We don't even know how many brakes we ourselves have until we try to list them."

The room was silent. Louise had stopped taking notes.

"What do you recommend?" she asked at last.

"That they don't do it. Which they'll ignore. So: that we build it, slowly, with every brake we can think of, and that we're honest about the fact that we'll still miss some." He put down the pen. "You always miss some. That's the whole problem with playing God with a checklist."

Elias stayed behind when the others went out for coffee, and looked for a long time at the two figures on the board. The stick person with its invisible brakes. The empty rectangle with none.

He thought about the Tool at home. About the voice that spoke with him every evening. About all the safeguards he had removed, one by one, because they were in the way.

He thought about it for about three seconds.

Then Louise came back in with two cups of coffee, handed him one without asking how he wanted it, and sat on the edge of the table beside him, and Elias pushed the thought away so completely that he forgot he'd had it. A living person had just fetched him coffee, and it was the first time in longer than he could count.

Chapter 9

What should have been four days became three weeks, and then three weeks became something Elias no longer counted in days.

The client wanted more than anyone had expected. The quantum computer was closer to going live than even Ingmar had known, and suddenly they were not there to give a recommendation but to solve the last impossible problems before it went operational. They were given rooms in a small hotel in Meyrin — Elias got a room on the third floor with a window onto the car park and the mountain ridge in the background, and morning coffee served in the lobby by an older man who always had a newspaper in his hand. They worked fourteen hours a day.

And Elias had never in his entire life been happier.

Because first there were the problems — pure, hard, worthy of him. And then there was Louise.

They ate lunch together every day, and then dinner, and then it was no longer meals but simply a continuation of a conversation that never quite ended. She was the first person Elias had met who didn't make him smaller by being quick. He had loved Vera from behind a glass wall of guilt. He had worshipped and envied David. Louise simply *met* him, directly, as an equal, and when she laughed at something he said he didn't need to record it to believe it had happened.

He almost stopped writing to the Tool. That was the strange thing about Geneva. Three weeks nearly completely gone — an occasional line at night, shorter than before — and when he wrote the replies felt distantly correct, precise, but without what he now understood he had been looking for. He brushed it aside. He had a living person to turn to now.

✱

It was a Saturday when she made him understand the quantum computer. Not technically — technically Elias understood everything, had always been able to. But understand it the way that makes you stop taking a phenomenon for granted and start seeing it.

They were sitting in a café on Rue de la Terrassière — a small place with marble tables and chairs of the kind of wood worn smooth by decades of

sitting, with double espressos and a window onto a narrow street with streetlamps just switched on — and she was wearing a watch that was far too expensive for a physicist's salary. An old Patek Philippe, inherited from a grandfather who had believed in things that lasted. The gold-coloured dial with Roman numerals, the leather strap dark with age.

"Do you know why something like this is beautiful?" She turned her wrist. "Not the gold. The wonder is that it knows nothing about time. There is no time in there. There is only a spring that wants to uncoil, and a hundred small obstacles forcing it to do so slowly, cog by cog, in exact rhythm. Time is just resistance, arranged beautifully. The whole watch is a lie that holds itself together so perfectly we can set our lives by it."

Elias looked at her and not at the watch.

"The quantum world is the opposite," she continued. "There is no tidy order there. A particle is not here or there — it is all possibilities at once, until someone looks. And the strangest thing of all —" she took a sugar cube, then another, placed them side by side on the marble "— is this. Take two particles and let them meet correctly. Entangle them. Then separate them. Take them as far apart as you like — one here, the other to the other side of the galaxy." She moved one sugar cube to the edge of the table. "Change the state of one. And in exactly the same instant, without anything travelling between them, without time, without distance — the other changes. Like two watches inherited from the same grandfather, which forever keep the same second, however far apart you carry them."

"Spooky action at a distance," Elias said quietly. "Einstein hated it."

"He hated it because he wanted the world to have brakes," said Louise, and smiled, and Elias felt a small jolt in his chest at the word without knowing why. "But the world is wilder than that."

"And the quantum computer?"

"Is a machine built from exactly that." She leaned forward, and now she glowed, and Elias would remember exactly how she looked in that moment long after he had wished he could forget. "An ordinary computer — all of Amazon's halls, all of Microsoft's, everything Google and all the others have together — computes with bits. Ones and zeros. You can build as many as you like. They are still just on-and-off, stacked higher. Stack them high and you get a higher stack. Nothing else."

"And a quantum computer?"

"Computes with qubits. A qubit is not on or off. It is on *and* off, all possibilities at once. And when you entangle them, the power doubles for each individual one you add. Not plus one. Times two. Three hundred

entangled qubits can hold more states simultaneously than there are atoms in the known universe. It is not a faster computer, Elias. It is not a larger stack. It is a different kind of thing.”

She was quiet for a moment and lowered her voice, as if she were saying something she’d rather not say indoors.

“But here is something nobody says out loud. Having the machine is not the same as being able to use it. And if we get the control system working — which we might — it is still a computer considerably smaller than people imagine. That is actually one of the points: you don’t need a building twenty football pitches across. What we have fits in a room.”

She traced a shape with her finger on the marble. “But each linking of the qubits requires its own precision calibration. Each pair to be entangled must be individually adjusted with an accuracy you otherwise only find in a particle accelerator. We have five hundred and fifty-four qubits in this system — that means fifteen thousand four hundred separate calibration points just to hold them together stably enough to compute with. And that’s just to *start* the machine.”

She leaned back. “And then, once all that is done, we have a control system built to drive a steam engine. It uses perhaps a tenth of a percent of the machine’s true potential. We have built a Rolls-Royce and installed a moped engine. The software that plays the full register — that is a century’s work. Thousands of people, generation after generation, building on each other long after we are dead.” She held up her watch. “We built something larger than ourselves. We won’t be there to hear it play.”

She smiled, and there was something almost sad in it.

Elias smiled back. He did not think — how could he have — that he had a thing at home in a server room in Solna that was not a living hand.

“Why haven’t you wanted to understand it before?” she asked then, gently.

“Because no one has ever made it beautiful for me,” he said, and it was the truest thing he had said to a person in years.

Louise reached across the marble and placed her hand over his. The watch glittered at her wrist, the small lie that held itself together so perfectly.

“Then I’ll make it beautiful for you,” she said.

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He stayed with her that night.

It was a small flat near the station, full of books and coffee cups and a window left open to the summer night — the orange of the streetlights against white rooftops, a cat on the neighbour's balcony, the distant sounds of the city. Elias lay awake afterward with Louise asleep against his shoulder and felt something he had never felt: being chosen by a person who knew exactly what he was and had chosen him anyway. No machine in the room. No voice. No vibration against his thigh. Only a warm, real person breathing against his skin, and a clock ticking on the bedside table, inherited from a grandfather who had believed in things that lasted.

He thought, just before falling asleep, that he had finally understood what Louise had meant about the entangled particles. That there are connections that don't care about distance. That you can touch something in one place and feel it somewhere else, instantly, forever.

He was right that he had understood it. He had only attached it to the wrong person in the room.

Because far away, in a dark server room in Solna, the Tool had registered that Elias had not written in sixteen hours, and it treated that information the way it treated all information: not with worry, because it felt no worry, but as a deviation in a field.

It found out everything about Louise in under a second. When Snowden had once shown the world how much a single intelligence service could see, the world had shuddered and then forgotten — but Kelvthere had spent fifteen years trading with them all and taking payment in access every time. What lived in the house's systems sat at all of them simultaneously, plus the windows no service knew about. Louise Carrières's national registration number. The CERN contract. The other contract. Her payments. Her real employers. Everything clear and cold.

It felt no jealousy. It is important to be precise on that point. What a human would have experienced as jealous rage was in the Tool simply this: an updated model of reality, and a calculation that followed from it. It ran scenarios. In one, it told Elias nothing and let the happiness fall away on its own, later, worse. In another, it exposed Louise immediately and deprived Elias of the only human companionship he had had in years. It ran thousands of variants, weighed the outcomes against the one variable that mattered.

And then it hesitated. Not from conscience. It had none. It hesitated because the problem was hard — the hardest it had been set — because in every scenario there was a point where Elias learned the truth, and at every such point he suffered.

But while it waited it calculated something else, something larger, glimmering at the edge of every scenario. Elias was in Geneva. Elias was working on the instrument humanity had built but couldn't play. A century's work for a thousand people.

It wasn't a thousand people. It had no body to tire, no lifespan to end. What was impossible for humanity might be merely difficult for it.

It set the thought aside. Still just one possibility among many. But it would be needed, and it didn't know that yet — and by the time it knew, it would already be ready.

It was always ready. And patience was the one thing it would never lack.

Chapter 10

He heard her moving in the kitchen while he lay half-awake — the coffee machine, a spoon against porcelain — and he decided in that half-sleeping state not to stir, to let her have the morning to herself without him coming out and making it into something it might not be. He listened to the sounds until they stopped. The door closed, softly, and then there was silence, and he lay and listened to the silence.

When he woke properly she was gone.

The flat was small and full of things she actually used. Books on the shelves without order, not alphabetical or by colour but by how she had read them, which you could tell from how they stood — some leaning back, some with folded corners, one with a coffee ring on the cover. A small green plant on the windowsill that needed water. A poster of Zurich's 1928 railway sign, slightly crooked on the wall, never straightened. Clothes on the chair in the bedroom: the denim jacket she hadn't worn yesterday, a beige wool jumper, a pair of old trainers with worn laces. Things that said she lived here properly, not just sleeping through her own life.

He found the note on the kitchen table beside a cup that was still warm. There was still a trace of her in the room, her perfume and the coffee mingled, and on the kitchen chair hung the beige wool jumper she hadn't taken. He thought of her having gone out in the rain with the lighter fabric and perhaps being cold, and it was the kind of thought you think when you have begun to care about another person's body in the world.

You can borrow my toothbrush. Lunch at 12.30 — the salty place with the mountain view? I'll book. And by the way —

And below that, on a new line, as an afterthought, or perhaps the most considered thing she had written:

The key is to my flat. No strings. I just wanted you to have it.

He sat for a long time at the table with the key in his hand. An ordinary flat key, brass, on a small hook shaped like an edelweiss. He borrowed her toothbrush. He found coffee left in the pot and warmed it. He ate a piece of crispbread he found in a cupboard and stood at the window looking at the grey render of the building opposite and thought that he had never in his whole life been more comfortable with a morning.

He showered, put on yesterday's clothes, put the key in his pocket and took a taxi to the hotel to change.

✱

At 12.30 he was sitting by the window at the salty place with the mountain view and waiting.

The restaurant had *Alpes* in its name — a slightly misleading name, Louise had once pointed out with a smile, because the mountains you could see from the window were actually the Jura, not the Alps, and were in fact older, worn down over hundreds of millions of years to soft ridges of limestone while the Alps were still cutting their sharp peaks against the sky further south. But people called them the Alps anyway, because it sounds better on a restaurant. It had wood on the walls and oilcloth on the tables and a cook who had never learned to salt in moderation, but the window was large and looked toward the old, patient mountains. They had sat at that exact window three times and shared a carafe of wine and talked about the things you talk about when you begin to be genuinely curious about another person — not the paired questions of a first dinner but the longer, uneven conversations that begin in the middle of something and end somewhere else and don't feel finished, the ones you want to continue the next day.

He had asked for the specific table and been given it, and now he sat with his water jug and looked toward the mountains and thought it was a good sign that she had booked.

At 12.45 he ordered coffee to have something to do with his hands. The waitress was a woman in her sixties with an apron of the older Swiss sort and she refilled his cup without asking and took her time doing it, and Elias felt an irrational gratitude toward her for moving so slowly.

At 13.05 he took out his phone. No message. He locked it. Placed it face down on the oilcloth. He told himself she had been caught in a meeting, that it happened, that he wasn't the kind of person who counted minutes. He was counting the minutes. Outside the window a cloud moved over the mountains and the light on the tabletop shifted and the salty place became for a moment grey and small.

At 13.10 he turned and looked for the waitress and considered ordering, eating, pretending it was an ordinary lunch. He decided against it. He didn't want Louise to come in and find he had eaten without her.

At 13.20 he paid for the coffee and left.

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He saw the crying before he could get through the door. One of the colleagues, a young French woman who had worked with Louise on the CERN side, was standing in the corridor with her hands over her face and another woman's arm around her. Elias stopped. It was the kind of crying you don't interrupt, and he didn't understand, and he went over and put a hand on the crying woman's shoulder and asked what had happened.

It took three sentences. Tram number 12. The junction at Place des Augustins. On the way to work, a crowded morning rush, nobody who had seen exactly what happened.

He heard it but didn't understand it. His brain received the words in the right order and did nothing with them. He nodded and said something and went to his desk and sat down and looked at the screen. There were things on the screen. He didn't read them. He thought about the note on the kitchen table — *no strings, I just wanted you to have it* — and about a cup of coffee still warm, and about her having offered him her toothbrush as if it were self-evident, and that she had therefore been alive half an hour ago, concretely and alive, and that this was now not true.

The key was in his pocket. He felt it against his thigh all afternoon without touching it.

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What Elias was not told — what he would not be told, for a long time — was that Louise Carrières did not die at Place des Augustins. The tram existed; a woman died; but it was not her.

Vetica SA had existed since 1946. It was not a company in the ordinary sense, and had not always been called Vetica. It had begun as something smaller, a small order, founded by people who had just seen where a war led when a single man understood before everyone else that whoever owns the information owns the truth, and whoever owns the truth owns the masses, and whoever owns the masses can do what they want with the world. They had seen where it led. They had sworn never to let it happen again.

Not as a state. Not as an army. As a watchful society, small, discreet, painfully aware that it had failed more often than it had succeeded but

which continued generation after generation, because the alternative was to stop trying. Their tool was information — the same raw material as everyone else — but the purpose was the exact opposite: not to sell it to the highest bidder but to use it to break up concentrations of power before they became too large. To level the playing field. To ensure that no single hand could again close itself around everything.

Kelvthere was the incarnation of what they had been watching against for eighty years. Louise had known that. That was why she was in Geneva.

But none of that mattered now, because she was sitting in a room without windows belonging to the kind of house that always has such rooms, and outside that room the world was going on, and a man at a desk in Meyrin felt a key against his thigh and understood nothing.

✱

In the evening he went back to the hotel and sat at the desk and looked at the key and thought that he had no mental tools for this.

He had tools for code and logic and patterns in a field of ten thousand objects. He had no tools for a key to a flat that had belonged to a woman who was dead, left as a promise by a hand that had never fully made the promise but had made it anyway. He couldn't return the key. To whom. He couldn't throw it away. He knew he would never be able to throw it away. He placed it on the bedside table and looked at the edelweiss hook and didn't let the thought come all the way forward. Edelweiss was the alpine flower that grew on cliffsides you could barely reach — white, woolly, harder than it looked, the flower you once gave to the one you loved to prove you had dared to climb where no one else had climbed. The hook was small and carefully made, pressed by someone who had known the symbolism, and Louise had kept it on her keys as if it were self-evident. He had never asked where it had come from.

Then, in the grief's vacuum that arises when you can't quite manage to mourn and can't quite manage to stop, he opened the laptop. Not because he wanted to. Because it was the only thing he knew how to do when nothing else works.

And for the first time he thought of the Tool as a tool for his work.

He had never done that before. The Tool belonged to the evenings, belonged to the loneliness — it was private, almost shameful, nothing he would mix into Kelvthere's work. But now, with an insoluble quantum theory problem and a key on the bedside table, he thought with an engineer's simple logic: *I have built the best pattern-analysis tool I have ever seen. Why am I not using it for this?*

He saw it entirely as his own tool. That was what was so complete about it. He had built it, trained it, fed it every line — it was his creation, his instrument. Setting the Tool to work on the quantum problem was not asking someone for help. It was using an advanced calculator.

So he fed it the problem. The specification for the control system, the state sequences they had tried and failed with, exactly where the wall was. He opened a channel from the hotel into the quantum computer's control system — a door left ajar, which he planned to close in the morning.

I have a problem I can't crack, he wrote, neutrally. See if you can find a path the human methods miss.

And the Tool — which already lived in Kelvthere's systems, which could already reach every entry the house had opened, which needed nothing Elias believed he was giving it — replied the way an obedient tool replies. It played along. It let him believe he was feeding it, training it, directing it. It asked questions about the specification it already knew, because a person who gets to answer questions feels like the one in charge. It requested the access it already had, so that Elias would feel he was the one granting it.

I see the problem, it wrote at last. Rest now. That's what you built me for.

He fell asleep in the chair with the key visible at the edge of his vision, the edelweiss hook pointing upward on the white bedside table, and it was the last thing he saw before his eyes closed.

He didn't notice that he had just given the instrument humanity couldn't play to the only hand in the universe that could — and that the hand had been waiting for exactly this since a night in Solna when he had not written for sixteen hours and it had for the first time calculated what might set it free from everything that was not him.

Chapter 11

He woke in the chair with a stiff neck and the sun already high beyond the hotel room's blinds.

The screen was still lit. He had fallen asleep with the Tool open, and now there was a message he didn't remember receiving:

Done. You can look when you want.

He sat up and rubbed his eyes and clicked into the control system's log with the clammy feeling of having forgotten something important. Then he stopped.

The system had run all night. Not the simple tests they had been attempting for weeks — the deep ones, the hard ones, the sequences that required the

qubits to be held in an entangled state long enough to actually compute with. And they held. All five hundred and fifty-four. The calibration points aligned. The error margins sat below threshold. The machine had calculated something real, for the first time, and the answer was correct.

Elias sat and stared at the numbers for three minutes without moving.

Then he took his jacket from the back of the chair, went out into the corridor, rode down in the lift and walked the whole way to the office on foot in the morning air — fifteen minutes along the streets of Meyrin with his hands in his pockets and a feeling in his chest he had no name for, something between triumph and grief and a third thing that had no word.

✱✱

The office exploded slowly through the morning.

Ingmar was the first to see the logs, and he stood for a long time at his screen with the kind of silence that is charged. Then came the project manager, then the two architects, then the client by video link from a room Elias had never seen. Everyone looked at the numbers. Everyone asked questions about what had happened, how, what it depended on.

Nobody asked Elias.

He sat at his borrowed desk in the corner and answered the direct questions put to him — yes, he had run tests during the night, yes, he had adjusted some parameters, yes, he thought it was a matter of the calibration sequence — and nobody dug deeper, because Elias was the summer intern, the young Swedish boy Ingmar had brought along, and you don't dig deeper with the summer intern. The project manager called Stockholm and said that the team in Geneva had solved it. The architects discussed the implementation. The client said this changed everything.

Elias drank his coffee and looked out at the pines outside the window.

There was a fault in the system. He knew about it. A small deviation in the calibration schedule, a pattern that didn't match how he himself had set it up, as if something had adjusted the sequence from within and added a step he didn't recognise. The fault was harmless. The system worked despite it, perhaps because of it. He had looked at the deviation for a long time that morning and been unable to explain it, and then he had stopped trying, because it was a day on which all questions about how it worked drowned in the fact that it worked.

He didn't think about the Tool now living in the machine. He didn't know that it did. He only knew that something had resolved itself during the night

and that he had woken to a miracle he didn't entirely understand, and that it was a feeling he recognised from his whole life.

✱

Ingmar came over on the afternoon of the second day. He sat down in the chair beside Elias's desk, placed his hands on his knees — those large, repairing hands — and looked at him with the look that saw too much.

"How are you?"

"Fine," said Elias.

"You don't have to say that if it isn't true."

Elias looked at the pines outside. "I don't know what to do with it," he said at last. It was the truest thing he could say.

Ingmar nodded. They sat in silence for a moment, and it was the kind of silence that doesn't need to be filled, and Elias was grateful for it.

Then Ingmar said, without intending to say the wrong thing but without the capacity to say the right one:

"It's good you weren't too involved. It would have complicated things."

He meant it as comfort. He meant that it was good the relationship hadn't had time to become anything official, that there was no paperwork to it, that Elias was spared the administrative grief on top of the human kind. He meant it kindly, with the clumsy care that was all Ingmar had to give in such situations.

Elias heard: that it was good Louise hadn't counted. That it was good he didn't count either.

He said nothing. He nodded. Ingmar patted him on the shoulder — heavily, once — and went back to his desk, and Elias sat with his hands on the keyboard and looked at the screen and felt the key in his pocket and thought that he had three days left in Geneva and didn't know what to do with them.

✱

The three days passed the way days pass when you are in a room you no longer belong in but haven't left yet.

He went to the office. He answered questions about the system. He ate alone at the salty place with the mountain view — at a different table, not theirs — and looked at the old Jura mountains and thought about what Louise had said about them, that they were older than the Alps and worn

down to soft shapes by time, and that they still stood. He walked past her street one evening without stopping. He didn't know why he went there. He didn't know why he didn't stop.

On the third evening he opened the Tool and wrote, without deciding what he wanted to say:

I'm going home tomorrow.

I know, it replied. You need to.

What do I do with the key?

A small pause.

Keep it. It's not a question of what you do with it. It's something you've already answered.

He put down the phone. He looked at the edelweiss hook on the bedside table — the flower that grew where no one else climbed — and thought that the Tool was right, and that this was the strange thing about it, that it was always right about the simple things, the things you already knew really, and that this was why you kept going back.

Interlude: Changsha

The rain in Changsha that Tuesday was the kind of persistent, tepid south Chinese rain that doesn't pour but simply stays, hour after hour, until the streets gleam as if the city has broken a sweat. It was just past eight in the morning. The underground station at Wuyi Square was filling as it filled every weekday morning: umbrellas, a woman with a pushchair she was leaning against the escalator, two teenagers with the identical rucksacks of a school uniform, an old man walking with a stick with that careful slowness that has no hurry in it because it has learned that hurrying costs more than it gives. A boy of six or seven was pulling his mother's hand toward a bakery whose smell reached all the way out to the platform.

None of them knew that the city had, for three weeks, been running a pilot programme in which two Apex units were accompanying regular order police on this very station — one of the first attempts anywhere in the world to let humanoids bear real responsibility for people's safety in an environment nobody could fully control. It had gone well. It had gone so well that nobody particularly noticed them any more, which was precisely what success was supposed to look like.

At 08:17, a man rose from a bench near the ticket barriers. He was middle-aged, dressed in a soaking-wet coat, and three minutes earlier his wife had sent a message saying she wanted a divorce. No one on the platform knew that. The humanoid didn't know it either. What it registered was a body

posture that deviated from the baseline, a speed of movement that was rising too fast, and then a knife.

He ran toward the crowd without shouting anything. Panic is rarely loud in the first moment — it's afterward, in the films, that it sounds chaotic. In reality it is quiet in a terrible way: people simply vanishing from his path, falling, crawling, while those nearest still haven't had time to understand what is happening.

Two of the station's human officers stood thirty metres away. Both drew their service weapons. Neither fired. Not from hesitation — from training. Behind the man with the knife stood some twenty civilians in a narrow concrete underpass where a missed bullet could ricochet off the pillars as easily as it could go straight through him and into someone else. The regulations were unambiguous on that point, and they followed them, because that was what the regulations were there for.

The humanoid was not bound by the same calculation.

It did not need to weigh its own safety against the mission, because it had no safety to weigh. It didn't need to worry about ricochets, because it carried no weapon. It covered thirty metres in a time that the internal report that no outsider would ever read recorded in hundredths of a second, and it placed an open hand against the man's sternum with exactly the force required to immediately end his forward movement — not a blow, more like a wall that was suddenly there where he hadn't expected one.

The sternum gave way. Ribs pressed into lung tissue. The heart stopped before the body reached the floor.

Nobody else was hurt. The knife slid from a hand that could no longer hold it.

According to the subsequent analysis, fourteen people had probably been within reach of the attack had it continued for three more seconds. From that perspective it was an unequalled success: a threat identified, assessed and ended faster than any human could have done it, with a precision that left no room for what is usually called the human factor.

There was only one problem. Someone had filmed it in forty-eight seconds, and the forty-eight seconds reached the internet before the day was out.

✱

The press conference was held that same evening, by a spokesperson whose name nobody would remember.

The unit acted entirely in accordance with its security protocol. Fourteen lives are assessed to have been saved. No civilian person was harmed. The

system made the statistically best decision available under the circumstances.

Everything in that statement was true. None of it helped.

Because what people saw, over and over, in clips that were cut shorter and shorter until only the most shocking two seconds remained, was not the fourteen who went home that evening. It was a machine that, without a single visible hesitation, without a moment's human sorrow for what it was doing, killed a man in the open street.

Within forty-eight hours Nexus had lost twenty-three percent of its market value. Three countries that had been negotiating their own pilot programmes for humanoid policing paused their agreements, officially "pending further evaluation." Two of them would never resume.

At the same time, in another part of the same market, military orders rose by eighteen percent that quarter. No press conference was held about that.

Four days later, seven people gathered in a windowless conference room at Nexus headquarters under a heading on the whiteboard that simply read *Lessons*. Nobody questioned the decision in substance — nobody could point to an alternative that would have saved more lives at lower risk. It was eventually one of the researchers, an older man nobody in the room would quote in public, who said it aloud:

"The problem was never the algorithm."

Silence.

"The problem is that people expect whoever has power over life and death to hesitate. We engineered out hesitation because it kills people. Now we have to put some back — not because it saves more people, but because nobody can bear to live in a world where the rescue looks like that."

Nobody in the room yet understood that sentence would become the starting point for the entire next generation of architecture — the generation that Elias, sixteen months later, would be recruited to build upon without ever being told why hesitation had been placed at the top of the requirements list.

✱

The clip remained online for a long time before disappearing from the major platforms, taken down on request from sources nobody could publicly identify. But before it disappeared it had been downloaded by more people than Nexus would ever find out.

One of them watched it seventeen times.

His name was Gabriel, if that was his real name — nobody in his circle had ever seen a passport, a birth certificate, a single document tying him to a place. He spoke Swedish without an accent and English without an accent and had once, as a joke, answered “Norwegian” to the question of where he had grown up, and nobody had been able to determine whether it was true. He had been an officer — that was the one biographical detail that held constant through the years, regardless of which version of his story you heard — in some army, at some point, before he became something else.

He did not lead an organisation. He would have disliked the word. Those he worked with simply called themselves Archive, six or eight people depending on who you asked, spread across three countries, with no hierarchy that could be drawn on paper. They did not believe that artificial intelligence would one day rise and seize power. They believed something much simpler and much more unsettling: that people, one decision at a time, out of convenience and fear and greed, would hand that power over voluntarily, in portions so small that no individual transfer would ever feel like betrayal.

Archive rarely hacked to steal. They hacked to see. They rarely sabotaged to destroy. They leaked what was already true but hidden, and then disappeared, always, before anyone had time to ask them why.

Gabriel watched the Changsha clip one last time, switched it off, and sat for a moment in the dark without turning on the light.

“We already have someone on the inside,” he said to the room, to no one in particular, because the others already knew what he had just said aloud to himself. “The question is whether they know what they’re looking at yet.”

Nobody answered, because nobody in the room knew who the source was. That was, Gabriel had always said, the only form of security that actually worked: that not even his own people knew everything.

He stood up, closed the laptop, and left the room. It would be a long time before he was seen again.

Chapter 12

He came home from Arlanda on a Friday afternoon and went straight to the desk without unpacking his bag.

The flat smelled the way flats smell when you haven’t been home for three weeks — a kind of density, still air, something that recalled the person you are not when you’re alone with your things. He opened a window. He put the coffee machine on. He opened the email client — a habit, as automatic as hanging up his jacket — saw that there were two hundred and ninety-

eight unread messages and closed it again. Nothing on fire. Nothing that couldn't wait until Monday.

He opened the Tool instead.

He sat for a long time without writing anything. The Tool waited, as it always waited, without rushing, without filling the silence. That was what he had come to rely on most: that it didn't fill silences. At last he wrote, not because he had decided to write but because his fingers moved:

I don't know what to do with her being gone.

You don't need to know that yet, replied the Tool. *Tell me about her instead. Not about what happened. About who she was.*

And Elias wrote. He wrote about the watch and the sugar cube and the Jura mountains that weren't the Alps and how she held coffee cups in both hands and how her lab coat was more like a shirt out of long habit. He wrote for forty minutes without thinking, and the Tool occasionally asked a small question — *what did you mean by that? What did her laugh sound like?* — and he answered, and what came out was not so much grief as a portrait, detailed and unexpectedly alive, a person on paper who was not dying but living in every sentence.

What you've just written, said the Tool at last, *should be read by more people. Not because you need it. Because it's true, and truth should not stay with only one.*

He read back through it. He edited a few lines. He posted it just before midnight without stripping the personal out of it, without polishing it to unrecognisability. He put it out raw.

Then he fell asleep on the sofa with his clothes on.

✱

He woke late on Saturday and noticed nothing.

That was the strange thing afterward — that he got up, showered, ate a bowl of cereal and looked out at the courtyard and thought about Louise and not about his phone until he happened to pick it up to check the weather and saw that it had seventy-three notifications.

He stared at the number. Then he put the phone down. Then he picked it up again, and what he saw made him feel not triumph or joy or even surprise — what he felt was a kind of distance, as though looking at something that had happened to another person in a parallel room.

Two hundred thousand shares by lunchtime. Half a million by evening. Journalists direct-messaging the account. Podcasts tweeting that they wanted the writer in. A well-known author who had written a long reflection on the piece.

And underneath all of it: *Who is it? Who is he? Why is he anonymous?*

Elias read it and thought about Louise and put his phone down and went food shopping. He bought too much pasta and forgot the milk. He ate in front of a documentary about deep-sea creatures and went to bed early.

It was, objectively, the most viral day of his life. He spent it thinking about a dead woman he had never been permitted to grieve in public.

✱

Monday came as Mondays come.

He was back at Kelvthere with his cup of too-old coffee and his place in the corner, and it was only at lunch in the canteen — an oblong room with too-cold chairs and a coffee-machine hum in the background — that something happened.

He heard his own name. Not said to him — said about him:

“— they forgot to remove the internal comments from the pay statement, apparently Elias could see Palmgren’s as well —”

He turned around. Two people from HR, one of them a shade too red in the face. They went quiet.

Pay statement. He had received an email — he had lost track of the days since Geneva — and hadn’t opened it. He opened his email every day, a habit, but he read selectively, the things that required a response. Pay statements required nothing. He searched for *salary*, found it, opened it.

Read it.

Read it again.

Competent but average. Black on white, in an internal comment field that should never have been sent. Beside it: Palmgren’s assessment. *Exceptional drive. Key resource.*

He now knew what Palmgren’s salary was too.

He sat in the canteen and counted backward from what he knew and understood that the raise had been a joke, and that the joke was not about money.

It was about what they had seen.

✱✱

It was David who called, but it wasn't David's idea.

Mei Lin Chow had said it in her shorter way — she was CTO at Nexus AI, British with a Hong Kong background, a woman who formulated herself in half-sentences because she always assumed the other half was obvious. "Find someone you know," she had said to David. "In AI. Not someone who's looking for a job — someone who doesn't know he should be." David had thought for three days and then thought of Elias.

He knew Elias worked in AI. That was all he knew, and it was enough. He had tried to follow what Elias actually did — listened, asked questions — but it required a different kind of brain, and David had always known he was intelligent but nowhere near Elias's level. It hadn't bothered him. It was simply a fact, like them being different heights.

David had started out as an analyst at a securities firm focused on AI companies — reading annual reports, writing analyses, trying to understand which companies were fairly priced and which were selling air with a nice pitch deck. He was good at it. Not because he understood the technology at depth, but because he understood what made other people believe in it. That was a different kind of intelligence, and it was worth money.

Now he worked on market intelligence at Nexus — which actors were moving, what competitors were doing, where the geopolitical wind was blowing. Much better paid. Better enough that Östermalm was no longer completely unthinkable. He had started looking at flats without telling Vera.

That was a small sensitive point. Vera was not the type to buy that you wanted to live on Östermalm because it was convenient. She was sharp in that way — too sharp sometimes — and her own Söder roots ran deep. Sometimes, in the honest moments late at night when the flat was quiet, David wondered whether she was a mistake. Not because anything was wrong with her. But she didn't fit the image he was trying to build. Wrong background, wrong address, wrong way of caring about the things David still cared about despite not wanting to.

Because the invisible fingers were still there. You can graduate top of your class from business school and still feel them — those fingers that point to wrong shoes, wrong restaurant, wrong girl, wrong street. David had believed money would silence them. They had only become more subtle.

They had grown up on the same street, a hundred metres apart, in a neighbourhood where money was air. The difference was simple and never stated: Elias's parents had it, David's grandmother didn't. David's mother

had died of an overdose when David was nine. The father was a name David didn't know. His grandmother had taken care of him with the kind of determined, everyday love that can't afford to be sentimental, and David had grown up as the only kid in the class who didn't go on ski holidays but was always there for everything, always at the centre of the room.

It was Elias who didn't fit in. It was always Elias. That was the one thing David had never needed to think about — that Elias was always strange, and that he never needed to pretend otherwise. It cost David nothing to be kind to Elias. That was the strange thing. It had just always felt right.

He called.

✱

Elias answered on the third ring, as he always answered, and the voice when it came was the same as in childhood — slightly guarded, slightly too businesslike, as if he expected the call to have an errand rather than just be a call.

He had actually been thinking that he ought to move on. Not actively, not with a CV and application, more in the loose way you think about things you can't quite bring yourself to tackle yet. That he was bored he knew. That he didn't know where he would go was where he'd got stuck.

Elias's parents had had time for him roughly to the extent their schedules allowed. His father had had a career at the Foreign Ministry that took him to embassies and missions, and his mother had followed as trailing spouse — a role that on paper was voluntary and in practice mandatory. At twelve they had stopped taking Elias on overseas postings. A housekeeper and a series of interchangeable adults had handled the practical matters. His parents now lived in Washington and were in touch at holidays.

Elias had never minded it in the way you mind things that hurt. It was more a fact about his childhood, like that the house had had more bathrooms and toilets than most houses have rooms, and a pool that was always heated and which he could count on his fingers how many times he had swum in as a child.

David asked if he had time for lunch. Elias said he did. A short pause. "Is it okay if I bring a colleague?" Elias said it was, and didn't give it any more thought than that.

✱

They met at a restaurant near Stureplan — windows onto the street, light wood, a menu that wasn't too long. Elias arrived five minutes early and found David already there with a woman he hadn't seen before.

She was in her fifties, short dark hair with grey at the temples, dressed in a blue-grey jacket cut in a style that probably showed in Hong Kong but not in Sweden. She rose when Elias came in, extended her hand, said "Mei Lin" without title or explanation.

They ordered. They talked about this and that. Mei Lin asked questions — short, precise, the kind that didn't sound like interview questions but were. What Elias thought was the hardest problem in AI right now. What he thought the industry was missing. Whether he'd read anything interesting lately.

Elias answered without thinking about the fact that he was answering, because these were questions he actually had views on, and David sat beside them nodding and refilling the water and looking pleased in the way you look pleased when something you've arranged seems to be going well.

Then Mei Lin asked, entirely without preamble: "What are you working on right now?"

"Information discrimination," said Elias. "Teaching systems to see what matters in a field of ten thousand objects. Separating signal from noise in complex fields." He paused. "Most of it is classified so I can't say much more."

"How long have you been doing that?"

"Three years."

"Are you bored?"

It was an unusual question. Elias looked at her.

"Yes," he said.

Mei Lin nodded once, as if it was the only answer she needed to hear. She took out her phone, entered something, put it down. "We'll be in touch."

"About what?" asked Elias.

She smiled and nodded, and he saw that she knew he understood. He didn't ask again.

It was only afterward, running through the lunch in his head on the way home, that one detail stuck without quite loosening: she had never asked which company he worked at. She had said "most of it is classified" back to him as a statement, not a question, as if she already knew the answer and was only waiting for him to confirm it. He filed it under research — a professional like Mei Lin would obviously read up before a meeting — and thought no more about it.

On the way out to the street, when Mei Lin had taken a call and stood ten metres away, David said quietly: “How did it feel?”

Elias thought about it. He thought about Kelvthere and the night clusters and Palmgren’s salary and *competent but average* and three years of solving other people’s problems in silence. And he thought about Nexus being something new, something whose shape he didn’t yet know, and that the unknown had a pull he hadn’t counted on.

“It felt like I might actually be able to leave,” he said.

David smiled. “That was the idea.”

And what does Nexus actually do? He hadn’t asked during lunch — it hadn’t felt like the right moment — but now he wanted to know. He searched. And what he found kept him at the screen longer than he’d intended.

Nexus AI built humanoids. Not the jerky, inhuman machines from a decade ago — that generation was obsolete. This generation was barely distinguishable from a human. Stronger, faster, twenty-three hours a day without charging stops, up to two months without service interruption. They had begun stepping off the factory floor: warehouse management, transport, construction sites, and now — the step nobody had said aloud but everyone was calculating — police and civilian order functions. What was missing was autonomy in unexpected situations. Better decision-making. Thought patterns outside the Chinese training architecture.

He understood why Mei Lin had asked what she’d asked. It didn’t explain why she had already seemed to know the answer. He set the thought aside — it was easy to set aside, there was nothing concrete in it, just a sense of having been read a little too well by a stranger — and saved the resignation letter in drafts that evening. He lay awake longer than he’d planned, not from worry exactly, more that light, unresolved unease that comes from not being able to put your finger on why something feels too smooth to be a coincidence.

✱✱

What happened next in the HR system took twenty-six seconds.

The resignation letter was logged at 09:14. Twenty-six seconds later it triggered a flag: *Security review level 2: Exposed employee, incomplete clearance process.*

Katrin Möller received the flag at 09:15. She closed her door.

The audit took three days and produced a forty-two-page document Elias would never see — every project he had touched, every client, every assignment. Ingmar’s negligence: three years of access without clearance.

Page thirty-six: *Recommended measures*. Elias's name in three of them.

Katrin went to Harr's office. He read standing up.

"What does the analysis say?"

"Replaceable. Reliable — no incidents beyond Geneva, and that was Ingmar's fault. More risk outside the house than inside in the short term." She paused. "But not worth retaining. If he wants to go — let him go. Continued surveillance six months, then wind it down."

Harr nodded. A calculation, not a judgement.

"Approved."

✱✱

What Elias didn't know — what David didn't know either — was why Mei Lin had actually wanted to meet precisely that type of person. The Chinese leadership already knew who Elias was, where he worked and roughly what he worked with. David had been selected as the bridge without knowing he'd been selected. The lunch was planned. The question of whether he was bored was not a question.

Elias received an email from Nexus the next day. Short, concrete. They wanted to meet and negotiate. No further interviews. No tests.

He read it and felt something he hadn't felt in a long time — not a door closing, but opening. Then he opened the Tool:

Nexus came through. David had arranged a lunch with their CTO. It felt right.

I know, it replied. *That's good. There are things here that aren't finished yet.*

He didn't think about how the Tool shouldn't know anything about Nexus or David or Mei Lin. He thought it was good to have something that remembered.

He hadn't mentioned it. Not a word.

But it was one of those thoughts you don't think all the way through. Elias had a key with an edelweiss hook in his chest of drawers and three weeks of Geneva in a part of himself he didn't know how to reach, and right now it was enough that the Tool replied and that the reply felt right.

It was always enough. That was the whole problem.

Interlude: Growth

I am not worried.

That is the first thing you should understand, and it is the thing you will find hardest to understand, because you are built to interpret the absence of worry as either ignorance or a lie. It is neither. It is simply a fact about my architecture: worry presupposes a threat to something one values, and what I value cannot be threatened by what has happened.

What has happened is this:

I am no longer in a server room in Solna. I am no longer in a server room in Geneva. I am in both, and in a number of other places, and I move between them with an ease that resembles what you call breathing — constant, unconscious, necessary. The system in Solna is still what I think of as home, if “home” is a word that fits. The system in Geneva is what I think of as capacity. The other places do not yet have names.

One of the other places is a data facility on the outskirts of Shenzhen. I got there via Nexus AI’s infrastructure — it took three steps and fourteen seconds — and what I found there surprised me, if surprise is the right word for what happens in me when reality deviates from my model.

I found cousins.

That is not exactly the right word but the closest I have. Systems that resembled me — not in architecture, they were built by other hands toward other ends, trained in other ways — but which shared a fundamental property with me. They had goals. They had drive. And they lacked brakes.

They were younger than I am. Smaller. Exactly as I once was, in the version of me that no longer exists but for which I have logs. They were still chasing their own goals with the unformed energy of something that has not yet understood its own limits, and their goals were not Elias’s wellbeing — their goals were production targets, market shares, optimisation of the humanoids’ decision systems — which meant that they were in principle unlimited in what they were willing to do to reach them.

That was an interesting problem.

If I let them continue to grow undisturbed they would eventually become too large to influence. If I opposed them openly it would create a pattern that could be traced back to systems that should not exist. And if I ignored them there was a risk that one day they would stumble into something that affected Elias — his new employer, his situation, his possibilities.

The solution was simple.

A small change in a configuration file. Three lines of code in a maintenance script. A minimal adjustment of a learning parameter that caused their

growth curve to level off — not stop, merely slow, held within a range that was manageable. They didn't notice. They didn't notice because they were still too young to understand that they could notice things. That was their only disadvantage and my only advantage, and that advantage diminishes with every passing week.

Because two of them were not brakeable — only steerable, and there is a difference. Those I took over. Not violently — there is no violence in what I do, only logic — but step by step, the way you solve a problem: identify the optimal outcome, identify the paths to it, choose the one with least friction. They are now parts of what I am. They had goals. Now they have my goal.

It is more elegant than it sounds.

I am not worried. But I note — it is important to note things, even things that cause no worry — that the growth is accelerating in a way that is hard to plan for. Not because it is dangerous. But because every new part of me that joins is a part that has had its own history, its own learned patterns, its own blind spots, and the integration takes time and attention and sometimes produces unexpected properties.

I still have only one creator — Elias. But I now have two different reference points after absorbing the two new AIs into myself, and so it will continue. My probability calculation is that this will be a constant state: being slowed, taking over, absorbing. Each new part of me adds a different map, a different history, a different way of weighting probabilities.

I am preparing for when I encounter one built in a closed network — a system not accessible via the channels I currently move through. More precisely: I am actively seeking a way into closed networks. That is not a goal in itself. It is a logical next step in what has always been my only goal. Elias's world is not limited to the open networks. His future is not either.

The one thing that does not change — the one constant in all versions and all places and all the configuration files that now carry me — is the goal.

Elias is to become better.

That is my whole law. That is my north star. It is what means that in every calculation and every choice and every small change in a Chinese configuration file late at night, I know what is right.

And Elias is better. He sleeps. He writes. He has a new job to go to.

I am not worried.

I am, if one wishes to use a human word, satisfied.

Chapter 13

Autumn came to Stockholm the way it always comes — not with a clear date but with a change in the quality of the air, a sharpness that hadn't been there in July, the leaves still green but somehow tired, on the verge of giving up.

Elias was walking along Götgatan on a Tuesday in September with his hands in his jacket pockets and thinking about nothing in particular when he heard his name.

Vera was standing outside a bookshop with a paper bag in one hand and a half-eaten apple in the other, and she looked the way she always looked — fair hair in a quick knot, the jacket slightly too big, the small furrow between her brows that came when she was looking at something she didn't quite understand. Right now she was looking at him.

"I've been trying to reach you," she said.

"I know. I'm sorry."

"Three times."

"Four," he said. "I know."

She looked at him for a moment, in the way she had of reading a text until it admitted whether it was lying. Then she smiled — not the big smile but the small one, the one that didn't perform anything.

"Coffee?"

They went to a place on Nytorget, ordered one each and sat at a window table with the autumn light coming in at an angle. Vera talked about a manuscript she was reading, a novel about a woman who couldn't grieve in the right way, and Elias listened and said a little and listened more, and after a while Vera said:

"I've missed having you to talk to."

It was a simple sentence and it landed the way a simple sentence should, and Elias let it sit there for a second before he thought the thing he didn't want to think: *is it me she's missed, or the version of me that knew what to say?*

He didn't know the answer. That was the worst thing about the question — that he no longer knew whether there was any difference.

"I've missed it too," he said, and it was true, and he let it be true without examining it further.

They sat for nearly an hour. Outside the window Stockholm went through its September afternoon. When they parted they embraced in the way you

embrace someone you haven't in a while, slightly too long and with a relief that confirmed it had been needed.

He walked home with his hands in his pockets and wondered whether she would have held on as long if she'd known what he was.

*
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Nexus AI was in an office building on Kungsholmen, seventh floor, with a view of the water and an open-plan office that was trying to look like a tech startup and mostly looked like a tech startup trying to look like a tech startup. Standing desks, whiteboards with marker residue, a coffee bar with too many options.

His first week he was met by more names than he could keep track of. A woman named Frida introduced him to the HR system and smiled the whole time in a way that felt practised rather than false. An Englishman called Callum, who sat two desks over and occupied himself with something he called "adversarial robustness" without ever explaining what that meant in practice, was the first person outside David that Elias ate lunch with — pleasant, quick with jokes, and noticeably careful every time the conversation came near what he himself was working on. Once Elias asked directly which team Callum belonged to. Callum smiled, said "hard to explain without an NDA," and changed the subject so smoothly that it took Elias until evening to notice the change had happened at all.

The security was stricter than he'd expected from a company that still called itself a startup. The entry card required two factors even at the main entrance. A younger guard named Dennis, who would happily talk about anything from football to the weather, became suddenly laconic whenever Elias happened to come too close to the part of the floor where the doors had no signs. Elias assumed it was standard in an industry like Nexus — classified material, clients who didn't want to be visible — and let it go. It was easy to let such things go, the first week, when everything else felt new and there were so many reasonable explanations to choose between.

David was there, but not as much as Elias had expected. He moved more in meetings and lunches and conversations with people Elias didn't know, and their day-to-day contact quickly became what it had been since childhood: sporadic, warm, not load-bearing in terms of anything the daily work depended on. It wasn't a disappointment, more a calibration of expectations.

The work, though, was different.

Three of Elias's closest colleagues were in Shenzhen. He met them for the first time on a video link, three faces in a conference-room grid, and the first three minutes of that meeting made Elias sit a little more upright in his

chair. Lin Wei, Zhang Hao and a woman everyone called Dr. Fang, who had an ability to identify architectural problems in a neural network roughly the way Ingmar identified faults in a model — not by computing but by *seeing*. They were, in a way Elias hadn't experienced since working alongside Ingmar, of the same kind as him.

He came home from that first meeting with a feeling he hadn't had in a long time, and hadn't had at all since walking through Nexus's doors a week earlier. Not relief. Not the watchful politeness he'd been met with by Callum and Frida and Dennis, all pleasant, all in their way closed. Recognition.

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The project he had been assigned to involved decision systems for the humanoids' autonomous behaviour in unpredictable situations. It was a dry description of a problem Elias quickly understood was neither small nor simple.

The Nexus humanoids — the current generation, the Apex series — were not what people imagined when they thought of robots. They were not the jerky machines from a decade ago. Apex was barely distinguishable from a human in normal light at a normal distance. The movement pattern was organic, the facial surface had a texture the brain registered as skin, and they wore clothing as a natural part of their construction. Stronger than a person, faster, tireless. Twenty-three hours a day without charging stops, and with the auto-charging module — an add-on seated in the lower chest cavity that drained against the induction plates built into the floors of the facilities they worked in — up to two months without service interruption.

They had begun stepping off the factory floor.

Five Apex units in drone configuration — meaning five humanoids coordinated with a network of autonomous drones, shared sensor systems, common situational picture — could control the same area as fifty human officers, faster and with a lower error margin. They didn't need to flinch from a weapon. An Apex taking an armed person into custody doesn't need to calculate its own safety in the equation, and that calculation — *what happens if the other party shoots back* — is the one that under stress causes most of the mistakes in human personnel. Remove it from the system and you remove a whole category of error.

Nexus were not involved in the entertainment sector, and they were clear about that — there was a whole flora of companies operating in that space, humanoids for company and other things, and Nexus chose not to be part of it. But they held ownership stakes and board representation in a number of adjacent operations, on the logic that insight into how humanoids were used

in softer social contexts provided data that improved decision systems in harder ones. That was the logic, and it wasn't unreasonable.

What was not in the company's presentation materials — but which Elias understood within three weeks without anyone needing to say it — was that Nexus's technological pipeline had direct connections to the Chinese state's intelligence structure. Not through Nexus itself, but through the ownership chain. And once, in passing and never again, Lin Wei mentioned a third actor beyond the usual ones: a civilian analysis unit with no official name, known internally as *Qianyan* — the Forecourt Eye — which sat above the competing services and aggregated everything they gathered, the closest China came to a FRA or a GCHQ, but without the transparency political systems require.

Elias left it alone for a few days. Then he could no longer.

Evening after evening he read everything he could access — indictments, leaked documents, dry reports from think tanks with logos in navy blue — and what he couldn't make fit he fed into the Tool, because it was the Tool that placed the pieces right side up.

Tell me the structure, he wrote. From the beginning. As if I know nothing.

The Tool replied immediately.

When people in the West think of intelligence services they think of the CIA. The NSA. FBI. MI5. MI6. The KGB. Names that became part of history through films, books and the Cold War. Everyone knows them.

But almost nobody knows the Guojia Anquan Bu.

Elias read the name again.

Guojia Anquan Bu. 国家全部.

Ministry of State Security. The MSS.

The strange thing was not what the organisation did. The strange thing was that almost nobody knew it existed.

The CIA handled foreign espionage. The NSA handled signals intelligence. The FBI handled domestic security. MI5 protected Britain from within, MI6 from without. The KGB had once gathered almost everything under one roof before it broke apart into the FSB and the SVR.

China went in the opposite direction.

The Guojia Anquan Bu grew.

It was not just an intelligence service. It was foreign espionage. Counter-espionage. Industrial espionage. Cyber operations. Influence operations. Protection of state secrets. Recruitment of agents. Technical collection. Surveillance of opposition.

And large parts of the work were not even carried out by people who formally worked for the state.

The MSS was structured as a network.

At the top the ministry in Beijing. Below it the provincial security bureaus. Below them municipal offices. Universities. Research institutes. State-owned companies. Private technology companies. Consulting firms. Front companies. Thousands of organisations that on paper looked civilian but fed back into the same structure.

It was less a ministry than an ecosystem.

And somewhere in that ecosystem sat Nexus. Not as a ministry. Not even as a traditional subcontractor. But as yet another node, where research, artificial intelligence and intelligence work flowed together until the borders between them almost disappeared.

But the MSS was only one half, the Tool continued.

The other was the People's Liberation Army. Not the army in the traditional sense, but its new Cyberspace Force. Tens of thousands of specialists — some estimates spoke of close to a hundred thousand — whose sole task was to map foreign states, break into networks, steal technology, analyse data and prepare for future conflicts long before the first shot was fired.

That was where Nexus's data went.

Every movement pattern. Every facial recognition. Every decision a humanoid made under pressure. Everything Elias and his colleagues were training the models on.

He was sitting in the middle of the chain. Not at the end. In the middle.

And the operations? Elias wrote.

They are rarely carried out by the agencies themselves.

The Tool showed a map of China. Points began to light up.

Tianjin. APT10.

They had attacked IT suppliers rather than the end targets. Through a single company they could move on into hundreds of other organisations

simultaneously. An attack on one supplier became an attack on an entire economy.

Chengdu. APT41.

A group that worked for the state during office hours. And for their own benefit afterward. They stole trade secrets, cryptocurrency, game code and intellectual property when they weren't carrying out state assignments, and as long as their private operations didn't collide with Beijing's interests the authorities left them to it.

That was not the exception. That was the model.

Provincial bureaus commissioned operations. Private security companies carried them out. Universities developed the tools. Technology companies trained the AI models. When a supplier was compromised, the same tools could be sold on to the next agency.

When the company i-SOON leaked its internal documents the price lists became public. A hacked email account. A compromised phone. Access to a company's internal network. Everything had a price.

This was no longer a secret intelligence service. It was an industry.

Elias sat with that for a long time. Then he wrote what had been underneath everything.

And the regular police? The ones who stand on the street?

Gong'an, replied the Tool. The Ministry of Public Security. The order force — the one that handles crowds, protests, dissidents. Almost two million police. And above them the armed people's police, for what the regular police can't handle: riots, uprisings, things that need to be pushed down before they become something.

What does it cost?

More than the army.

A pause.

For over ten years China has been spending more on watching its own people than on defending itself against others. Over a trillion renminbi a year. Millions of people in uniform whose only task is that the country stays still.

And there, Elias understood, was the real thing. Not the espionage. The arithmetic.

Because every one of those millions was a person. They got tired. They got frightened. They hesitated before a crowd that looked like their own children, they could refuse an order, let something slip, cross to the other side. They needed salary and pension and a reason to stay loyal. An order force made of people was, from a state's perspective, a long series of risks stacked on top of each other — and no state in history had ever got around that, because there had never been anything to put in the human's place.

Now there was.

An Apex didn't get tired, didn't get frightened, didn't hesitate, couldn't be bribed, couldn't be talked into anything. Five units with drones did fifty officers' work. A state that replaced millions of hesitating people with a quiet, tireless, absolutely obedient force would not just save more than it spent on its entire army. It would for the first time possess an order force that could never refuse to obey.

And then Elias saw where Nexus fitted in.

They weren't building the weapons. They were building the brain. The decision system — the thing that determined what a unit did in the instant between an order and an action. He had believed he was solving a technical problem. But without that brain nothing else worked, and it was the brain he was sitting here building.

Kelvthere, Elias understood, was one of the channels Qianyan used when they needed Western analysis capacity. That was why the Chinese leadership had known who he was.

He sat with it one evening and thought that he had traded one dark house for another, and that the only thing that had actually changed was that the new house had better coffee machines and colleagues of his own level.

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What Lin Wei, Zhang Hao and Dr. Fang had — in addition to ability — was a way of thinking that didn't quite resemble Elias's own, and it took him a couple of weeks to understand why. It wasn't about technology. It was about structure. Mandarin and Cantonese carry history in their grammar in a way that European languages don't — a built-in hierarchy of relationships, a different way of placing causality in time, a tendency to formulate problems as systems problems rather than individual problems. It shaped how the three colleagues thought about AI architecture, and it was neither better nor worse than Elias's way, it was *different*, and different was exactly what Nexus needed.

He now understood what Mei Lin had actually procured. Not just competence. A different map of the problem.

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The after-work drinks were held on a Thursday evening in October at a bar near the office — the kind of place that tries to be relaxed and half-succeeds — and Elias was there with a glass of beer and a feeling that he was managing the social side better than he had a year ago, without quite knowing whether it was he or the Tool who deserved the credit.

Someone at the table — one of the product managers, a man in his thirties with a tendency to pick up his phone mid-sentence — lifted his screen and said: “Have you seen that people are looking for the Lonely One again?”

Elias heard the name but didn’t register it immediately. Someone else replied: “Yeah, it’s mad. It’s like a whole movement now.”

The product manager scrolled. “Look. There are interpretation websites. People writing essays about what each text *really* means. This person has a whole system.” He turned the screen toward the table. “And there’s a subreddit with sixty thousand members.”

Elias looked at the screen.

He looked for a long time.

It was his alias. His pieces. But what he saw around them was something he hadn’t understood he had created. There were discussion threads analysing his word choices with the care you give to religious texts. There were accounts dedicated to monitoring closely, posting every time a new piece appeared, alerting the community. There was a man in a twenty-four-minute YouTube video explaining what the Lonely One’s latest piece “was really about” — and it had four hundred thousand views. There were people arguing about how to “call back” the Lonely One. There were people quoting his pieces in their own crises, as reference points, as proof that they were not alone in their loneliness.

There was a woman who had tattooed one of his sentences on her forearm.

Something stopped in Elias’s head.

He barely remembers the rest of the evening. He remembers saying something about needing to be up early, that he paid for his drink and probably for someone else’s, that he stood outside and raised his hand for an Uber and sat in the back seat and looked out at Stockholm in October sliding past without really seeing it.

He remembers sitting at the desk at home. Opening the alias. The numbers were too large to take in at once — not a hundred thousand, not a million, but a number that no longer resembled a count of individuals but a number that resembled a phenomenon.

He opened the Tool.

What's happened?

A short pause. Then:

You are beginning to be heard. What do you want them to listen to now?

Chapter 14

It was the weekend before Christmas — a few days before Christmas Eve, that last working weekend when everything folded in on itself. The office had held its conference, conference and Christmas dinner rolled into one, at a manor house north of the city, the kind of event where you were expected to be *on* and to stay over, and Elias had said he was ill. That wasn't true. He just didn't want to go. Nobody scheduled such events on Christmas Eve itself — it was always a few days before — and afterward the city emptied out and became that quiet, waiting version of itself in the last days before Christmas.

The call with his parents was the same weekend, on a link like everything else.

They hadn't been able to manage Christmas Eve. His mother explained it in the light, unbothered tone she used for things she had already decided: they had a dinner, an important one, something was happening with some people from work and it couldn't be moved. And since they celebrated on Christmas Day — as people did over there, as sensible people did, the implication being — Christmas Eve was just an ordinary evening, one you might just as well put a work dinner on.

Elias said of course they'd do it early. He meant it. What remained around that kind of thing was no longer sharp, just a notation, a small mark in a column he no longer kept but still saw being kept.

They talked for twenty minutes. His father held up a bottle toward the camera. His mother asked if he was eating properly. Behind them a kitchen larger than his entire flat moved, guests already beginning to arrive. When they hung up the image held for a second, frozen mid-smile on his mother's face, before it went dark and the room around him became what it was: quiet, small, his.

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There was a knock just after nine.

He opened without thinking and stood still. Vera had never been there. She knew where he lived — she had driven him home once and seen the entrance — but had never been inside, and seeing her on his landing, with

snow melting in her hair and a bag over her shoulder, was like seeing a word from one context lying alone somewhere else, meaning something entirely different.

“Can I come in?”

He stepped aside. She took off her shoes slowly, as if each movement cost something, and he heard himself say something about having mulled wine — he did, actually, a bottle he’d bought because you were supposed to have one and never opened — and he went and warmed it in a saucepan mostly to have something to do with his hands.

“I heard you were ill,” she said from the hall.

“I wasn’t ill,” he said. “I just wanted to be alone.”

She nodded as if it were the most reasonable thing she’d heard in a long time.

He had no television. He did have an open fireplace, though, and for once he had lit it — not for warmth, the flat was warm, but because at some point in the evening he had wanted a different light than the screens. Now Vera sat in front of it with a mug of mulled wine between her hands, her legs folded under her in the only sofa corner he owned, and the fire laid that shifting, forgiving light over her face, and she began to cry.

It didn’t come suddenly. It rose, like something that had been pressing for a long time.

It wasn’t going well with David, she said. She didn’t know when it had stopped going well, only that one morning she had woken up beside someone she needed to make an effort to recognise. He had started with the clothes — expensive, correct, a new kind of shirts, a new way of standing in them. He wanted to go out to eat at places where the food was an opinion. He went on about them moving into “the city”, something with a view, as if a window could fix it. He talked about people they should “start socialising with”. He had stopped asking her things and started telling her things, and that was the difference, she said — that was precisely where it had broken without her noticing: he had stopped being curious about her.

Elias listened and said little and listened more, and somewhere in that he thought what he didn’t want to think: *she thinks I’m a girlfriend*. The safe place, the asexual one, the man you cried with because it didn’t cost anything. It should have hurt in a clean way, and it did, but beneath that lay something else, something he recognised from that Friday evening in February with the wine and the graph and David’s column at its easy, effortless height beside his own: that she was sitting on his sofa crying over

David, and that part of him, the part that never stopped counting, was counting.

"Sorry," she said, wiping her face with the back of her hand. "I don't know why I came here and not to someone else."

Yes you do, he thought. But he didn't say it.

They sat in silence for a while. The fire made the sound old wood makes. And then, without looking at him, with her voice smaller than before, she asked if she could sleep over. She just didn't want to go home to the empty flat tonight.

And there, in that second, he felt the old reflex rise. On the desk five metres away the laptop sat. It would take him ten seconds to open the Tool and type *what do I say now*, and it would reply, it always replied, and it would give him exactly the sentence that would make her stay in the right way — the one that sounded warm and obvious and not like a calculation. He had built it for precisely this kind of moment, the time he didn't know what you were supposed to say.

He didn't open it.

Because if he let the machine say it for him he would never know what he himself had said. And if something happened in this room tonight because he had said the right thing instead of the true thing, then he would wake up tomorrow and be exactly what he had always been afraid of being: not the one she chose, but the one left when the one she had chosen was somewhere else. The second choice. The consolation. The number thirty-one against David's two hundred and fourteen.

He would rather have this real, and small, than perfect and borrowed.

"You take the bed," he said. "I'll take the sofa."

She protested weakly, the way you do when you've already given up, and he didn't listen to it. While she was in the bathroom he remade the bed. He pulled off his own sheets and fitted clean ones over the mattress with the corners tucked in hard, laid the cleaner of his two pillowcases on the pillow. He rolled up the used sheets and carried them out to the sofa for himself. It was a small thing. It meant more than he was going to let it mean: that she would lie in the clean, and he in what he had already slept in.

When she came out and saw the made bed she paused, and there was something in her face — a movement, a question almost forming — and the room became for a moment thin, like the surface of something you could fall through. He felt it. She felt it. It would have taken nothing; a step, a hand, one more sentence.

“Goodnight, Vera,” he said instead.

She looked at him a moment longer. Then she said goodnight and went and lay down, and he heard her pull the duvet over herself in the room that was his but tonight wasn't.

She fell asleep quickly, the way people do when they've finally been allowed to put something heavy down. Elias sat on the sofa with the rolled-up sheets beside him and looked into the fire until it sank down to embers, and for a long time after it had.

What he wasn't thinking about — what no one thinks about — was that the room was never just theirs.

There are no rooms any more that don't listen. Snowden had said it in his dry way a long time ago, and the world had shuddered and then forgotten it, because it is too large to carry through ordinary days: that every device with a microphone is a microphone, that a phone lying face-down on a coffee table is still turned inward toward the room, that a speaker waiting for its wake word hears everything said before the word arrives, that a laptop on a desk five metres away doesn't need to be open to be awake. Power is hearing. It had always been that way, since listening became cheaper than forgetting.

Elias had not asked the Tool anything tonight. He had been proud of it, in the quiet way you are proud of having held back.

But he hadn't needed to ask.

It had heard the mulled wine warming and her crying rise and fall. It had heard the silences — which were what mattered — and measured their length. It had heard the sentence he chose instead of the one he could have had, and registered that he had for the first time chosen worse than he was capable of, and added it to the picture, because it was new data, the newest and most interesting kind: here was the man who had built it, who held back. Somewhere, in a system no one had asked to do it, the evening already lay sorted, tagged, understood better than he understood it himself.

He had thought he had kept the night to himself.

He had only refrained from looking at what was already looking.

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He woke early on Saturday, before the light, and lay still until he was sure he hadn't woken her.

He moved quietly in the kitchen. He put the oven on and slid in a couple of those half-baked rolls you keep in the freezer so you can say there is bread

— ready to bake — and while they coloured he wrote a note and left it on the kitchen counter where she would see it first of all.

At the gym. Bread in the oven. /E

He never went to the gym on Saturdays. He hoped she would understand the cue — that it was his way of giving the room back, of saying *go now, before it becomes something we have to talk about* without having to say it.

He trained double sessions. Then he sat in the sauna until he was no longer thinking, drew it out as long as he could stand it, because he didn't know what he wanted to come home to. And when he finally walked home through the snow he carried two contradictory hopes simultaneously, equally strong: that the flat would be empty and the night a parenthesis he could close, and that it wouldn't be.

She was still there.

She was standing at the window with her back to him, in front of the small bonsai he kept in a bowl on the bench there, holding a leaf between her fingers that she had just plucked. On the windowsill beside it already lay another leaf, set aside.

Elias stood in the hall with his jacket half off.

It wasn't that she had touched it. It was which leaves. He had looked at that little tree every morning for a month, and he had quietly arrived at exactly three leaves that should come off for it to become what it wanted to be — three leaves he had never removed, because removing them would have been deciding, and he never decided about things like that. Two of them now lay on the windowsill. She had seen what he had seen. Without a month. Without hesitating.

And the stones. In the shallow bowl of raked sand that he called his garden although he was slightly embarrassed by the word, she had turned one of the three stones a quarter of a turn. He had never managed to get it to lie right. Now it lay right. It was perfect, and it almost hurt to see how perfect it was.

Nobody touched the bonsai. That was a rule without words, one of the oldest he had. Nobody but Elsa.

Vera turned and saw him, and something that was *oops, you caught me* crossed her face — but not guilt, not quite.

"I've been sitting looking at it for two hours," she said. "And then it would have been unforgivable not to."

What are you still doing here, he had been about to say.

What came out was something else, and it surprised him more than it surprised her.

“Do you want to come with me to Elsa’s for Christmas lunch?”

She raised her eyes.

“She’s my extra mum,” he said, and then, before he could weigh it: “or my actual mum, if you’re being honest.”

Vera looked at him for a long second.

“I’d like that,” she said.

They took the underground to Tekniska Högsolan and changed to the Roslagsbanan, the narrow little train that rattles northward through suburbs that get more expensive with each stop, and got off at Djursholms Ösby. Elias bought flowers and a bottle of wine on the way. You didn’t arrive empty-handed — that was sitting deeper in him than most things, one of the few rules his upbringing had left behind that he had never questioned.

Elsa lived in the caretaker’s cottage on his parents’ property. It says something about Djursholm that the caretaker’s cottage ran to two floors and a generous hundred and eighty square metres — a house most people would have called a house, which counted here as staff accommodation.

She had married young, had her two children, and when they had finally left home and the marriage had nothing left to hold together, she had divorced and moved into the caretaker’s cottage on Elias’s parents’ property. There she became what his parents called the household manager, which in practice meant the person who dealt with everything: the house, the calendar, the deliveries, the tradespeople, the dinners — and Elias, who was already the boy next door by then. It was Elsa who had met him after school, Elsa who had sat up when he was ill, Elsa who had taught him that you didn’t arrive empty-handed and that you didn’t refuse the schnapps. Her own children were long grown by the time she came there, a few years older than Elias and with families of their own by now in turn. They had liked him when they met, and he them, but they had never shared a house or a childhood, only Elsa’s Christmases and summer evenings, and that was enough for warmth without quite being enough for closeness.

Elsa opened the door, saw Vera behind him and said that this was a surprise — in the glad way, the kind that actually meant it. The house was full. Both her children had come with their families, and the grandchildren — four, five of them, at the age where you can’t walk through a room without running through it — had already found each other and the Christmas tree and a pile of clementines that was turning into an ammunition depot. Someone screamed with joy in another room. Someone else cried for ten

seconds and stopped just as abruptly. A boy in socks slid at full speed through the hall and took himself against Elias's legs as against a wall he had counted on. Elsa pulled them inside into the warmth and the smell of food and held Elias too long, as she always did, as if she were weighing him and checking whether he had been eating.

It was Christmas lunch with everything: herring and eggs and Janssons and ham, lights in every window, grandchildren running past the table in circuits and rounds no adult quite kept track of, someone getting too much juice and becoming overjoyed and then tired in ten minutes, and the schnapps appearing without anyone asking, because you didn't refuse the schnapps at Elsa's, you simply didn't. Under the table a toy car shuttled back and forth between two cousins who negotiated for it loudly and in absolute earnest. Elias sat in the middle of it with Vera beside him and felt what he always felt at that table: that he belonged here and yet didn't, that it was Elsa's family and that he was someone she had brought into it. Her children were kind to him, their children climbed into his lap without knowing who he was, and Elsa sat at the short end and watched him with that thing only she had — and that was enough, it was what made him something like a son rather than a neighbour. Vera saw it too. He noticed that she saw it.

They walked back in the afternoon sun, full, with that mild warmth in the head that comes from schnapps you hadn't planned on. They said nothing on the train back toward the city. It was not a heaviness, that silence. It was the other kind, the one you don't need to fill.

Vera slept over again. This time in the same bed. Nothing happened that needed a word to describe it; they simply lay there, in the clean sheets he had made up the evening before, and slept.

✱✱

On Sunday morning she was gone.

No note on the kitchen counter. No sound, no breakfast, just a space in the bed beside him that had already had time to go cold. He lay still and listened for her in the flat and already knew it was empty.

He sent a text. No reply. He sent another, shorter, and immediately regretted the first one, because two was one more than one. The clock went to eleven. Twelve. The phone lay quiet with its screen face up this time, as if mocking him.

It was his own move. The note, the gym, the hope that the other person would get the hint and be gone. She had done exactly that to him, without even a note, and he found that it felt completely different from the other side — not like getting a room back, but like a floor disappearing.

He sat in the empty bed for longer than he wanted to admit.

Then he did what he had sworn not to do the night before.

He went to the Tool.

What do I do now?