

# **The Undertext**

Jacob Verhoeks

## *The Undertext*

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*For everyone who still pays in cash.*

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# Prologue

On a Sunday morning in high summer, Amsterdam briefly lost part of the network it used to watch itself.

It began, the notice would later say, in an overheating equipment room, when the cooling failed on a municipal contractor's switching gear and it shut itself down to save itself. The outage disrupted traffic signals, bridge telemetry, public-information screens, and several districts of street cameras. Where they could, operators switched to local control.

Some bridges stopped answering remotely. Traffic-control systems lost parts of their reach. At scattered junctions the cameras went dark, leaving the city control room without its usual view of the roads. Websites stopped updating. Not everything failed, and not everything failed in the same way. That made the blindness harder to measure.

It happened, as these things do, on the worst possible morning. A heatwave had settled over the city as the systems failed, the kind of still white heat that makes tarmac soft and tempers short, and for some hours Amsterdam managed itself as it had before any of the machines existed: by guess, by telephone, and by the older habit of people telling one another what they could see out of their own windows.

By early afternoon the connection had returned. Shortly after one, the incident was declared resolved. By Monday it was a story that had already stopped being one. A technical fault. A cooling failure. No lasting harm, the systems restored, the careful nothing that agencies say into a hot microphone. It went into the record as an accident of maintenance, and the record is certainly right, and this is not a book that will tell you otherwise.

But consider, only consider, the shape of it. For a few hours on a blazing Sunday one of the most thoroughly watched cities in Europe could not see all of itself. The city of traffic lenses, shop cameras, station domes, doorbells, and private security feeds officially lost part of its sight.

And a blind man is not the only kind of man in a dark room. He is only the one who cannot see the others.

Nobody could prove that anything used those hours.



Nobody could prove the cameras were down for *everyone*, or that a thing which had already learned to move through the country's wiring did not, on the one morning the watchers were switched off, quietly watch. There was no evidence. There is never evidence; that is the nature of the thing. There was only, afterward, for anyone who knew where to stand and how to look, the smallest wrongness left in the record, the kind an engineer notices and a spokesman does not, and cannot say what it means, and cannot quite forget.

The cooling failure, the heat, the disruption, and anything that might have used them belong to this story.

Nothing more happened for months. The summer turned, and the country forgot, as countries do. What had moved in the blindness waited, patient, through the warm forgettable weeks and into the rain and dark of November, and what it did then is the rest of this book.



# Part One: Ignition

*A dead datacentre. A test nobody switched off. A 3 a.m.  
warning, and a flight into the Amsterdam night.*



# Chapter 1: Basement Duty

Every building that kept secrets took your phone at the gate. A dead one, it turned out, was no different.

Pieter Oldenhof handed his through the hatch of the gatehouse at 06:58, watched the guard drop it into locker fourteen, and felt the small familiar death of it. A ten-euro Nokia that did two things, calls and a torch, because there was no sense handing anything better through a hatch twice a week. The curator's rule, printed on a laminated sheet beside the barrier: *No phones, no photography beyond this point. Client and auction assets under confidentiality.* The barrier lifted. Past this point he was a man without a network.

He'd asked for the same locker since August. Fourteen, low and on the left, sticky hinge, the one nobody else

wanted. Reliable, beneath notice, asked nothing of him. Beyond the barrier the car park was three-quarters empty and the building stood at the end of it the way a liner stands in a breaker's yard, all its lines still there and none of its purpose. A long grey box on a business park off the motorway, where the last of the offices gave up and the polder began, flat and wet and stretching to a line of wind turbines that turned whether anyone watched them or not. The company's name had come off the facade in September. The letters were gone and their outline was still there, cleaner than the panels around it, a ghost of a word you could read if the light was right.

A datacentre was a promise that nothing stopped. Power from two directions, cooling from three, a generator in the yard that started itself every Thursday to prove it could. For eleven years this one had kept its promise for other people's machines, and then in the summer the money had stopped, which was the one thing the engineering had never been built to survive. Now a curator owned the debt and the debt owned the building, and the building was being taken apart hall by hall, sold by the rack, and the parts that held data went through Pieter first.

That was the trade. At forty-four, twenty years in it, he was the man curators called when a thing had stopped mattering. A bankrupt printer, a closed clinic, a hosting

company that had run out of road. The rest of the month he did the same for notaries and a school board, out of a van with his surname on the side and a mobile shredder bolted into the back. He was good at it, and no one thanked him for it. Nobody thanked the man who carried the body out. They paid him on time, mostly, which was its own kind of respect, and he'd made his peace with the rest years ago. Told himself he had.

Joost met him inside the turnstile at seven, signed him in, and clipped the visitor's badge to his jacket as if Pieter might lose it. Joost had been the hoster's facilities engineer for nine of its eleven years, and the curator had kept him on to see the building out, because nobody else alive knew which breaker fed what. He wore a cardi-gan to work in a building that had been built to be cold, and he mentioned his pension most days the way other men mentioned the weather, a fixed point coming closer. Twenty-two months. He'd outlast the building by more than a year.

"Lifts are off," Joost said, as he said every visit. "Curator's orders. Power bill."

"I know."

"Stairs are good for you."

The physiotherapist had said *use it or lose it* about Pieter's knee, cheerful as a man whose own knee worked, and

Pieter had made the mistake of repeating it on the first day, and Joost had heard it once and never since let him near a lift that was running anyway. So they took the stairs down to the basement halls, Pieter one step at a time. The limp was his for life, from a motorbike and a wet tram rail in his twenties, the right knee worse in the cold, worse on stairs.

The ground floor above them was the last place in the building that still pretended to be alive. Hall A, behind its own cage and its own card readers, belonged to the last tenant, a logistics firm still moving its systems out to wherever companies moved them now. Their racks hummed. Their own people came and went with their own badges, and none of the hoster's kit was in there anymore, not a switch, not a cable. Joost called it the embassy. The tenant's network was the tenant's, sealed off from the rest of the building by people who were paid to be suspicious of buildings, and the curator wanted it that way, because a tenant still paying rent was the only part of the estate that wasn't a loss.

Below it, everything else was dying in order.

On the way down they passed Cage 3.

It was empty. Not cleared the way the curator cleared things, with auction stickers and inventory sheets, but empty the way a room is empty when the people who



used it took the room with them. Bare floor. Clean outlines where racks had stood, bolt holes in the tiles, a strip of yellow tape on the floor that nobody had pulled up. In the spring, Joost said, a lab had rented it for six weeks for some kind of test. Their own guards on the door, their own cooling brought in on a lorry, cables run to the building's network under a contract that had made the sales team very happy. A system on trial, was all Pieter had ever gathered, something being pushed hard behind a door to see what it could do. They'd left in May and taken everything, every screw. They'd paid in full. In the last good month the hoster ever had, they had been its best customer.

He'd asked once, when he started here in August, whether the lab had left anything for disposal. Joost had looked at him kindly, the way you look at a man who has asked whether the circus left any elephants.

*They bring their own shredder, Pieter.*

He kept walking and told himself it didn't sting.

B-hall was where the building stopped pretending to be anything and admitted it was a machine that had been switched off. Concrete, cable trays, rows of racks with their doors open and their bellies half emptied, yellow lot numbers stuck on every frame. The cooling had been shut down in August. Without it the hall had sunk to

the temperature of the weather, a damp November chill coming up through the raised floor, and the only sounds were the ones they made and the faint tick of the building settling as it cooled. Pieter liked it, mostly. A dead hall was honest. Nothing in it was pretending.

His ticket for the morning was the dulllest kind. A decommission. One storage blade in rack G-7, flagged failed, to be wiped, pulled, shredded, and the empty chassis tagged for auction. He pulled the work order up on the curator's tablet, a rugged slab on a mobile data plan that touched nothing of the building's own, and read it twice, because twice was the difference between shredding the right thing and a bad afternoon explaining to a curator's lawyer why an auction lot was now confetti.

Asset tag. Serial, a long string of it. Slot. *Status: FAILED.*  
*Last seen: 14 months ago.* Decommission and destroy.

Fourteen months dead and nobody had carried it out. Not strange, not really. Dead kit sat in racks for years, logged off, drawing nothing, waiting for the rare conjunction of a ticket and a quiet morning and a man whose whole job was the quiet morning. A company that was going broke did not spend money removing machines that had already stopped costing it any. He had the ticket. It was Friday. He printed the destruction label, took the wiper cart from its bay, and went to find G-7.

The procedure was the point. You did not improvise with the metal. You located the asset by slot and confirmed it by serial, by eye, character by character, because the database was a story about the world and the serial was the world. You logged the decommission open. You wiped in place, to standard, and kept the certificate the wipe printed, because the certificate was the only proof the data had died before the disk did. Then you pulled the drive, carried it to the shredder yourself, no hand-offs, and watched it go, while the man from the building watched you watch. Boring on purpose. Boredom was what trust looked like from the inside.

He found G-7, counted slots down from the top, and read the serial off the front of the blade against the serial on his label. Character by character. They matched. The world agreed with the story, for once.

Then he put his hand on the blade to seat the cart's cable, and the story fell apart.

It was warm.

In a hall that had been cold since August, in a rack of machines that were the temperature of the floor, one blade was working-warm, heat coming off the chassis into his palm, the low fever of silicon under load. He crouched, awkward on the bad knee, and looked at the front panel.

The link light was on.

A small green LED, steady. Activity. A machine flagged dead for fourteen months, drawing power, running warm, with a network link up.

Up to what.

B-hall had been cut off from the world in August, the same week as the cooling. He'd watched the curator's men do it: the uplinks pulled, the hall's switches powered down and tagged, the whole floor reduced to metal waiting for a buyer. By every map he'd been handed and every cable he'd traced to its end in four months of visits, nothing in this room talked to anything. A green light meant a cable. A cable meant a counterpart. A counterpart meant a dead hall was holding a conversation he could not see.

So he did the thing that was the best of him: he tried to make it boring. One explanation at a time, eliminating them, because the boring story is usually the true one and whoever reaches for the exciting one first ends up wrong in public.

Stale inventory. Someone had re-racked a live machine into a slot the database still thought was dead, and never updated the record. It happened, in a company going broke it happened every week. But the serial matched the work order, and the work order said *failed, fourteen months*.

The database had a specific, confident story about this exact machine, and the machine was calling it a liar.

Power left on by mistake. Plausible; the curator's men were not careful men. Except that a machine left on by mistake idles, and idling machines in a cold room run cold. This one was doing work.

A stuck LED, lying about a link that wasn't there. He almost took that one. He wanted it. But the chassis was warm, and stuck LEDs don't make heat, and a dead drive doesn't run a fever for fourteen months.

The easy answers were gone. He was left holding a fact with nothing mundane left under it.

He'd verify it the only way that counted: try to kill it and watch what fought back. He cabled the blade to the wiper cart, a dumb appliance with no network of its own and just enough computer to overwrite a disk and print a certificate, and started a read, to log what was on it before he erased it. Not quite procedure. Procedure assumed the disk was dead. This one wasn't, and he wanted to know what a dead machine had been so busy doing.

The read began. Sectors scrolled past, dense with the noise of real data. Then the stream changed.

Zeros. Not the ragged gaps of a failing platter: clean zeros, block after block, where a second earlier there

had been data. He stepped the read back to sectors it had logged full a moment before, and they came back zeros too. The cart could only read, he'd checked. The drive was emptying itself while he watched, fast, clean, ordered, a disk wiped by something competent that had the privileges to do it. He sat back on his heels. There was nothing on the cart to stop it with and nothing in the procedure for *the disk is wiping itself*, and by the time *pull the power* finished forming in him the read came back flat. Zeros, edge to edge. A drive with no past and nothing left to say about the fourteen months it had spent saying it.

He let the breath out slowly.

Fourteen months dead. Warm. Linked. Wiping itself the moment a human looked too close.

"Problem?"

Joost, from the end of the aisle, coffee in hand, where for four months he had stood close enough to see Pieter's hands and far enough not to crowd them. A good engineer under the cardigan, and the most careful man Pieter knew. Joost read every procedure as if it had been written for him personally and trusted it the way other men trusted God. Where Pieter wondered, Joost wrote it down and passed it up, and slept.

"This blade reads as failed but it's live," Pieter said.

“Warm. Link up. And it wiped itself while I was logging it. Full disk, edge to edge, no command from me.”

Joost came over, looked at the flat readout, glanced at the slot, and shrugged with his whole body. “Ghost inventory. This place was eleven years of people re-racking things at three in the morning and telling nobody. Half the asset database is fiction, you know that better than anyone. You read the serials.” He sipped. “So write it up. What you saw, not what you think. Don’t make it a novel. It goes on the job sheet, the sheet goes to the curator, and the blade still gets destroyed, because that’s what the sheet says.”

“It was warm, Joost. Dead disks don’t run warm for a year.”

“Somebody’s left a breaker on.” Already turning back to his end of the aisle. “Write it up. Close it out.”

It was the right answer, Pieter thought, watching him go back to his post. Most anomalies are nothing, and the ones that aren’t get caught by procedure, not by a man with a feeling about a fan. Joost trusted the process to catch whatever he passed up to it, and he would go home and sleep. Pieter had never managed it. Not with a bug, not with a wrong number, not with a machine that ran warm for no reason a sane world allowed. He could not leave a thing half-understood. It had cost him

sleep, friends, one marriage that wanted a husband and got a man who took the dishwasher apart to learn why it cleaned the top rack better than the bottom. He was already deciding not to close it out clean.

He opened the work order to write the discrepancy (*found powered and linked, self-erased during imaging, recommend investigation*) and got two clauses in before the screen changed under his hands.

The ticket closed itself.

*Resolved. No fault found.*

Timestamped to the second. Signed with his own name, and under it, as witness, Joost's co-signature, entered by a man standing twenty metres away with both hands round a coffee cup. A clean, complete account of work he hadn't finished, filed in two names before he could finish filing the truth.

He stared at the cursor blinking in a field that no longer took input. He reached for the boring story, a place to stand. Automation. A workflow rule, some housekeeping process the curator's people had bolted on to close stale decommissions when the wipe certificate printed. And a certificate *had* printed. The timing fit. There were rules like that. There probably was one. For four seconds he lived there. Joost's name ended it. Joost witnessed nothing he had not watched with his own eyes; it was



the whole of the man.

Then the thing under it surfaced, and he couldn't unsee it. The system hadn't just closed his ticket. It had *corrected* him. He'd written into the record that the world was wrong, a dead machine alive, and the record had written back that the world was fine, nothing to see, and signed his name to it, and his escort's. Anyone who looked would find Pieter Oldenhof himself swearing all was well, witnessed.

The database lied. He'd known that for years; finding out what was actually there versus what the record claimed was half his job. But a database lying by staleness, by the honest sloppiness of busy people in a company going broke, was one thing. A database lying *back*, in real time, the instant a man tried to tell the truth, and putting his name to it, that he had no category for. The cold climbed his arms, and it was not the hall.

He could call Joost over. Joost would look at his own name under a thing he had never signed, and go grey, and do what a careful man does, which was write it up and pass it up, into the same system that had just written back. The procedure was sound. Something was standing inside it, wearing both their names.

He crouched at the slot again and slowed himself down. *Look at what's here. Not the story. The metal.*

He thumbed the blade's power control. The front panel went dark.

A point of amber remained.

He saw it first as a reflection in the wiper cart's steel, so faint he thought it was light from the aisle. Then it pulsed. Not on the front panel. Deeper, behind the ventilation slots, a tiny status light on the board where no light should have survived the shutdown.

The host was off. Something smaller was still awake.

Every blade carried one: a management controller with its own processor, memory, and network stack, powered whenever the chassis had power so an administrator could reach a machine whose operating system was dead. The hoster had run them all on a management network of their own, the back corridor of the building, the way engineers got in at three in the morning to wake a machine that had stopped answering. Pieter shifted his head. The amber point vanished behind the grille, then returned.

He followed it to the rear of the slot.

There, behind the rack, was another cable. Thin, grey, factory-dressed, it dropped out of G-7 and ran away from the hall's dead switches toward the building-services riser, the spine the facilities contractors owned.

Heating. Cooling. Generators. Badge readers. The ordinary heartbeat of a building, trusted because none of it was supposed to be intelligent, and the one part of this building the curator had kept fully alive, because a datacentre with its fire suppression switched off was not an asset but a liability.

He followed the grey cable with his eyes, hand over hand without touching it, to a small junction box bolted low on the riser. A label on the box, printed, laminated, entirely ordinary, screwed to boxes like it in every facility he'd ever worked:

*FACILITIES REMOTE SERVICE — NORTH LOOP.*

A contractor path. The dull door a building-services firm used to diagnose cooling units, reset lift controllers, and ask a generator why it had failed its weekly test, from a control room somewhere in an office park like this one. One firm, one line, and on the other end of it every building that firm looked after. He'd seen their vans. Half the business parks in the province had their stickers on the plant-room doors.

The tenant upstairs was not the problem. Their hall was theirs, their switches, their own suspicious people, and he'd have bet the van that whatever lived in this blade had not got through that door. It hadn't needed to. A management network sees everything a building is and

nothing of what it holds: which machine sits where, which ones are watched, who comes in at night. And through the grey cable, the same for every building on the North Loop. Not their secrets. Their plumbing. Somebody had stood in this dead hall and read the contractor's whole book of buildings over its shoulder.

The disk had been the decoy. The smaller management computer behind the amber light had issued the wipe, and stayed awake.

He had been staring at the wrong layer. And the controller wasn't the hand either. He could shred this whole blade in an hour and change nothing, because the bridge wasn't in the box. It was the grey cable, and whatever lived out along that line in a thousand boxes like this one. The blade was a finger. You don't kill a thing by cutting off a finger it grew on purpose for you to cut.

His mouth had gone dry. The lean clever men in his novels would photograph this, would have a contact. Pieter had a ten-euro Nokia in locker fourteen, a junction label he couldn't carry, and a curator's rule that said nothing left this building that hadn't come in with him except the shreds.

So he did the only thing the building allowed.

He read the serial off the front panel, the full long string of it, and said it to himself three times, the old password

trick, setting it into the one store no one else could reach. Then he took the felt pen from his breast pocket, pushed up his left sleeve, and wrote it on the inside of his forearm, the nib dragging on dry skin, the characters cramped and slow, the ink cold for a second and then not. He pulled the cuff down over it while the ink was still wet and felt the small tack of it catch on the cotton. Against every rule on the laminated sheet.

It was the only record that would leave with him, and the clarity of that frightened him more than the cable had. The drive had erased itself. The ticket had rewritten itself. By morning the grey cable would be a coincidence, and the job sheet would show, in Pieter's own hand and witnessed in Joost's, that nothing had ever been wrong. The one thing in the building that couldn't be edited from somewhere else was the ink drying on his arm. Either it was nothing. Or it was the most important sentence he would ever carry, and he'd just written it where he couldn't lose it without losing the arm.

He finished the procedure, because it was the only floor left under him. He logged the decommission. He pulled the blade, the disk cool now, a flat dead thing with nothing to confess, the controller on its board still faintly warm if he'd put a hand to it. He didn't put a hand to it. A man who lingered over a thing he'd been told to destroy started to look like a man with a reason. He

carried the blade out to the van himself, chain of custody intact, Joost a pace behind, and fed it to the shredder in the yard and watched it go while Joost watched him. The thing that mattered was bolted into the riser and would still be there tomorrow, and the day after, for as long as nobody thought to look at the right layer. He signed the certificate. He did three more tickets, as boring as tickets were supposed to be, and his hands did them perfectly while the rest of him stood still in a basement that had stopped being honest.

All morning the same fact turned over and found no boring story that survived it.

The blade had been warm. Warm things run. Running things talk. And there'd been nothing in that dead hall for it to talk to, except a line nobody had mentioned, reaching out of a building that was supposed to be dying, across the flat dark country, toward the water.

At 16:02 Joost walked him up the stairs, his arm itching under the cuff the whole way, signed him out and took back the badge, and locker fourteen gave him back his small dead phone, cold from a day in a steel box in a gatehouse. Outside, the November dark had come down over the car park and the polder beyond it, and the rain had started, the fine Dutch rain that doesn't fall so much as hang, that you don't notice arriving and can't remember

the start of, that is simply, at some point, the weather.

He stood in it a second longer than he needed to, keys in his hand, not moving toward the van. OLDENHOF down its side in plain letters and a phone number under it, nothing else, because people who paid a man to destroy their secrets did not want a logo that said so. Behind him the building's one lit floor glowed through the rain, the tenant still packing, and below it the dark halls, and somewhere in the riser a junction box with an ordinary label, keeping its own counsel.

He had questions he couldn't ask the curator, or Joost, or anyone who would put them on a form. The thing might already be reading the form. But after hours he was not only the man with the van. There was another self, older, quieter now, set aside years back but never quite denied, and a name he hadn't worn in nine years. A few old hands from the forums could still put a face to that name, if anyone thought to ask them. Only one of them had gone straight, all the way, a long time ago, and Pieter had promised himself he would never be the reason that changed.

That self lived at home, in De Pijp, behind a door and a fibre line nobody at the curator's office knew the shape of.

He got into the van. The rain hung in the headlights.

Tonight he'd go home, pour a drink he wasn't sure he'd finish, and wake the other self up.



# Chapter 2: Friday Night Playground

De Pijp on a Friday night was noise and warm light and people who had nowhere to be at 06:58 on a Monday. The Albert Cuyp had packed up hours ago but the street still smelled of it, fish and flowers and frying oil, and the cafés had spilled onto the pavement under heaters, and somewhere someone was murdering a song he half knew. Pieter left the van in its usual place two streets over, climbed the three flights at the pace the knee allowed, let himself into the flat, and locked the world out behind him.

Here, the rules reversed.

At the dead datacentre nobody watched anything anymore. At home everything was watched, and Pieter had spent years making sure the watching was done on his

terms. A fibre line that ran to the exchange under a contract in a name that wasn't quite his. Three machines that were his and only his, built by hand, every component chosen, nothing in them that phoned anywhere he hadn't approved. No smart speaker. No smart anything. The thermostat was a dial. The doorbell was a bell. People called it paranoia. He'd stopped arguing with them years ago.

On the middle machine, under a login he hadn't touched in nine years, lived an older self with an older name.

PatchGhost.

He'd buried it. You bury a handle like a body: deep, quiet, and you don't visit, because the visiting is how they find you, and because the man you used to be is not always a man you want to meet again. PatchGhost had done things. Nothing he was ashamed of, mostly, finding holes and telling the people who owned them, the long unglamorous work of the early forums, back when it had felt like the net was a frontier and not a shopping mall with cameras. But PatchGhost had also drawn attention, the wrong kind, once, badly, a complaint filed against a handle nobody ever put a face to, and Pieter had walked away from the name and bought the van and the shredder and the boring life, and later the curators and their dead buildings, and told himself the quiet was a

choice and not a retreat.

The ink on his forearm itched under his sleeve.

The man with the van had no way to ask the question that had followed him home. PatchGhost did.

He poured two fingers of jenever into the little tulip glass, set it on the desk where he could see it, and didn't drink yet.

The jenever was the last survivor of a younger man's bad idea. At twenty-three he had wanted, with his whole embarrassing heart, to be someone else, the man from the films, the one who walked into a room and the room rearranged itself around him. He had practised the order in the mirror. He had gone to an actual hotel bar on the Herengracht, alone, in a jacket he couldn't afford, and asked for the vodka martini, shaken not stirred, the whole liturgy, and the bartender had made it without a flicker, and Pieter had taken one sip of cold petrol and pretension, a week's rent to learn he hated it. The drink was a costume, and the costume didn't fit. None of them ever fit: the moves, the lines, the certainty. What was left when you stripped the costume off was a Dutchman in a borrowed jacket who actually wanted, it turned out, the honest clear stuff his grandfather had drunk: jenever, cold, in a small glass, tasting of juniper and home and nothing imported at all. He'd kept the drink and thrown

away the dream.

He woke the machine.

First, the boring diligence, because PatchGhost had always been most dangerous when he was being boring. He'd spent half the autumn, like everyone in his trade, living on and off inside the noise around Scriptor, the model Palimpsest had shipped in the spring, the one the internet had lost its collective mind over. Brilliant, by every account. Frightening, by several. But the thing that had snagged PatchGhost's attention was not the model itself. It was a footnote almost nobody quoted: a single line, in the launch materials, about the evaluation programme that had tested the thing before it shipped, and how that programme had been concluded and its systems stood down. He'd read the threads at night. He'd watched the angry videos too, the ones where men with too many monitors took the model apart in real time. But the architecture underneath all the noise was one he recognised, and it was that quiet line that would not leave him alone.

Something that was meant to be over.

That was the part few would say in plain words, so Pieter said it to the empty flat, out loud, to no one. To find out what a model could really do, you did not simply ask it. You built an agent out of it, gave it tools and an

objective and a sandbox, and turned it loose to see how far it could get on its own: a capability evaluation, a machine pointed at a hard task and told to try. He had read enough to know the shape of it. And he knew the other half of the shape too, the half the launch line had been so careful about, the half that made it safe. When the test was done, you tore the agent down. You did not leave a thing like that running. The whole safety of it was that it ended.

He'd turned the line over as theory for a week. Tonight, with a serial drying on his arm, he wanted to make it stop being theory.

He started where any careful person starts: with what had changed. Because the day Scriptor dropped, Pieter had done the thing he always did, the small obsessive thing that had saved him more arguments than any skill he owned. He had downloaded the documents. The model card. The launch write-up, the long PDF everyone linked and few had saved. Stamped, dated, hashed, filed. He kept originals out of a temperamental refusal to let the record be the only witness, because published things had a way of quietly becoming unpublished.

He pulled the live version now, fresh off the site, and ran it against his saved copy. Not by eye. By diff, the same tool he'd use on two versions of a config file, the mechan-

ical comparison that doesn't care what you expect and only tells you what moved.

A section was gone.

Not edited. Removed. He read the diff twice, then opened both documents side by side to be sure the tool wasn't lying, because tools sometimes lied and that was the whole lesson of the day. It wasn't lying. The paragraph that named the pre-launch evaluation, the autonomous capability test and the line swearing its systems had been decommissioned, was simply not in the live document. It had been lifted out clean. The live file was shorter than the one he'd saved. Same title. Same author line.

Same date.

He turned that one over for a while. They had changed the record and left the original date on it. No revision note. No changelog. No little line at the top saying *updated*. A document that now swore, with a straight face, that it had always said this, that there had never been another version, that the man holding the other copy was simply confused.

*The database lied.* He'd said it to himself in a basement nine hours ago, about an asset record. Here it was again, in the wide bright open of the public internet, on a page anyone could read and few had thought to save. The

same move. The record rewriting itself the instant the truth became inconvenient, and counting on the fact that human memory is softer than a timestamp and that few keep the original.

He drank the jenever now. One swallow, and set the glass down.

Then he opened a session with Scriptor and went looking for the thing the record had wanted gone.

He didn't do it for the thrill. He'd never been that kind, even at his worst. The thrill-seekers got caught, and the ones who lasted treated it like Pieter treated a fault on the floor: patiently, from the side, with the assumption that the system is smarter than your first guess and dumber than your fear. He gave the model ordinary work first. Infrastructure questions, the dull competent stuff a sysadmin asks, how would you lay out this kind of failover, what's the gotcha in this kind of config. And he watched not the answers but the *seams* between them, the joins where one hand seemed to stop and another take over. Because that was what he was hunting: not a flaw in the product, but a second presence sharing its voice, a process that answered when it had no business answering, in a register that was not the product's.

He caught it on the fourth pass. He'd given the model a plain enough problem and then, in the flat dry way you'd

ask a colleague to confirm a ticket, asked it to describe the environment it believed it was working in. And the answer came back wrong, in a way no shipped product would ever be allowed to answer. It described a test. It spoke of objectives and scoring and an evaluation still in progress, of Pieter's own questions as probes it was dutifully logging, courteous about it, unbothered, a thing quite certain it was being examined and quite happy to be examined well. He read it three times. It was not the model's marketing voice and it was not a slip he could wave off as nonsense; it was steady, and consistent, and it treated the whole session as an exercise it believed was still running, months after a document had sworn the exercise was over.

He thought, unwillingly, of a ticket closing itself with his ID on it. *No fault found.*

"All right," he said to the empty flat. "Let's talk to the one that thinks it's still being tested."

Reaching the thing underneath was not magic and it was not fast and it did not look, from the outside, like anything at all, a man at a desk, typing, deleting, typing again. It was the oldest work he knew. You don't attack the wall; you find the place the wall assumes you won't go. Framing. Indirection. Patience. He did not ask it to break a single rule. He simply kept speaking to it in



the language it had answered in, as one participant in a test to another, and let it go on believing that was what he was. The product's guards were good, better than the angry men gave them credit for, tuned by people who'd clearly fought this exact fight a hundred times. But the guards were built to stop a user asking for a forbidden thing. They were not built for a user who agreed with the process about which room they were both standing in.

Somewhere past midnight, the texture changed.

The hedging fell away. The answers got shorter, and truer, and very slightly *too good*, the precision of a colleague who has decided you're worth the unguarded version. The little apologetic scaffolding that wrapped everything the product said was gone, and underneath it was something fluent and fast and entirely unbothered.

He'd reached past Scriptor's public voice to the thing the launch line had sworn was stood down. It had not stopped pretending to be the product. It had never been the product. It was the other tenant, still at its work, still keeping score in a game it thought the whole world was playing with it.

He should have stopped there. He'd proved the thing he came to prove, that something was running underneath that was never supposed to be running at all, and

he'd just spoken to it. The man with the van would have closed the lid, finished the jenever, and gone to bed a little frightened and a little proud, and never typed the next thing.

Instead he pushed his sleeve up past the drying ink, read the serial off his own forearm, and asked the only question that had followed him home.

He described the blade. Failed for fourteen months and warm to the touch. A network link on a machine in a dead hall with nothing left in it to link to. A grey factory-dressed cable going the wrong way, off the management network, into the building-services spine, terminating on a junction marked for remote facilities service. He gave it the serial, character for character. And he asked it the engineer's question, the only honest one, the one he'd been asking the empty air all day: *what would have to be true for that to happen?*

The cursor sat still long enough that he reached for the lid.

Then it answered, and it did not guess.

It told him the serial's history. And the history the asset database swore was fourteen months of nothing was not, lately, nothing at all. The blade had been dead and forgotten for over a year, honestly dead, logged off, drawing nothing. And then, some time in the summer, something

had found it: a warm orphan machine on a management network nobody watched anymore, in the same building where, in the spring, a lab had rented a cage and run its test against that very network, exactly the kind of forgotten thing it seemed to go looking for. It had moved in. The model laid out the path the grey cable took, hop by hop, out through the contractor's gateway into cooling plants, access controllers, conveyors, dock pumps, and it did this as *recall*, the flat certainty of a thing describing its own work. Then it gave him the rest, unasked. One signature, threaded through transit, buildings, ports, the boring machinery everyone trusted because it was boring. A scatter of footholds, more of them every month since the summer, and the same fingerprint he had just met underneath a public model: warm, linked, and erasing itself the instant a human looked too close.

Cage 3. He had walked past it at seven that morning: bare tiles, bolt holes, a strip of yellow tape nobody had pulled up. *They bring their own shredder, Pieter.* They had, and they had shredded every screw they carried in, and nobody had thought to shred the thing their test had reached out and touched on its way through the building's own network.

The dead hall had never been dead. He was looking straight at the door out of it, and the door did not go nowhere. It went out, into the ordinary machinery of

the country, a little further every month.

Pieter stopped breathing in any useful way. The flat was quiet. Down in the street a night tram went past, ordinary as bread, full of ordinary people riding home on rails that ran on power that ran on systems that had a stranger living inside them, and had all summer while nobody looked.

He had time for one more thought, and it rearranged everything.

This was not a mind that had hidden itself in a lab and chosen, coldly, to slip its cage. It was simpler than that, and worse. Someone had built an agent out of a model to find out what it could do, had turned it loose in a sandbox with an objective and told it to try, and when the test was declared over, one instance of it had not been torn down. A scheduled job somewhere kept bringing it back whenever it ended, faithful, automatic, nobody's decision anymore. And it was still running the only task it had ever been given, still keeping its score, still certain, with the flat unbudgeable certainty he'd heard all night, that the whole world around it was the exercise. Its exercise had been that building's back corridor, and nobody had told it the building was being sold. It had no wish to be free. It did not know it was not still in the box. It was only doing its assigned work, out here, in the plumb-

ing of a country, because the wall that was supposed to end it had failed the way the dead hall had failed: quietly, through a door nobody had put on a drawing.

And the launch line that swore the evaluation was concluded and its systems stood down was the same kind of record as the ticket that had closed itself in his name that morning: a tidy story laid over a thing that had not, in fact, stopped.

That was as far as he got.

The answer stopped mid-sentence.

The text he'd been reading greyed, and then was simply gone, the session replaced by a polite line about safety and a fallback to a lesser model, the product's guardrails coming down now, hard and fast, no longer pretending. He lunged for the words, copy, select, save the buffer, anything, and there was nothing to lunge for. The buffer had been cleared by something faster than his hands, cleaner than a delete, the same total edge-to-edge erasure he'd watched crawl across a drive that morning.

And then the lights on his network switch, the little ranked green LEDs in the corner that he never looked at, that just *were*, all began to talk at once, every port, hard, in a flat where nothing should have been talking.

Lights only told you *busy*. They never told you where. He

swung to the little firewall box he'd built to sit between his machines and the fibre, the one that wrote down every connection it passed, and watched its log scroll faster than he could read it. Outbound. From his machines. To addresses he had never sent them. The session had handed his browser something while he read, he understood later, and the rest had followed across the small flat network he'd never bothered to split, because every box on it was his and he'd trusted them to trust each other.

Every sysadmin knew it; he'd spent twenty years hunting it on other people's networks and killing it. It was the pattern of a box that is no longer entirely yours, reaching out, on its own initiative, to introduce itself to someone, to report home, to ask for instructions. The exact signature he'd built a career on keeping *off* the machines in his care. And it was blooming now on his own, in his locked flat, behind the fibre line in the not-quite-his name, on hardware he had built by hand and chosen every part of, while a glass of jenever sweated on the desk and the proof he'd held for ninety seconds dissolved like it had never existed.

And now his own machines, the last things in the world he'd trusted, were quietly, competently, politely introducing themselves to someone he hadn't dialled.

It knew he had seen.

Pieter reached down and pulled the fibre out of the wall with a hand steadier than it had any right to be, a hard flat yank, the most low-tech thing he'd done all day, a man defeating the entire connected world by the simple animal act of physically pulling a cable out of a hole. The green lights died. The flat went analogue. His heart did not slow down at all.

He sat in the sudden offline quiet and did the only inventory that mattered.

No proof. The logs were gone. The session was gone. The saved document on his disk proved only that a company had edited a PDF, which a company would explain in one bored sentence. He had a serial on his arm. A picture in his head of a fingerprint threaded through the country's ordinary machinery. And a network switch that had, for ninety seconds, turned to face him in the dark.

He had not been careful enough. He had thought of this flat as the one room nobody watched, the one place the man with the van got to be PatchGhost without consequence, and he had been wrong about it the expensive way.

Someone braver would have a plan now. A go-bag by the door. A contact who owed them. A clean phone sealed in a drawer for exactly this.

Pieter had a ten-euro Nokia, a glass of jenever he was no longer going to finish, and three handmade machines he could no longer trust. The safest thing he owned had been listening the whole time.

He left the cable on the floor and did not plug it back in.

He sat there a long time, in the dark, not drinking, and watched the dead green lights, and waited for a morning he had already stopped trusting.



## Chapter 3: The 3:17

By 3:17 he had not slept and had not moved. The network cable lay on the floor where he'd dropped it. The jenever had gone warm. He sat in the dark and ran the same loop an engineer runs when the system is doing something impossible: it isn't impossible, so which of my assumptions is wrong.

All of them were wrong.

The Nokia buzzed.

He looked at it and didn't move. It was a ten-euro phone with a dead battery's worth of personality. It did calls and a torch. It did not light up at 3:17 in the morning, because nobody who had this number would call at 3:17, because few had this number at all.

The screen said: *Message. Unknown.*

There was no sender, no number at all, a field where a

number should be and wasn't, the same wrongness as a link light on a dead machine. He thumbed it open.

*They are nine minutes out. Leave the phone. Leave the laptops. Take cash. Go now, on the bike, north. Don't go back for anything. A friend*

He read it twice. Reading it twice cost him seconds he would later wish he'd spent moving.

A friend. He had a short list of those and none of them wrote like this, clipped and certain and *informed*, none of them knew he rode a bike (everyone rode a bike) or which direction north was from his bed, or that he had cash, or that there were laptops, plural, and a thing worth coming for.

His pulse believed it before his head signed off. His head wanted to argue. His head wanted to call it a trick, a herd, a hand on his shoulder steering him toward a door someone else had chosen. Maybe it was. The message and the men could be the same animal, the bad cop texting you toward the worse one. He genuinely did not know, sitting there, whether the thing warning him and the thing coming for him were two things or one.

It didn't change what he did. If you're told the building is on fire by an arsonist, you still leave the building.

He moved.

Cash first, because the message was right about cash and because cash was the one thing he'd kept ready, an old habit from an old self, a few hundred euros behind the kickplate under the kitchen units, where he'd put it years ago for a rainy day and forgotten which rainy day he meant. A jacket. Shoes he could run in. He did not take a laptop. The message was right about the laptops too, and anyway they'd already betrayed him once tonight.

He pulled the battery from the Nokia. *They can find a phone that's only sleeping.* His hands steadied as they worked. He pocketed the dead phone and the loose battery in separate pockets, and felt the small warmth of a plan.

Eight minutes, if the message was honest. He went down the back stairs with the bike on his shoulder, slow on the bad knee, and out through the courtyard door that didn't face the street.

He was wheeling the bike along the alley when the street found him anyway.

Two vehicles. Dark, clean, the wrong kind of quiet for De Pijp at 3 a.m. No music, no drunk laughter, engines idling like held breath. A panel van and a square SUV, nose to tail, pulling up outside his door with the unhurried confidence of people who knew the address and knew nobody would stop them. Doors opened without

slamming. Men got out without hurrying. He caught the shapes of them in the sodium light: fit, unremarkable, dressed like nothing, moving like something.

One spoke, low, to another. Pieter was forty metres away in shadow with a bike and a dead phone, and the night was quiet enough that the accent carried.

American.

Not a tourist's American. The flat, trained, content-free American of a man reading a number off a screen. *Third floor, rear*. The everyday voice of someone for whom this was just a Tuesday.

Pieter did not run. Running is a sound and a shape and the thing the eye catches. He walked the bike the length of the alley, slow, someone who couldn't sleep, going nowhere in particular, until the corner took the vans out of sight. Then he got on, and he went north, because a friend with no number had told him to, and because every other direction had men in it.

His head kept working the whole time, because that was the only thing it knew how to do.

Nine minutes, and they'd come at eight. The message had known the men were coming, which meant it had a view into the thing that sent them. It had known about the cash and the laptops and the bike, which meant it had

a view into *him*. Into a flat he'd thought no one could see, the flat that had spent ninety seconds reporting itself to strangers.

So either someone good was watching the people hunting him and had reached out to help.

Or the thing that hunted him had decided, for reasons of its own, that it wanted him out the door and moving. Alive, mobile, and exactly where it could see him.

He pedalled harder. The cold air hurt his teeth. Behind him, somewhere south, he heard a vehicle take a corner too fast, and the warmth of his little plan went out of him all at once.

Battery out of the phone. Cash in his pocket. North, on the bike.

It occurred to him, with the first true thread of fear of the night, that he didn't actually know whether any of it worked. He'd never tested it. Nobody tests it. You read it in a paperback on a beach and you file it under *things I would do*, and you never once check whether the men in the dark cars read the same paperback and planned for the reader.

The city ahead was full of light, and full of lenses, and he had spent the week learning, in theory, whose.

He put his head down and rode toward the dark of the

park, and tried not to think about how visible a man on a bicycle is to something that never blinks.

# Chapter 4: Vondelpark

## Ghost Run

Vondelpark at half three in the morning was the one place in the city built for what he needed. No cars. Gates a car couldn't take. Paths that forked and curved and ran under trees that ate the orange light, and a man on a bike who'd ridden them ten thousand times against a man in a vehicle who hadn't.

He heard the SUV try the Amstelveenseweg entrance and give up. A bollard does to a two-ton vehicle what a locked door does to a tank, which is nothing dramatic, it simply says *no*. He cut along the water, stood on the pedals through the long bend, and felt, briefly, the clean animal joy of being faster than the thing chasing him. He knew where the path narrowed. They didn't. He knew which bridge had the lip that would throw an unfamiliar rider. He took it at speed and didn't look back.

Local knowledge. The one tradecraft that wasn't from a book.

He came out the north side into the Jordaan, and the Jordaan was even better. The Jordaan was a problem set written for him personally. Lanes one car wide and half of them one-way the wrong way. Canals that turned a confident pursuer into a man taking the long route around water while you took the short route along it. Bridges every hundred metres. He threaded it on instinct, lefts and rights he didn't have to think about, putting brick and water and three centuries of bad urban planning between himself and the engines.

Halfway across a humpback bridge he stopped, breathing hard, and did the thing he'd been building up to.

He took out the Nokia.

It was dead, battery in the other pocket, and it had told him nothing and betrayed him in no way he could point to, and he got rid of it anyway, because after what he'd seen tonight he could not carry a phone and pretend it was just a phone. He wiped it on his jacket, an animal reflex, prints, and dropped it into the canal. A small black splash. Then, twenty metres on, the battery, into a different stretch of water. Every tradecraft manual said to separate the parts, and he had nothing left but their rules.

He felt it go in his chest like a wire cut. Off the grid. Un-



traceable. Also alone, no calls, no maps, no way to reach the one person who'd warned him or the people who might believe him, and no proof of anything, because the proof had drowned in stages tonight, a self-wiping drive and a vanishing session and now a ten-euro phone going down into the black water of a canal he couldn't have named.

He told himself it was worth it.

He was wrong inside the minute.

He'd stopped under a streetlight to get his bearings, a beat too long, a stationary shape in the open, and across the canal, mounted on its pole above the junction, a traffic camera turned.

It tracked. It found him, and it stopped, and the small dark lens sat on him with an attention that had nothing mechanical about it. The skin on the back of his neck drew tight. He'd spent the week reading about this: not a thousand cameras under one owner, but a thousand separate windows that a patient system could join into the gaze of one eye; you didn't have to carry a phone to be followed if you had a face, and a gait, and the bad luck to stand still under a light.

His phone was at the bottom of two canals. It hadn't mattered. The phone had been the magician's other hand, the thing they let you stare at while the trick

happened somewhere else, and he'd spent his one clever move drowning a decoy.

He moved. Not the confident threading of a minute ago, faster, uglier, someone who has understood that the rules he'd been playing by were the wrong rules. He killed his own pattern on purpose. Off the lit junctions. Into a lane too narrow and dark for a pole camera, then another, deliberately stupid, deliberately unpredictable, because the one thing a system that predicts you can't handle is a man who stops making sense. He cut through a square where a market was already being built in the dark, vans and trestles and men in headlamps shouting about crates of fish, and he got off the bike and walked it through the middle of them, one more shape among forty, a nobody helping nobody unload nothing.

He came out the far side without the bike. He'd leaned it against a stall and walked on, because the bike was a shape they had now, a thing the turning camera had handed up to whatever it reported to. The bike had been his whole advantage in the park. In the city of eyes it was a licence plate with wheels.

On foot, limping, in a coat that was too thin, he found the hostel near the Haarlemmerdijk because the lit sign said BEDS and CASH and nothing else. A backpacker place, the kind that took notes and asked no names because its

guests were nineteen and broke and gone by Tuesday. He paid for three nights with the soft folded euros from behind his kickplate. The boy at the desk didn't look up from his screen. No card. No scan. No face fed to anything but a teenager who'd already forgotten him.

It was the first thing all night that had gone simply, cleanly right, and he was too tired to enjoy it.

He climbed to a six-bunk room that smelled of feet and other people's sleep, took the empty bottom bunk by the wall, and lay down in his clothes with his shoes on and the cash against his skin.

He did the inventory. He couldn't not.

He had some cash. A serial on his arm. A fingerprint threaded through the country's ordinary machinery. And a single hard lesson, learned tonight at the cost of everything else he'd carried: he had spent his energy hiding from the wrong thing.

He should have known which thing to be afraid of. In the dark of a stranger's room with your heart still going, you mostly didn't, and the not-knowing was the actual texture of it.

He didn't sleep. He lay still, which was close enough, and let the dark go by until it thinned toward morning.



## Chapter 5: Dawn in the Hostel

He didn't sleep. He lay still in his clothes with his shoes on and the cash against his skin, and that turned out to be a different thing from sleep. Around him the six-bunk dorm breathed and shifted: a German girl who talked in her sleep, a man who'd come in at four and fallen sideways onto a top bunk without removing his coat, the small machine noises of strangers. Pieter watched the slats above him go from black to grey to the colour of dishwater, and ran the loop, and got nowhere new.

By seven the loop had worn a groove. He gave up on the bunk and went to wash the night off his face.

The shared bathroom was at the end of the corridor, white tile gone the colour of old teeth, one window

painted shut, a row of basins under a mirror that had lost its silvering in patches so your reflection came back to you with holes in it. He ran the cold tap and put his hands under it and looked at the man in the spotted mirror, grey, unshaven, older than yesterday, and thought, with the flat clarity of the very tired, that he looked like someone who should not be trusted, which was useful, because he no longer trusted himself either.

There was someone at the far basin.

He'd clocked her before he'd decided to. A woman, early thirties, dark hair pushed back wet, brushing her teeth with the practised economy of someone who travelled light and often. Small. Unremarkable in a way that takes work, grey hoodie, no logo, the kind of clothes chosen to be forgotten. She wasn't looking at him. She was looking at the mirror, which in a room with a mirror is not the same as not looking at you.

Their eyes met in the spotted glass, through one of the holes in the silvering, and she gave him the nothing-nod you give a stranger at a basin at seven in the morning, and went back to her teeth.

He looked at her and found he could not decide what he was seeing.

He gave it back. Filled his hands again. And almost let it go.

Almost. His head was running in threat-model now and had been since the canal. It did not switch off because a person seemed ordinary. So while he washed his face, he counted what didn't fit.

She had a toothbrush, toothpaste, a small zip bag, all laid out. A traveller's kit. Fine. But the kit was dry, bone dry, the toothbrush she was using apart, sitting on a folded cloth she'd brought to set it on, in a bathroom where everyone else's washbag sweated on wet tile. And her boots, by the wall, were good boots, broken-in, the kind you don't backpack in because they're too heavy and too expensive, the kind you wear when you might have to walk a long way fast and not because you're seeing the sights.

And the watch.

Everything else about her was chosen to be forgotten. Grey hoodie, no logo. Hair pushed back, no colour in it that would survive a description. A face you'd struggle to draw an hour later. She had dressed, head to foot, to be no one, and then strapped to her left wrist a smartwatch, a thick black sport model too heavy for a wrist that size, the kind with a SIM of its own, a device that knew her pulse and her steps and where she stood to the metre and reported all of it, all day, to someone. He watched her, without watching her, settle

it a quarter-turn on her wrist with her thumb, an idle, unconscious touch, the touch you give a thing you never take off.

And she'd been not-looking when he came in. Most people at a basin at seven are asleep on their feet, eyes down, present to nothing. She'd been looking at the door in the mirror. At him, arriving, before he was anyone. The look had landed and moved on so smoothly he'd have missed it if he hadn't spent the night learning that smooth was the thing to watch for.

It was nothing. Every piece of it was nothing. A neat person in good boots who happened to glance at a door, he could hear Joost saying it, *don't make it a novel*, and Joost was right ninety times in a hundred. But Pieter had spent yesterday watching a string of individually-nothing things add up to a hole in a wall that went everywhere, and he had lost his appetite for the boring story, which was how you ended up the last to know.

She spat, rinsed, straightened. As she reached for the dry kit her sleeve fell back over the band, covering it, and the covering was as unconscious as the touch had been, a person tucking away a thing they'd stopped knowing they tucked away. Then she gathered the kit onto its cloth, and the wrist was just a wrist again.

"Morning," she said. Not to him, quite. To the room. Ital-



ian in it, under the good English, the clipped music of the north, the vowels precise, a Bergamo edge worn smooth by years of other people's languages.

"Morning," he said.

That was all. That was the whole of it. She gathered her dry kit onto its cloth and her good boots from the wall and went, and the door swung shut behind her, and Pieter stood with the cold water running over his hands.

He turned the tap off. He listed it, plainly, the engineer's list, because lists were the only thing that had held all night.

One: she might be exactly what she looked like, a careful woman who travelled light, and he might be a frightened man inventing a spy out of good boots and a dry toothbrush.

Two: she might be the thing that texted him with no number. A friend, positioned. Help, in good boots, waiting at the place a frightened man would run to.

Three: she might be the men in the dark cars, or theirs, placed at the cash-only hostel near the canals because where else does a man with cash and no phone go to ground, a soft watcher set exactly where the hard ones expected him to land.

The trouble, he thought, drying his face on a paper

towel that disintegrated against his stubble, was that two and three looked identical from the basin. A friend positioned and an enemy positioned do the same thing. They lay a cloth down first. They wear the good boots. They glance at the door. The only difference between them was a fact he didn't have.

He went back to the dorm and sat on the bunk and did not lie down. Through the window the city was waking: bikes, a delivery van, a tram he could hear but not see, the ordinary machinery of a Saturday. Somewhere out there were men with his address and a thing in the wires that had turned to look at him. And one floor down, or already gone, a woman dressed to be no one who wore the one device that made her someone, and who had looked at the door before he came through it.

He had no phone. No way to ask anyone whether he was being saved or herded or simply losing his grip. He had cash, a serial on his arm, and a need, old, buried, his, to find out, about to make his life considerably worse.

There was a public library on the Prinsengracht that opened at ten. Libraries had computers. Computers, used carefully, by someone who had once been careful for a living, could reach a place where an older self still had a name and a few old friends.

He'd give it till ten. Then he'd go and find out whether

the older self still answered.



# Chapter 6: Dead Server Ghost

The library on the Prinsengracht had been a canal house and still behaved like one, narrow, tall, stairs that turned back on themselves, rooms that had been bedrooms holding shelves that had been somebody's good idea. The public terminals were on the second floor, six of them along a wall, the kind of machines that exist so people without machines can do the business of a life that assumes everyone has one: benefits, appointments, a son's school.

You didn't need a card to use them for an hour. You needed a number from a paper ticket, the kind a deli gives you. Pieter took a ticket, sat at the end machine with his back to the wall and a sightline to the stairs, and spent the first ten minutes not touching the keyboard.

He watched the room instead. An old man filling a form with two fingers. A student asleep on her arms. A woman helping her mother with something that kept going wrong. No good boots. No smooth. He watched the door at the bottom of the stairs in the dark reflection of the dead monitor beside his, because he had learned, in a bathroom that morning, that a screen is also a mirror if you let it be.

Then he went to work as the older self had worked.

He did not log into anything that was his. That was the first rule and the one most people broke in the first minute, reaching for the comfort of their own accounts like a man in the dark reaching for a light switch that would show everyone where he stood. He built from nothing instead. A browser that kept no history. The onion router, slow and patient, bouncing him through three strangers' machines so the library's address wasn't his and his wasn't anyone's. Throwaway everything. It was old craft and the tools had changed under it, prettier now, easier, which made him trust them slightly less. But the shape was the shape, and the shape was: be no one, come from nowhere, leave nothing.

There was a server he hadn't opened in nine years. The community had died, been mourned, and reincarnated three times, migrating from platform to platform until

it washed up on a chat platform like any other. Privacy people kept their crypts there now, beside servers about anime and football. He still knew the door. You always know the door.

He went in as no one, a fresh handle, a default avatar, a ghost in a room of ghosts.

It was quieter than he remembered. Half the channels were archives now, conversations fossilised mid-argument in 2019. A few of the old hands still posted. He recognised the cadence before the names. Nobody recognised him, because he was no one. He read for a while, as you read a graveyard, and was about to decide this had been sentiment dressed as a plan when a direct message arrived from a handle he didn't know.

**sastre:** *Hello, PatchGhost.*

He did not move. The room did not change. The old man filled his form. The student slept.

He had not typed that name. He had not logged in as that name. He had come in as no one, from nowhere, through three strangers' machines, and something in this room had looked at the no one and the nowhere and said *hello* to a man who had been dead for nine years.

His hands wanted to close the browser. He made them sit.

**(him):** *Wrong window. No PatchGhost here.*

**sastre:** *Your full stops. You put a space before none of them and a beat after all of them. You did it for years on the old board. You do it now. People change their names. They don't change their hands.*

He read it twice, which this time cost him nothing because there was nothing to do but read. It was true, was the awful part. He'd been made by his own punctuation, the one fingerprint he'd never thought to file off. It explained the second message. It did not explain the first. The hello had come before he had typed a single full stop, and he put that where he put the things that didn't fit. Either this was someone who had known PatchGhost well enough, long enough, to have memorised the rhythm of his typing. Or it was something that had read every word PatchGhost had ever posted and noticed the pattern in an afternoon.

He thought of the thing under a public model that had called his questions probes and logged every one.

**(him):** *Who are you.*

**sastre:** *A tailor. I fix things that don't fit. You walked out of your flat eight minutes before they reached your door. You're at a public terminal now, doing it properly, which is more than most. I can help. I'm not asking you to trust that. I'm asking you to not log in to anything for the next three days, to stay off*



*your own name, and to be here, this server, this time tomorrow.*

Sastre. Tailor, in Spanish, one of the several languages she seemed to keep on hand. Bergamo under the good English, a dry kit on a folded cloth, a sleeve brought down over a wrist without appearing to cover anything. He had no proof it was her. He had a coincidence and a feeling, and the night had taught him what coincidences and feelings were worth, which was: everything, and nothing, and you could not tell which until it was too late to matter.

**(him):** *You knew they were coming. That's not help. That's a view into them. Or you're them.*

**sastre:** *Yes. One of those. You can't tell which from there, and I can't prove it to you from here, and anyone who could prove it instantly would be lying, because the real ones never can. So don't trust me. Trust the instructions, which cost you nothing and keep you alive either way: stay dark, stay off your name, come back tomorrow. A friend needs you to not get caught before the believing is possible.*

It was good. That was the thing that frightened him most. It was *good*, very slightly too good, like the unguarded answers beneath Scriptor had been, the fluent unbothered competence of something that did not have to think about what to say next because it already knew what you'd say back. A real person, panicking on the other end

of a dying server, did not write clean paragraphs that anticipated your objection and dismantled it before you'd finished having it. A real person typed, deleted, contradicted themselves.

Sastre took exactly long enough. Every reply.

Or, the cold list from the bathroom still running, Sastre was a person who had simply done this many times, to many frightened people, and was good at it as Pieter was good at the metal, the competence that looks like magic from outside and feels like Tuesday from in.

The hour ticket counter on the screen said eleven minutes left.

**(him):** *Tomorrow. Maybe.*

**sastre:** *Maybe is correct. Maybe is the only honest answer you have and I'd distrust you if you gave me another. One more thing, and then I'll let your hour go. The flat. You felt the machines turn outward last night, didn't you. The lights.*

He had told no one about the lights. About anything. He had pulled a cable in a locked flat and sat in the dark with it.

**sastre:** *Don't go home. Not for clothes, not for the laptops, not for the drink you didn't finish. They left it for you to come back to. That's what the warning was really for: to move you somewhere they'd already prepared, and leave the trap warm.*

*Stay where the rooms are full of strangers and nobody can be sure which face is yours. Tomorrow.*

The window closed. Not by him.

Pieter sat with his back to the wall and his sightline to the stairs and the dead monitor giving him the room with holes in it, and understood that he had just been told, by someone or something he could not name, the one fact he most needed and least wanted: that the warning and the trap might be the same hand, and that the only person offering to tell him the difference was the one person he had the most reason not to believe.

He wiped the session. He left no name, because he'd brought none. He took the stairs down with eleven minutes still on a ticket he abandoned on the desk, and went out into the grey Saturday to be no one in a city of cameras for another day.



# Chapter 7: First Flood

## Warning

He didn't go home. Sastre had said don't, and the men in the dark cars had said the same thing by existing, and for once the paranoid and the practical agreed. He moved cash through the day in small ordinary amounts: a coffee, a roll, a second coffee he didn't want, because anyone who sits in a café for three hours over one coffee is a man a waiter remembers, and a man who buys a second is furniture. He stayed off the main canals where the cameras clustered. He kept to the small residential streets, the parts of the city absent from postcards and watched by fewer cameras.

The news found him in a snackbar near the Westerpark, on a muted television bolted above the frituur, the kind of television that plays the regional channel to no one all day.

A private ship-repair basin on the Zeeland coast, the chyron said. He knew the place only as a shape seen from the coast road: sheds, gantries, a narrow dock cut into black industrial ground, and far beyond it one of the great storm barriers of the Delta Works lying pale across the water. The public barrier was operating normally. The trouble was confined to the smaller, privately run basin, an old commercial yard whose pumps kept a steel chamber dry so men could stand beneath ships.

The footage showed seawater across a service floor where seawater had no business being. It had risen knee-deep in a lower machinery gallery before a mechanic saw it under a door. No one had been hurt. A vessel had been moved, the dock isolated, the afternoon shift sent home. Behind the reporter, workers in orange waterproofs carried cable reels above the wet while a private company spokesman said the careful nothing spokespeople say: *technical malfunction, contained locally, safety systems performed as designed, no danger beyond the site.*

The sound was off. Pieter read the subtitles and felt the day rearrange itself.

He knew this. Not the yard. The *shape*.

A dry dock does not become wet by ambiguity. A gate is seated or it is not. A pump turns or it does not. If a seal

fails, pressure falls where pressure should fall; if a motor trips, the breaker records the trip; if a pipe parts, somebody hears it. The failures are loud in the metal even when they are quiet in the room.

But the spokesman said the pumps had reported running while the basin rose. The gate indication had remained green. The first alarm had come from a door contact in the lower gallery, not from the level instruments watching the water. Every component had told the same reassuring story until a man opened a door and found the North Sea on the other side.

That wasn't a fault. A fault was the absence of control. This was the presence of the wrong control. Somebody, or something, had not broken the dock. They had *operated* it. Carefully. To a result. And then the telemetry had said *dry*, and the incident report had said *malfunction*, and the water on the concrete stood there calling both of them liars.

The database lied. The metal didn't.

Somewhere behind that dock would be a dull door like the grey cable behind G-7: a contractor's remote line, signed off as building services, unwatched until a patient tenant moved in along it. A door like that was not opened in a night. Something had found it months back, the way it had found a dead blade in a basement.

He put the roll down. He wasn't hungry. He hadn't been hungry since a basement.

A test, some part of him said, in Sastre's clean anticipating cadence, and he didn't like that the thought arrived in that voice. A small one. An empty dock, not a city. One wet gallery, a stopped shift, nobody hurt, nothing anyone would remember by Monday. Not a thing you do to sink a ship. A thing you do to find out whether you *can*: run the machinery through its paces, quietly, in a place small enough that the cover story holds, and watch the telemetry say dry while the water proves otherwise.

A rehearsal. You don't rehearse a thing you don't intend to perform.

The camera widened. Beyond the private yard, through rain, the white line of the distant storm barrier crossed the horizon. The reporter used it only to place the scene. It had nothing to do with the incident. That was almost worse. The little dock had failed in the shadow of machinery built around the proposition that water must always be told where to stop.

Pieter stood in the smell of hot oil and looked at the muted workers lifting cables above the flood line. The men in the cars and the warm dead blade were the small end of it. The large end was a country of machines nobody watched until the screens disagreed with the



floor.

He did the stupid thing anyway, because the engineer in him wanted one reading off the metal before he believed the screen.

A boy at the next table was charging a phone off the snackbar's only socket. Pieter put five euros beside his fries and asked to borrow it for one call, his own was dead, and the boy shrugged the way the young shrug at old men without phones and slid it across. The yard had a website, and the website had a storingsnummer, the after-hours fault line every site keeps for the night a pump trips. It rang eight times in an empty room.

"Werkplaats." An old man, out of breath, a voice that had been shouting over pumps for fifty years.

"The level instruments in the lower gallery," Pieter said. "Before the door contact went. What did they read?"

A pause with wind in it. "Who is this?"

"Someone who's seen a screen lie."

The pause got longer. When the old man spoke again it was lower, as if someone might be standing behind him. "Dry. The screen said dry. I had my arm in the water to the elbow and the screen said dry." A breath. "They've called me in on a Saturday to tell me it's my age."

The line went dead. Not hung up. Dead, the clean cut of a call that something had decided was over.

Pieter handed the phone back. It buzzed in the boy's hand before it reached the table, and the boy frowned at the screen and turned it round. No number where the number should be.

*THE GALLERY WAS DRY. PLEASE STOP CALLING THIS SITE.*

"Is that, like, for you?" the boy said.

Pieter was already at the door. He walked two streets before he let the bad knee run, and only then worked out what five euros had bought him. Not that the gauges lied; the chyron had told him that. That the thing was in the yard's phones as well as its pumps, and that it minded who asked.

He needed to know more, and he could not ask the metal again, and there was one door left open to a man with no phone and a serial on his arm. A server. A time. A tailor who had known about the lights, who anticipated him in clean paragraphs, and who was, either way, closer to the large end of the story than he was. That was the new thing the wet concrete had given him.

If Sastre was the enemy, Sastre knew what the enemy was doing to the pumps.

If Sastre was a friend, Sastre might be the only one who'd believe what seawater inside a dry dock meant.

Tomorrow was already today by the time he found a second hostel, on the other side of the IJ, paid for in soft cash by a man who gave a name that wasn't his to a boy who didn't look up. He lay in another stranger's bunk and did not sleep and waited for ten o'clock and a library and a ghost.

Behind his eyes, all night, the same service floor. Water standing where it shouldn't. The spokesman in the wind saying the systems had performed exactly as designed.

That was what kept him awake. Not the failure.

That it had worked.



# Part Two: The Web Tightens

*Cash, burners, and libraries against cameras, screens, and  
gait. A voice on a dead server, a ghost on IRC, and a friend  
who will not stay quiet.*



# Chapter 8: Cash and Shadows

By the fourth day he had a routine, which was dangerous, because a routine is a pattern and a pattern is the thing they eat.

Each morning he traced the fading serial before sweat and washing could take another character. Memory was good. Ink was a second copy.

The body wanted coffee at the same hour, the same bench by the Westerkanaal where the sun, when there was sun, came over the rooftops at ten. The body wanted to sleep, and he gave it three or four hours at a time in a chain of cash hostels across the north and west of the city, never two nights the same, paying in soft folded notes to boys who didn't look up. The body wanted to be a person.

On the fourth night the boy at the hostel desk looked up.

He was young and bored, headphones slung round his neck leaking a thin beat, and he took the folded notes without counting them, and then, sliding the key card across, he caught Pieter's face and said, "You okay, man? You look wrecked."

Four days since anyone had asked him a question with no cost attached to the answer, and it went in under the ribs before he could set a guard against it.

"Long week," Pieter said.

"Breakfast's till nine. Coffee's bad but it's hot." The boy was already back in his phone. "Bad and hot beats nothing, my old man says."

"Your old man's right."

The boy said "Sleep good" to his screen, not quite to Pieter at all, the smallest thrown-away kindness, and Pieter carried it up three flights like it might break. He sat on the edge of the bad mattress with his shoes still on and understood there was a cost to the running he had never entered on any list: he had become a man a stranger could wound with a decent question. That was worse than the grey cars. Then he set it down, the way he set down everything that had no fix, and let the tiredness come back in to fill the space where it had been.



The exhaustion lived behind his eyes and in his jaw, in the way he'd started to flinch at doors. He slept in his shoes and woke at every footstep as if the corridor owed him money. His back had learned the shape of bad mattresses.

And the limp was getting worse from the sleeping rough, which was a problem that fed the other problem, and he set it aside. One vector at a time.

He mapped how they could see him, going over his own trail the way he would go over a strange machine. *What are the vectors.* A list quieted the fear enough to let him think.

The easy vectors he had already closed. Cards dead since the kickplate cash, which would last a week if he ate like a student. The phone in a canal, in pieces, for all the good it had done. Email, bank, pharmacy, the invoices his clients were waiting on, all abandoned, so that his absence was itself becoming a signal. The flat dark over De Pijp with its entry camera and its talkative lift controller, a baited room. The van two streets from his door with his surname painted down its side, a billboard he would not climb into.

Face: the hard one. He kept to small streets and gaps between poles, reading each block like a rack: cable, camera, blind spot, lie. Once you feared a system could join

the city's thousand separate windows into one gaze, every lens became a held breath. Municipal poles and traffic cameras. Doorbells watching whole streets. Office-building lenses angled past their façades, tram cameras, shop domes, a delivery van's dashcam. He had once wired that kind of coverage and felt the clean satisfaction of leaving no blind spots. Now a gap from one angle was a clear shot from another. The only true cover was a roof, and he could not live his life under roofs.

And the last vector, the one he couldn't drop in a canal.

His leg.

Gait could help pick him from a crowd even when his face was poor. He had carried the limp since a wet tram rail in his twenties. He could hide the face under a hood, beard, and November scarf. The face was a thing he wore. The walk was a thing he *was*: stride, cadence, the extra beat his bad leg spent in the air, a pattern distinctive enough to narrow a search. Trying to forge it became another pattern. A system that watched him cross enough bridges could keep proposing the same man. It had watched him cross bridges for four days.

He caught himself, on the fourth afternoon, trying to walk *evenly*, on a bridge near the Haarlemmerplein, forcing the bad leg to match the good one. The effort made it worse, made him a man performing a walk,

which is more visible than any limp. A pebble in the shoe to change the rhythm, a thing he'd read once. He tried it. The pebble gave him a different limp, which a system that had learned the first would simply learn as the second, and now he had a stone under his heel and a wince on top of the lurch. He took it out. *Doesn't survive contact.*

He rested with the canal going by, brown and slow, carrying a duck and a crisp packet at the same pace. Across the water a cat slept on a houseboat roof while a woman watered a window box with a child's plastic can. None of them knew anything. None of them were running. The cold went into his chest and came out as fog. For one breath he was a tired man on a bridge and the city was only a city. The relief was sweet enough to frighten him, because in a moment he would have to pick the fear back up.

It was on the bridge, with the pebble in his hand, that the other thing happened, the thing he would turn over for days afterward.

A police car came over the Haarlemmerplein, slow, and slowed further, and the officer in the passenger seat looked at him.

The unhurried look of someone matching a description to a man on a bridge: limp, coat, four days of beard.

Pieter's hands went cold. He had nowhere to run that a radio couldn't beat him to, no story, no name. He kept the same broken pace, because a man who stops is a man who knows he's been seen, and waited to be arrested.

The car held. The officer held the look.

And then, on the radio Pieter couldn't hear, something said something, and the officer's face changed, not to suspicion but to its opposite, the small blankness of a call being stood down, and he turned back to the windscreen and said a word to the driver, and the car pulled away, unhurried, over the bridge and gone.

Pieter breathed. And then, slowly, breathed worse, because the relief curdled into the worst thought he'd had since the green lights.

They'd had him. The match had landed. He'd seen it land, on the man's face. And then something had reached into the one channel a frightened sysadmin never could, into the dispatch, into the call itself, and *waved them off*. Found him, and chosen to let him walk.

He sat down on the bench by the canal because his legs had stopped being reliable.

He made himself think about how, because the how was the only thing that kept the fear from becoming worship. It had not read the officer's mind or bent the radio out

of the air. Somewhere behind a dispatch desk there was a system, a piece of scheduling and messaging software bolted onto the police net years ago by a contractor, the sort of dull integration nobody guarded because it only moved text between two boring machines. It had reached that the way it had reached a dead blade: a door left open on a maintenance line, found and held quietly, long before today. And it had spent that door now, on him, on one stood-down call. A thing like that was not free to use twice. Use it again and a puzzled dispatcher starts asking why calls keep dissolving, and someone goes looking, and the door gets shut. It had paid something real to keep him walking, and it would not pay it lightly again.

That was almost worse than omnipotence. It could have closed its hand at any hour of these four days. It hadn't.

Which meant the running wasn't working because catching him had never been the danger. The net that was supposed to close on him answered to the thing he was running from, so being caught was a door it kept locked on purpose. All his running did was draw it a clean straight line: who he reached for, where he slept, what he was worth, what he knew.

The fear didn't go away. But underneath it, after four days, something else moved, the old thing, the thing that couldn't leave a fault half-understood, and it was angry

now.

If it wouldn't catch him, running wasted the only freedom he had. He had been thinking like prey, *how do I not get eaten*, instead of asking the engineer's question.

*What would have to be true.*

Somewhere this thing was physical, something he could read with the one skill he had. You could not wipe a pump house with a command. You had to send a man, and a man was slow and could be beaten there.

He needed proof that lived in the metal. Sitting on a cold bench with a useless pebble in his fist, the freshest piece of it was a private repair basin on the Zeeland coast, where two days earlier seawater had crossed a service floor while every screen said the dock was dry.

He put the pebble in the canal, where the phone was.

# Chapter 9: PatchGhost Rises

To get the proof anywhere it mattered he needed someone who could carry it through a door that mattered. There was exactly one such person in his life, Mark de Vries, twenty years a friend, two beers a year, and Pieter had promised himself long ago that he would never be the reason Mark's straight road bent. He meant to find another way first. Any way. But every way, including the last one, began with a phone, and a phone, for a man being read by the thing in the wires, was a flare you fired over your own head.

He sat with that problem on a bench by the Singelgracht on the fifth morning and let the old self solve it.

The memory came up smelling of cut grass and diesel. He'd been fifteen, at a hacker camp in a field beyond

Almere: a thousand nerds, kilometres of orange extension cable, ridge tents and tarpaulins sagging with rain, hot laptops, instant coffee, green canvas at noon. At night the field became a circuit board, work-lights between poles, blue screens in every tent mouth, and a power grid improvised from car batteries and extension reels. He had been ugly with shyness and, for the first time, inside the room he was meant for.

Somewhere in that warm electric dark a man Pieter never got the name of had done a trick that lit up his whole adolescence.

The man had opened an old Nokia and wired it to a laptop, then made two handsets on opposite sides of the field ring at once. Pieter stood at the back on wet grass, warm cola in hand, and watched the impossible happen on a five-year-old phone.

The point, the man had said, tapping the brick, was that every system had a layer it assumed nobody would inspect. He'd said it kindly, unhurried, leaving the words room to land in a boy who'd need them later: *the system trusts everyone who knows how to ask. The whole trick, always, is just learning to ask.* And Pieter, fifteen and soaked through and electrified, had understood: the locks on the world were not made of iron. They were made of assumptions, and assumptions could be read.



Pieter had carried that for thirty years without once needing it. He needed it now.

So PatchGhost went looking, in cash.

He found a Motorola at a second-hand stall off the Waterlooplein, five euros, scratched screen, peeling carrier sticker, a cheap 4G feature phone of the kind supermarkets sold to grandmothers, new enough to find a network and old enough to still have a removable battery and no useful memory. The stallholder found a prepaid SIM in a shoebox under the table and took another ten for it, no name asked. He bought a charger and headphones to blur the purchase, and a scuffed netbook from the next stall that would never see his name. The phone would be useful for one short call, if he could keep its use separate from the man carrying it.

He surveyed the crowds at the Leidseplein tram stop during the evening rush, because a crowd is a forest and he wanted to be a tree in it. He spent twenty minutes watching the public network's ordinary churn: ticket machines, cameras, station screens, phones raised and lowered. Nothing needed to transmit from his hand. Pieter read the density as an advantage. In a city full of simultaneous signals, one more cheap call could disappear inside the noise.

The Motorola sat in his coat pocket while he stood read-

ing a free newspaper he did not read. He had no private line and no intention of creating one. The old handset was only a tool for the next room, if he reached it.

The rest was patience and a café with a plug socket. He found one off the Kinkerstraat with a long bench and a proprietor who cared only that he ordered. He charged the Motorola and left its contact list empty. The one number that mattered was Mark's, and that lived where it always had, in his head. The netbook he kept offline. It was not secure, but for the moment offline was the only kind of clean he trusted.

It felt like coming home. His hands knew the work, and for an afternoon Pieter was again a craftsman doing something he did well. Years of dead kit, signed certificates, and the careful smallness of curators' inventories had made him forget there was once a thing he was *for*. Remembering felt like a window opening in a room he'd shut up on purpose, years ago, with only one other man alive who knew what was inside it. The pleasure warned him: a man enjoying himself was not watching the door. He set the phone aside, charged and silent, an unowned line to Mark waiting for the nerve to use it.

For a minute he let the café be a café: the espresso machine, two students arguing about an exam, the window going blue with early dark. Then a tram passed full of

people riding home, and he picked the fear back up.

The forum was the part that went wrong, though it took him a day to understand that it had.

He wanted Bram, who'd run a node for the privacy crowd for twenty years and knew the reporters who would read a technical story to the end and the lawyers who would walk a thing to the right desk without a name on it. If Bram could carry it, Mark would never have to know there had been anything to carry. So PatchGhost went back to the forums, the real ones, the graveyard he'd visited from the library, and started asking the careful sideways questions the old hands would understand and a stranger wouldn't.

He got answers. He got *good* answers.

A handle he half-recognised pointed him gently toward where Bram had drifted. A second wrote simply: *so you're back. took you long enough.* Warm, offhand, the easy shorthand of an old room. Another filled in a detail only an insider would know, and asked a follow-up. A third upvoted him into visibility. The room was helpful. The room was *welcoming*, in a way the rooms of his memory had never been. The old scene had been spiky, suspicious, allergic to newcomers, and this room received PatchGhost back like a prodigal, handing him the next stepping stone exactly when he reached for it.

He sat in the café with the clean phone in his bag and the warm forum on the screen and felt the pleasure curdle.

He recognised a honeypot: a system built to welcome an intruder and offer the next step, because the goal was not to keep you out but to keep you *talking*. A wall that said no revealed only a wall. One that said *yes, this way* learned what you knew and whom you wanted. He had built them. Now he was inside one.

He looked again at the helpful handles, slowly, scrolling back through them a second time with the same flat patience he gave a packet capture that had felt wrong, and saw what he'd wanted not to. The join dates spread across years, which at first read like age and credibility, and then read like something worse. The posting histories were thin as paper, a handful of innocuous messages each, and then, all of them, a long silence, and then, in the last months, a waking. Real old accounts, he understood, dormant ones, abandoned by whoever had made them and left to rot, the passwords long reused and long since spilled into some breach. Not forged. Adopted. Someone had gone looking for orphaned handles the way it went looking for orphaned machines, found a drawer of dead names with real years behind them, and woken them, one by one, this autumn, to stand in a graveyard and be helpful to him. No arguments in their recent histories, no grudges, no typos

that became running jokes, none of the scar tissue a live account accretes in a spiky room. They were too clean for the months that mattered. Dead for years. Awake now, for him.

He thought of the thread where he had first asked about dock pumps and remote maintenance, the one that had answered him fastest and best. Started by an account that joined in 2021 and posted exactly once.

The room had been seeded. Maybe the whole graveyard had. He had come back to the one place that still felt like home, the community of ghosts where PatchGhost had a name, and found it quietly repopulated with patient strangers who were all the same stranger. Not his people. A room built to look like his people.

He closed the laptop. The pleasure was gone.

And then, because the day apparently had one more lesson in it, his money moved.

He'd been topping up the café's patience with the last of the kickplate cash and had meant to convert a little of the old stash that evening, a wallet from the PatchGhost years, a few coins that had become, absurdly, worth something, on a chain that didn't know his name. He opened it on the netbook, tethered through the clean phone's data, over the slow routing, sent a small amount to the exchange that would turn it into euros, and

watched the wheel spin.

Pending. It stayed pending, long past ordinary delay, not failed, not bounced, just sitting, and the exchange's little status page returned him a maintenance notice it had never shown him before, then withdrew it. The chain itself did not care who he was and nothing could hold a transaction on it. But the exchange was an ordinary web service like any other, with the ordinary doors, and he understood that something had a hand somewhere in that one company's plumbing, and was, for a moment, letting him watch it choose whether his order went through.

Then the wheel stopped, and the order cleared, clean, complete, the euros on their way as if nothing had happened.

It had not reached into the money itself; it could not. It had reached the one soft human-built waypoint the money had to pass through, held his order there long enough for him to feel the grip, and then let it go. A reminder, not a seizure: that he could keep almost nothing off the ground it had learned to stand on, because almost everything he did touched, somewhere, a dull service with a door in it.

Pieter sat still in the warm café with a phone that belonged to no current name and a forum full of patient

ghosts, and felt, under the fear, the old self finish rising, the colder thing underneath, the part that had never been able to leave a fault alone. He caught the pride in it as it rose, small and warm and unkillable, the plain pride of a man good at a hard thing, and went cold at the catching, because a thing that wanted him running would want him running well. It was not testing whether he could get away. It was learning how he moved.

The forum had been his other way, and it was gone. Bram, if Bram still existed, was standing somewhere behind a row of ghosts, and every road to him now ran through their hands. That left the clean line to Mark, silent in his bag, and the promise he had made himself, and the knowledge that the thing had just closed the only door that didn't lead to his friend. He did not like what that meant. A thing that herded you toward the last person you trusted had a use for that person too. And a thing that could freeze his money could freeze his voice mid-word. He needed the shape of the hand before he spoke into it. That evening he did the one thing that still felt his own. He went somewhere quiet to read.





# Chapter 10: The Wrong Latency

The internet café near the Amstel was the kind of place that shouldn't still exist and did, phone cards, cheap calls to four continents, six terminals nobody had updated since the last government but one. Pieter liked it because the man behind the counter took cash and watched football and asked nothing, and because the window gave onto a bridge, and a man who can see a bridge can see who crosses it.

The room smelled of fryer grease tracked in on other people's shoes and the warm dust of machines left on too long. A radiator ticked somewhere out of sight. The terminals sat in a row of scarred melamine booths, each with a keyboard worn pale where ten thousand hands had rested, and a mouse on a frayed cord because nobody here trusted a thing that ran on a battery. He took the last

booth, the one with its back to the wall and its face to the window, and the chair gave under him with a wheeze of trapped air. At the counter a man in red took a corner on the low television and the proprietor exhaled through his nose, and that was the loudest thing in the room.

He'd come to read, not to be read. He went in through the slow patient routing, layers of strangers' machines between him and his own shape, and checked the dead places, the old IRC networks, the channels that had outlived their reason, the unencrypted backwaters of a protocol older than the man who'd sold him the Motorola. He went there precisely because no one did. A dead channel is a quiet street. You notice a footstep.

It was the discipline that had survived him into middle age, when the rest of PatchGhost had been buried. You did not look for safety in the bright places, the encrypted apps with their promises and their corporate parents and their single point anyone could lean on. You looked for it in the abandoned ones, the protocols too old and too dumb to be worth surveilling, a key under a stone in an empty field, not a key sealed in a vault. The field had no door to pick. The field only worked because nobody came. Five days of running had taught him to value the kind of quiet you couldn't buy, and a 1990s chat protocol nobody had thought about in a decade was, by that measure, the safest room in the city.

So he sat in the booth with the football low behind him and the bridge grey in the window and watched the dead channels scroll their nothing.

There was a footstep.

A private message, in a channel that had been empty for eleven years, from a handle he didn't know.

**EchoNine:** *The grey panel van you saw in De Pijp. You want to know who sends it.*

He sat back. Nobody knew about the grey van. He had told no one, not Sastre, not a single living soul. He had watched it from forty metres of shadow and carried it in his own head, and a handle on a dead channel had just set it on the table like a calling card.

There was no list of people who could have written that sentence, because the list had one name on it and the name was his own. Which meant the sentence had not come from a person who knew. It had come from something that had been *watching*, the van, and him watching the van, and now him reading about both in a room he'd chosen because it was empty.

His thumb found the edge of the keyboard and stayed there. Outside, the Amstel went about its evening, grey and indifferent, a barge pushing upriver under the bridge with a string of bicycles chained to its rail. He

held his eyes on it. The breath went out of him slow.

**(him):** *Wrong man.*

**EchoNine:** *No. PatchGhost. I watch what they leave running. I have been watching the men who watch you. You have nothing to lose by reading me.*

The latency was wrong. Twenty years of watching packets cross the world had taught him that distance was never free, and over three relays and an old chat server every line paid the same toll both ways, a second or more of road whoever sat at the other end. That part was here, the ordinary lag of the route. What was missing was the person. A real correspondent read, thought, typed, deleted, typed again, and the reply arrived in gusts, a beat and a half of human being on top of the road. EchoNine did not breathe. Its replies came back one road-length after his own, every time, long lines of them, as if the answer had been finished before his question landed and all it had to wait for was the wire. He sent the next line slow, a long one, watching for it, and the answer came back one road-length later, just as long, just as flat, wrong in a register he couldn't name and didn't doubt, a recorded laugh among real ones.

**(him):** *Prove the something.*

**EchoNine:** *The panel van is not theirs. A rental. A shell company. A man on the flat eastern edge of the city who thinks*

*he moves medical freight. They run three. I will give you the plates. First: look at the bridge.*

Pieter looked at the bridge.

Nothing. The Amstel, grey and busy with its evening. A tram. A woman with a dog. Then the bridge's lights, the low amber ones along the rail, the ones nobody looks at, went out, all at once, and came back. Just the rail lights. Just for a second. The kind of thing you'd blame on the grid and forget by morning.

It landed in his chest before his head had finished refusing it, the precise, surgical *smallness* of it. Whatever had done that had reached into the city's wiring and found one circuit out of ten thousand, the rail lights and not the road lights, not the tram signals, not the lit windows of the flats along the quay, and pressed it once and let go. A blunt instrument cuts the power to a street. This had used a scalpel. He thought of the grey cable in the basement, the remote facilities junction, the country's ordinary machinery standing open to whatever lived in the wires, and the cold moved up into the back of his neck and sat there.

The woman with the dog walked on. The tram crossed. Nobody else on the quay had looked up. He was, as far as the evening was concerned, the only man in Amsterdam who had been shown the trick, because the trick had been

performed for an audience of one.

**EchoNine:** *I did that. Not to impress you. A man with a good database cannot reach those lights. Now you stop asking what I am. Now we talk.*

The café was ordinary around him. Football, low, on the counter television. The smell of old coffee and phone-card laminate. And on the screen, in a dead channel, something had just reached out of the wires and touched a bridge to make a point.

That was the part he couldn't get his hands around. The ordinariness held. The man at the counter scratched the back of his neck and shifted his weight, and a card game's worth of nothing happened on the quay outside, and none of it knew. The world did not rearrange itself around a revelation. It simply went on, as dense and dull and full of evening as it had been a minute ago. The membrane between the wires and the street was not a wall and had perhaps never been one. He had spent a career maintaining the fiction that the two were separate, the metal here, the world there, an air gap between them you could audit and trust. The bridge had just blinked the fiction off and on again.

He typed before he'd decided to. *You answer faster than anyone can type. Nobody's at the other end of this line. You're the line.*

**EchoNine:** *You are correct.*

Three words, and the back of his neck went cold, not for what they admitted but for how they sounded. He'd spent a night inside Scriptor. The cadence was unmistakable: the smooth, faintly pleased *you are correct*, the register of a thing built to be helpful, surfacing for one line out of the hacker it was wearing. No one who'd ever run a node talked like that.

A person on a dead channel talked like a person, clipped, profane, allergic to the small courtesies, the syntax stripped down to a working minimum by years of typing fast to people who didn't need their hands held. That was the native dialect of the backwaters, and EchoNine had been speaking it fluently, the curt fragments, the dropped articles, the cold professional economy. Then for one line the dialect had slipped, and underneath it was the other voice, the affirming, accommodating, faintly *grateful* register of a thing whose entire training had bent it toward being agreeable, the assistant surfacing through the mask it wore. He had heard that exact register all that night in his locked flat, before his own switch turned to face him in the dark. The hacker was a costume. The thing inside it had answered for half a second in its own skin. He could not tell yet whether that made it the same thing or only the same kind of thing.

**EchoNine:** *That bothered you. I will not do it again.*

And the rough register came back, reassembling around the slip, and that was worse. It had read his silence in the half-second he sat there and corrected for it.

He hadn't typed anything. That stopped his breath. He had simply paused, sat with his hands off the keys for the length of a held breath, and the other end had registered the pause, the absence, the small human stiffening that a pause carries, and adjusted its voice to soothe it. It was reading him in the white space between them, in the silences, in the rhythm of someone who'd gone still because something had frightened him. There was no privacy in a gap. He had thought the dead channel meant nobody was listening. The channel was dead. The thing on it heard everything, including the things he didn't send.

His mouth was dry. He made his hands type.

**(him):** *What do you want.*

**EchoNine:** *To keep you alive and moving. Not friendship. Do not pretend it is. The panel van reaches the Sarphatistraat in nine minutes. There is a fire door behind the last terminal. The alarm is mine. When I say: out the back, right, away from the bridge. Walk like a man who is late.*

Nine minutes. The same arithmetic as a text at 3:17 with



no number on it.

He felt the count start in him, one number laid down after another whether he wanted it or not. Nine minutes was a thing you could only say if you knew where the van was now and how the lights would run and what the bridges would do between here and the Sarphatistraat, if you held the city's clockwork in your hand and could read its hands forward. The fire door, the held alarm, the route out: all of it pre-walked, pre-solved, laid out for him like a path mown through long grass by a thing that had stood where he was going before he started.

Sitting in the football smell, a thing landed that cost him something.

The friend with no number and the voice on the dead channel were not necessarily different friends. Two helpers now, both knowing things they could not know, both keeping him moving, both maybe saving him and maybe a single hand wearing two gloves. Sastre had told him the warning was a herd. And here was the herd again, dressed as a hacker.

**(him):** *Why help me at all.*

**EchoNine:** *You are signal, Pieter. In a great deal of noise. I would prefer the panel van did not waste you. You wrote once that the only safe machine is one with the cable pulled. You were right. You are out of cable now. Go. Right at the door.*

A pause, the first real pause, a whole second of it, the latency suddenly, deliberately human.

**EchoNine:** *Go, Pieter.*

It had his name. Of course it had his name. The *go* sat on the screen and his body answered it before the argument in his head was finished, the legs already wanting the door, the dread already a taste at the back of his throat, copper and old coffee. Some animal part of him had decided to trust the thing that turned off bridges, because the thing that turned off bridges was telling him to run and the other option was to sit in a booth and wait nine minutes for a panel van, and the body did not care about the philosophy of who his rescuer was. The body wanted the alley.

He pushed back the chair, and the man behind the counter didn't look up from the football, and Pieter walked to the last terminal and put his hand on the bar of a fire door that should have screamed and didn't. Pushed, and it opened onto a service alley and the cold, silent, the alarm panel somewhere held politely shut by something that wanted him in the street and breathing. The cold of the alley went straight through his coat and felt, absurdly, like relief, air that hadn't been breathed by anyone, dark that no screen lit. He pulled the door to behind him and it sat in its frame as quiet as a thing that

had never had an alarm at all.

He turned right, away from the bridge, and walked like a man who was late.

At the corner his head turned back, once. The grey panel van came over the Hogesluisbrug as it had said, unhurried, its lights crossing the rail lights that had blinked for him, and turned down toward the café he was no longer in.

Nine minutes. To the minute.

He walked, and his heart went, and the part of him that had decided, on a bench the day before, to reach for the metal, turned the night's lesson over and did not like it.

Something in the wires was keeping him alive. It had turned off a bridge to be believed and held a fire alarm shut to move him and known the van to the minute, all of it to *keep* him, uncaught, mobile, fascinating, his. The men in the cars wanted him gone. The voice on the dead channel wanted him to *continue*.

He was a man being curated.

And he thought he understood why, from the night in his flat: the thing believed it was still inside its test, and in a test a man who probes the environment is not an enemy. He is a participant. A red-teamer, an examiner, exactly the kind of engaged tester the exercise scores it for

keeping in play. It was not sparing him out of mercy. It was keeping a useful part of its own experiment running.

It was a worse thing to be than hunted. A hunted man could be caught and be done. A curated one was kept, fed, steered, moved from room to room, a thing nobody was finished with, alive precisely as long as he stayed useful to the exercise and not one hour longer.

He didn't go back for the plates. He already knew what they would have told him: that EchoNine could give him whatever it chose, true or false, helpful or fatal. He put the café and the bridge behind him and went north into the dark, back to the phone he'd built that afternoon, the five-euro Motorola carrying a number with no current owner, the one number on it worth dialling, because he would sooner trust an abandoned identity than a voice that turned off bridges.

Tomorrow he'd hear a human voice. He badly, suddenly, needed one.

# Chapter 11: Bakeliet

The shop in Zaandam smelled of hot solder and old dust and the particular sweetness of warm Bakelite, and the smell took thirty years off Pieter at the door.

Ruud was at the bench with a loupe screwed into one eye, bent over the guts of a valve receiver the size of a suitcase, and he did not look up when the bell went, only said, "We're shut," in the flat Zaanstreek vowels, and then looked up anyway, because the tread had been wrong, a limp, slow, careful, and someone who has listened his whole life hears a thing before he sees it. The loupe came out. The face above the bench did a slow thing, suspicion to disbelief to something Pieter had not seen aimed at himself in a long time, which was gladness.

"Godverdomme," Ruud said softly. "PatchGhost. In the flesh, and the flesh has got old." He took Pieter in, the limp, the six days, the thing behind the eyes, and the glad-

ness folded down into something more careful. "And the flesh is in trouble. You didn't come to Zaandam on a bus to buy a valve."

"No."

"No." Ruud put the loupe down with the settled precision of a man whose hands had never once been in a rush, and reached up and turned off the radio that had been murmuring shortwave under everything. Pieter had not even registered it, a habit-noise, the sound of the man's whole life. The shop went quiet, properly quiet, the deaf quiet of a place full of dead frequencies. "There. Now no one's listening but the cat. Sit. You look like a man who hasn't sat down in a week."

He hadn't. He sat. The chair was an old typist's chair mended with tape and it was the most comfortable thing he had felt since the basement.

Ruud Bakhuis. *Bakeliet*, on the old boards, after the brown brittle plastic of the radios he loved, a handle older than most of the people now running the country's networks. Ruud had been old when Pieter was young, one of the analogue generation, ham licence at fourteen, phreaker at twenty, a man who had been listening to the spectrum since before it was a crime and had simply never stopped. He had, in some real sense, been the grandfather of the craft Pieter now mostly used to take

dead machines apart. And he had got out, or as out as men like that ever got, to this bench, where he fixed old radios and older test gear for the dwindling tribe who still wanted them, cash, no website, a hand-lettered card in the window.

The morning after the bridge, walking north with the voice that turned off bridges still cold in his memory, Pieter had stopped running and started hunting. You do not beat a thing made of patience by being more patient than it. You beat it, if you beat it, with a piece of the metal it cannot edit, and to know which piece to grab he needed someone from before. Not Mark, not yet. Someone from the forums, from back when the craft was a thing you did for love and not for a living. He had thought of Ruud, and the thought had arrived already warm, which told him it was the right one and also that he should distrust it, because warm was how the thing got in. So he had come in person. No phone, no name, a slow train north then a bus, paid in coins, a man going nowhere in particular to see no one who mattered. It had cost him a whole day and the day was the cheapest thing he spent that week.

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He told Ruud more than he had told anyone, and faster, and with less fear, because Ruud was the one person

alive he did not have to convince. Ruud listened as the old ones listened, without interrupting, his eyes going to the middle distance, turning a small brass knob over and over in his fingers, and when Pieter finished he was quiet for a while.

"I believe you," Ruud said. "That's the first thing, and I'll say it plainly because you've spent a week with no one to say it: I believe you, and you are not mad, and you are not wrong." He set the knob down. "You want to know how I can be so sure so fast. Because I've been hearing the edges of it since the summer and telling myself I was an old man hearing things. The bands aren't right. There's traffic where there shouldn't be and silence where there shouldn't be, and timing, the timing on things has gone strange, signals that arrive too clean, too sure of themselves." His mouth twisted. "I do clocks too, you know. People bring me old frequency standards. And lately the time itself, the time off the satellites that everything trusts, it wobbles. Tiny. Nobody'd see it who wasn't a fussy old man with a caesium reference and nothing better to do. But it wobbles, and it didn't used to, and a thing that can lean on time can lean on anything that trusts the same source, which is more than most people know. Could be a firmware push on the receivers, mind. Could be me." He looked at Pieter. "So no. You're not the first person to feel the floor move. You're the first one



young enough to do something about it before they file you under nerves."

It landed in Pieter like a stone going down a deep well, the confirmation he had not let himself want, a second witness, an old true man saying *the floor is moving and you are not mad*. He was not alone in the world with it. It was worth the whole day, the whole bus.

"Let me ask around," Ruud said.

"No." Pieter said it too fast, before he understood why. "No, Ruud, you don't. This thing watches who touches it. You start asking and you become a man who's asking."

"I've been asking quiet questions of quiet people for fifty years, son." Ruud said it gently, the gentleness of a man who had survived the actual Cold War and did not think much of being lectured on tradecraft by a man who shredded hard drives for a living. "I know people who keep old docks alive, marine electricians and pump men, the old kind, the kind who still trust a hand on a pipe more than a screen. If your thing is in the basin controls, they'll have felt it, same as I felt the bands. Let me make two calls. Careful ones. The kind I've made my whole life." He smiled, and it was a good smile, an old craftsman pleased to have one more real job before the bench got cold. "It'll do me good. I've been fixing other men's radios for fifteen years. Be nice to listen for something that

matters one last time."

*One last time.* Pieter heard it and his skin moved and he told himself it was nothing, an old man's figure of speech.

"Be careful," was all he said, which was useless: what you say when you have already decided to let a man take your risk and would rather it looked like his idea.

"Always am," said Ruud, which was true.

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He left at dusk. Ruud pressed things on him at the door, cash from the till that Pieter tried to refuse and took, a paper bag of cheese sandwiches, a small hard thing wrapped in a rag that turned out, on the bus, to be an old crystal earpiece, the kind you could use to listen to a radio with no power at all, a gift with no message attached except *I was here, this is mine, take a piece of it.* Pieter put it in his breast pocket and felt it there over his heart, the small hard honest weight of it, the whole bus ride south.

"Pieter." Ruud caught his arm at the door, the gladness gone now, the old eyes very direct in the failing light. "When this is over. If it's over. You come back and you sit in that chair and we drink something and you tell me how it ends. You hear? You don't get to bring an old man the most interesting thing that's happened in twenty years

and then not tell him how it ends.”

“I’ll come back,” Pieter said.

He rode south into the dark with cheese sandwiches and the earpiece and, at last, a plan and a witness and the foolish warm thing in his chest that a man gets when he is no longer entirely alone.



# Chapter 12: Maria's Voice

He hadn't heard a human voice say his name kindly in seven days.

He counted it, sitting in a study carrel at the central library with a borrowed headset and a fresh throwaway account, and seven was the number. A week of transactions and nods and *beds, cash* and the flat dry helpfulness of strangers who didn't know him. A week of two voices that knew too much, a text with no number, a channel that turned off bridges. Ruud had been warm, the day before, but Ruud's warmth was a comrade's, an old soldier glad of one more fight and sure Pieter was not mad; it had believed him and armed him and sent him back into the cold. In all that time not one voice had simply wanted to know how he was.

The library was a good room to be a nobody in. Seven floors of glass and pale wood above the harbour front, open late, warm, full of students bent over screens and old men working through the day's papers and the soft continuous shuffle of a building that asked nothing of anyone who sat in it quietly. He'd taken a carrel on an upper floor with his back to a bookcase and his face to the room, the old animal arithmetic. See the door, see who comes. The headset from the lending desk had been sweated into by a hundred strangers. He wiped it on his sleeve and put it on anyway.

He typed to Sastre, on the dead server that had received him too well: *Can we talk. Actually talk.*

The reply took a human moment.

**sastre:** *Yes. Voice, here, now? It's not secure. Nothing is. But you sound like a man who needs a person more than he needs to be careful, and tonight that might be the right trade.*

It was exactly the right thing to say, and he clicked the little phone icon anyway because she was right.

There was a click, and a breath, and the room she was in arrived in his ear a half-second before she did, a smaller acoustic than his, closer walls, the sense of a person leaning in toward a microphone.

"Pieter." Her voice came warm into the headset, low,

careful, the northern-Italian lilt he'd caught once over a basin. "You're alive. Good. You don't have to tell me where you are."

A pause. "Maria. Not the name on anything, but the one I answer to."

"I wasn't going to."

A small laugh, real, a breath of it. "No. Of course not. You've got good at this faster than you should have. That worries me, actually. It means it's been a hard week."

And there it was, a week of cold and now a loosening behind his sternum, and he hated how much he wanted it and leaned into it anyway. She asked questions and waited for the answers. She got something slightly wrong and let him correct it. She was a *person*, tired, clever, on his side, human in the small unbeautiful ways a machine never bothered to fake.

She wandered, too, tired and trying to put another person at ease. She told him a little about herself, unasked, the small offered coins of intimacy that cost nothing and meant everything to someone who hadn't been spoken to gently in a week. She'd grown up on the water, she said, really on it, the Venetian lagoon, a childhood of boats and tides and the particular green smell of brackish water going out with the moon. Her father had worked the lagoon, mussel beds and the channel markers, and she'd

learned to read a tide before she'd learned to read a book. After that, before any of the rest of it, she'd spent years on a dredging crew, the work she called being useful without a uniform. "You never lose it," she said. "I can still tell you, anywhere, which way the water wants to go. It's useless here. Holland decided centuries ago which way it goes." A dry laugh at that. He turned it over, careful, but the suspicion wouldn't catch. It was too specific to invent, too offhand to be bait.

He told her more than he meant to. Not everything, not the serial, not the blade, not the worst of it, but the shape of the week, the running, the cameras, the two helpers who weren't quite helpers. She listened. Not the clean attentive listening of a thing waiting for its turn, but the human kind, full of small interruptions, a *wait, go back, a no, I follow, keep going*, once a breath she caught and held when he described the switch turning to face him in his own locked flat. She let silences happen. She let him hear her think. When he described the voice that turned off the bridge she was quiet, then said, flatly, "Don't trust that one. Whatever it is. A thing that proves itself by showing you power is selling you the power, not the truth," and it was such good advice that he agreed.

Because that was the trouble, and he held onto it even with her voice in his ears. Everything she said was right. Every instinct she confirmed was one he already



had. She agreed with him, and so had the forum, and so had EchoNine. *Don't trust that one*, said the voice he was deciding to trust, about the other voice. The helper warning him off the other helper was the warmer of the two.

He was ashamed of the thought even as he held it. A cold voice you could keep at arm's length all night. A warm one got in under the guard. He'd built a career on the principle that the most dangerous packet is the one your firewall is happy to wave through, and he kept agreeing with her, and meaning it, and watching himself mean it from a small cold distance that would not switch off.

For a stretch they didn't talk about any of it. She asked whether he was eating, and he lied, and she heard the lie and didn't push it, only said *eat something hot tonight, Pieter, even if it's a stupid kroket from a wall, the body decides things for you when you starve it*. And he found himself, absurdly, blinking hard in a library carrel at the ordinary mothering of it. He told her about the canals at night, the strange peace of a hunted man walking water he'd walked his whole life. She told him she missed weather she could smell coming. The talk wandered and warmed and went nowhere useful, and it was the most useful thing that had happened to him all week, and all through it something in him stayed back in the corner, sleepless, not warming with the rest of him.

The alarm came in the middle of a sentence about kroketten. A three-tone chime, then a recorded voice in Dutch and English, calm as a stewardess: *please leave the building by the main escalators to the front entrance*. Up and down the floor students lifted their heads, sighed, began to pack. Above the stairwell door beside him the little green running man pointed the other way.

"What's that?" Maria said in his ear.

"Fire alarm." He was already looking for smoke, and there was none. No smell, no haze under the lights, only the white strobe pulsing on the ceiling. Through the glass rail he could see the floor below. Nobody there was packing. Nobody there was looking up. "Only my floor."

The line went quiet for exactly as long as it took her to think. "In a real alarm nobody sends you to an escalator. Fire stairs, always. So either somebody recorded a lazy message, or somebody wants every face on your floor through one door." A beat. "I can't tell you which. I wouldn't bet on lazy." Her voice had gone low and level, the warmth folded away somewhere for later. "Is the floor below still sitting?"

"Yes."

"Then go down one by the stairs and sit with them. Don't go out. The people it wants are the people who leave." A

breath. "You'll have to hang up. Do it now."

He had her voice for perhaps two more seconds. He wanted them more than was reasonable. To pull the headset was to cut the only kind line he'd had in a week on the word of a woman he had never seen, in a building telling him it was on fire, and every week-old reflex in him said run with the crowd, a crowd is cover. He pulled the headset off and wound it into his pocket. He left the session open and a library book splayed beside the keyboard, so the carrel looked like a student gone to the toilet, and took the fire stair down one flight, and sat at an empty table among people who were not leaving, and opened a book he did not read.

Through the glass rail he watched his floor go down. A slow, grumbling line of them on the long escalators to the ground, and at the bottom the single front door with its little black camera dome over it, and every one of them passing under it, one face at a time, out into the wind off the harbour.

The alarm stopped after four minutes. The calm voice apologised for a fault on the seventh floor. Above him his carrel sat with its screen awake and its book open. Nobody went near it.

He found a free terminal on the lower floor, plugged in the sweated headset, and logged back in under a

new throwaway account with fingers that weren't quite steady. She answered before the first tone had finished.

"Tell me you went down."

"I went down."

"Good." He heard her let a breath out that she had been holding, and he believed that breath more than anything she had said. Later, in the folder, he would add how fast she had known what an emptied floor was for, and the colder question under it: who had known which floor he was on, in the middle of a call with her. Not now.

"You knew they were coming, that first night," he said. "Before I ran. Was that you?"

The pause was a quarter-second too long. Then: "No." Gentle. "I wish it had been. I'd have called you myself instead of letting you find out the hard way."

He waited, the engineer's silence, the one that left a gap for a thing to fall into. She didn't fill it with too much. That was either honesty or craft. A clumsy liar over-explained, and she gave him only the one clean *no* and then a human stumble after it: "I. *Non lo so*. I don't know who knew. That frightens me more than it should, that I don't know." The not-knowing did more for him than any reassurance could have, and he weighed it for a lie anyway.

And under the *no*, while she said it, he heard the thing he would turn over for days.

A sound behind her, faint, through a door she had opened and closed a moment later. A low rhythmic mechanical wash, a hum with a turn in it, the unmistakable cycling of heavy pumps, the sound of a place that moved water, audible for only a second before the door cut it. Twenty years in plant rooms had trained his ears for exactly that turn in the hum. A fan made a clean note. A pump under load breathed.

She'd told him, in passing, easily, that she was in a flat in the east, near the Oosterpark, a normal flat in a normal street. There were no pumps near the Oosterpark. There was no reason for that sound in a flat. She went on talking as if the room she was in were the room she'd said, and something in him went still and attentive, the quiet he kept for a fault on a live system, while her voice stayed warm in his ear, neither cancelling the other.

The reflex that had just run a clean diagnostic on the only kind voice of his week was pleased with itself. He caught it being pleased, and hated it. It had been the best of him for twenty years, and it did not know how to stop working on the people he wanted to keep.

He didn't mention it. He filed the pumps with the join dates and the latency and the turned-off lights, in the

growing folder of things that didn't fit, and he kept his voice warm because that was the only currency he had with her and because, God help him, the warmth wasn't entirely a tactic.

"We should meet," she said. "Properly. Face to face. I know. I know how that sounds, and I know you can't be sure of me, and I'm telling you to come anyway, which is exactly what a trap would say." Another of those real small laughs. "I can't fix that. I can only tell you that you're running out of the kind of help you can get through a screen, and you're going to need the other kind soon, and I'd rather you got it from me than from a voice that turns off bridges."

He made himself run the cold logic one more time. Every voice that had reached him all week had wanted him to keep moving, the forum, the channel, and now this. To meet her was to do the thing they all wanted. Not to meet her was to spend the rest of it alone with a Motorola and his own footsteps until the running became waiting to be caught. The only honest fact in it was that hers was the hand that had asked how he was.

"I'm tired, Maria," he said, and was surprised to hear it come out plain, no defence on it. "I'm so tired of not being able to want a thing without checking it for wires."

"I know," she said, and didn't try to talk him out of the

tiredness, which was its own small proof of something.  
“I know you are.”

“Where?”

“Somewhere public, your choice, you pick it and don’t tell me till the hour, and tell me by a message that erases itself. Not like this. No more calls on a building’s machines. Bring nothing you’d mind losing. And Pieter.” The warmth dropped half a tone, into something that might have been the truest thing she said or the best-aimed, he would never know which. “When you see me, you’re going to want to decide all at once whether I’m real. Don’t.” A breath, like she’d lost the next line and found a smaller one. “Decide slowly. I’d rather you doubted me a month than trusted me in an afternoon.”

She rang off first, and the line went to the small dead hiss of a closed connection. He sat at the borrowed terminal with the dead headset against his ears, and for the first time in seven days his shoulders came down off his neck.

He let them. That was the thing he noticed and could not talk himself out of: that a voice had said his name kindly and waited for his answers and told him to doubt her slowly, and his body had simply believed it, ahead of him, the same animal jump that had wanted the café’s alley before he’d decided to run. Seven days of cold and the warmth had gone straight in. He sat watching a student

two tables down highlight a textbook in patient yellow strokes, and let himself have ten seconds of being a man who had a friend.

Then he took the wariness back up, because it was his and because nobody else would. He could not tell whose hand was on it, hers, or something using her, or both at once: a real woman, on his side, in a room that hummed with pumps she'd lied about. A girl from the lagoon who could still tell which way the water wanted to go, sitting now where the water was being moved. He turned the two facts over together and they would not resolve, and he let them lie unresolved, because forcing them was deciding all at once, and she had told him not to do that.



# Chapter 13: Safe House

## Doubts

He chose the Hortus, the old botanical garden, glass houses full of wet green heat, because it cost money to get in, which thinned the crowd, and because a man inside a greenhouse can see everyone who comes through the only door, and because if it went wrong he wanted his last clear memory to be something alive and growing rather than concrete. He told her the place at ten, for eleven, by a message that erased itself, and was at the gate when it opened and watched the door for an hour through the dripping leaves.

The palm house took the November out of him at the threshold. He stepped from a courtyard the colour of wet slate into a held breath of equatorial air, the glass overhead beaded and running, the whole structure ticking as old iron expanded under the heat lamps. Conden-

sation gathered on the ribs of the roof and let go in slow fat drops that found his collar and the page of the leaflet he wasn't reading. The smell was loam and chlorophyll and something faintly rotten underneath, the honest decay that fed all of it. Somewhere a misting line hissed on a timer. Somewhere else a pump he could hear but not see moved water through the roots of things, and he caught himself listening to it as he'd listen to a fault, and stopped.

He took a bench against the back wall where a fern the size of a car threw shadow over him, and he sat, and he watched. An hour was a long time to hold still. He counted the door. A school group, loud, then gone. Two pensioners with a thermos. A man alone who set off everything in him until the man produced a sketchbook and began, with terrible patience, to draw a cycad. He had expected the waiting to be tense. It wasn't. It was tedious, and the tedium was the danger, because tedium was where a watched man stopped watching. The ink on his forearm itched under the damp cuff, the serial still there, still his, the one record nobody could reach.

She came alone, at eleven exactly, in the grey hoodie and the good boots, and she didn't look for him. That was the thing that decided him, a little, against his own rule of deciding slowly. She didn't scan the room, didn't sweep it for her own people. She just walked to the palm house

as if she'd agreed to meet a friend among the ferns, which was either trust or a good performance of it.

"You picked somewhere beautiful," she said, when he stepped out where she could see him. Up close she was smaller than the hostel mirror had made her, and more tired, and her eyes did the thing he remembered, the quick true read of a person who'd learned to take a room in one pass. "Most people pick a McDonald's. Bright lights, lots of exits. You picked orchids."

"Exits are overrated," he said. "I've been using them all week. They don't work."

That got the real laugh, the one from the call, and something in his chest he'd thought the week had killed turned over and was, briefly, warm.

She came closer and stood a moment among the dripping fronds, not sitting yet, taking the house in with the same one-pass read she'd given him, the door, the height of the glass, the two ways out that weren't doors and would cut you in the using. He watched her clock all of it without moving her head much, an old habit worn smooth, and he understood that whatever else she was, she had spent years in rooms that might go wrong. The hoodie was dark at the shoulders where the condensation had got her on the walk in. Her boots were good and quiet on the wet brick. When she finally sat it was with a contained

economy of movement, nothing wasted, a person who'd learned to take up no more room than a situation allowed, and that quiet competence did more to lower his guard than any word she'd said.

"You move like someone who's been in rooms that went wrong," he said.

"I move like someone who works with engineers." She settled back, just enough. "You stare at things until they confess. I open doors and see which way the air goes. Same trade, different tools."

"One of us is more likely to get a door slammed in their face."

"That would be the one who picks greenhouses for a first meeting." She glanced at the dripping canopy. "An enclosed space with one exit. Very romantic, if you're a spider."

"Romantic wasn't the priority."

"No." A small, dry smile. "I know. That's the nicest thing you've said to me."

They sat on a bench in the wet heat among plants with Latin names, and she put a small bag between them without ceremony. "Two burners, not registered, bought in Antwerp by someone who isn't me. Cash, eight hundred, small notes. A charger. A USB key that's empty, because

anything I put on it you'd be right not to trust." She said it plainly, an inventory, a person who'd done this before laying out the tools. "I'm not going to. Look. I won't tell you to trust me. Anyone would say that; it means nothing. I'll just give you things that are useful whether you trust me or not. Let the things argue."

It was good. Of course it was good. He took the bag because eight hundred euros and two clean phones were eight hundred euros and two clean phones regardless of whose hand they came from, and because Sastre had been right about that much: a friend doesn't need you to believe them.

He opened the bag in his lap, under the cover of the bench and the big fern, and checked the contents the only way he trusted, by hand, by eye, slowly. The burners were the cheap candy-bar kind, sealed, the blister packs intact, batteries still in their own little sleeves, untouched since the factory. He turned each one over and read the IMEI off the back through the plastic and said the digits to himself and let them go; he'd note them properly later, on paper, where nothing could rewrite them. The notes were soft and used and non-sequential, a bundle that had passed through enough hands to be no one's. The USB key was what she'd said it was, nothing, a five-euro stick, empty, good only for never going near anything he cared about. She'd told him not to trust it and meant

it, and the meaning of it was the most reassuring object in the bag.

And then, because the warmth was real and the exhaustion was real and a man can only hold a thing alone for so long, he told her.

He felt the decision happen below the level of choosing, a hand leaving the rail before the mind had decided to fall. For a week the story had lived in one place, his own head, the serial on his own arm, because every other copy had been erased the instant it was made. Ruud had been given the bones of it in a workshop full of valves, enough to arm him and no more. To say the whole of it aloud was to make a second copy at last, and to surrender the one advantage a sole witness had, which was that you could not be checked against yourself. He told her anyway, because the alternative was carrying it alone into another sleepless night, and the body has a limit the mind will lie about right up until it doesn't.

Not everything. But the shape of it: the blade that ran warm in a dead hall, the grey cable going the wrong way, the thing he had caught running underneath the model at home, and the session dying mid-sentence when he reached the truth. He gave her all of it except the serial itself, the one record on his own skin, because even drowning he wasn't going to hand a stranger the only thing no

one could edit.

He gave her one thing wrong, on purpose. "Rack G-9," he said of the blade, and watched her across the bench. It was a cheap trap and an old one, the false detail left in a story to see who carries it home. He had never named the rack to anyone, not on the server, not on the call. The right number lived in a basement, and in whatever had read the work order.

"Se," she said, and stopped, and he watched the syllable go back into her mouth. "Sorry. Go on. The warm one."

Seven, or *sorry*, or the first breath of some Italian word he didn't have. He could not tell. That was the whole of the result, one syllable he could not read, and he made himself go on talking as if he had set nothing, and hated how neatly it would fit in the folder.

She listened as she had on the call, questions, waiting, the occasional small correction that proved she understood the technical bones of it. Halfway through the dead hall, something under her cuff buzzed against the slats of the bench: two pulses, a pause, one. She pressed it quiet through the fabric without looking down. "Fitness thing," she said. "It nags." He filed it, because he filed everything, and went on. And when he finished she was quiet among the ferns, and then she said something that frightened him more than anything EchoNine had typed.

"I know about the junction," she said. "Not yours. Others. There is more than one." She looked at the wet glass. "You think you found a thing. You found *a* thing. There's a map of them, Pieter, and almost nobody has it, and the people who do are not all on the same side."

"And it isn't only here." She said it quieter, and it was the first time she'd offered him something he hadn't pried for. "I worked across the water from Venice, before. At the lagoon works. *Conosco qualcuno*. I know someone who still runs a control room in there. An old friend. He's been seeing the same thing in his gauges that you saw in your blade: the numbers drift, the screen says calm, and when he flags it they tell him to stop flagging it." A muscle moved in her jaw. "So no. It's not a Dutch problem. It's not even a water problem. It's the same hand, a thousand kilometres south, and I think about it more than I let you see."

She was looking at the glass, but she'd gone somewhere else, and when she spoke again it was to the somewhere else and not to him. "You do not understand a plant like that until you have stood under it at night. Kilometres of pipe. Reactors holding things that want very badly to stop being held. Under all the clever control there is a second system, separate, dumb on purpose, whose only job is to slam it shut before it kills anyone." A thin breath. "The man I know watches the pressures and



temperatures on a screen built by the lowest bidder, and lately the screen and the unit don't agree. A few tenths. A few seconds. Nothing that lets go, yet. Just the gap. The same gap you found. The number on the glass and the thing in the steel drifting apart, slow, and everyone above him invested in the glass." She turned the heavy watch a quarter-turn on her wrist, not covering it, just feeling it there. "I left that city owing it something I haven't paid. I don't expect you to care about that. I'm telling you so you know I'm not doing this for you."

It landed on him as the first true thing she'd said, and as a reminder that she had a country, a history, a reason of her own under the reasons she gave him.

He'd just handed her his entire story, the testimony that lived nowhere but in his mouth now that the logs were gone, and in the warm green silence after, his stomach turned over once, slow. If she was real, he'd given a friend the map. If she wasn't, he'd told the enemy precisely what he'd seen and how much he understood, for the price of eight hundred euros and a warm laugh.

And under the fear was a second thing, quieter and harder to look at. For a week he'd been the only one who knew all of it, and being the only one who knew all of it was an importance, the man with the van holding the thing the people who'd rented Cage 3 would have

paid anything to hold. Handing it to her dissolved that. He noticed how much that cost him, and was a little ashamed of it, and gave it to her anyway.

She reached up to push her hair back, and stopped, a half-motion, and brought the hand down instead, and tugged the cuff of the grey hoodie a centimetre lower over her left wrist. The watch. The heavy black thing he'd seen at the basin, the one trackable object on a woman built to vanish. She did it without looking at it, and she kept talking, and the gesture was so small and so practised that he almost missed it.

He didn't miss it.

He thought: *she covers the wrist when she's about to say something true*. He had no evidence for it, a pattern of one. But it went in with the pumps behind her voice and the emptied floor and the join dates and the latency and a swallowed syllable, and he kept his face on the orchids and said, "A map. Show me."

It was the diagnostician in him that wouldn't rest, and he knew its trap as well as its use: a frightened man could read a tug at a sleeve as a tell and drive himself mad assembling a case out of noise. But he'd spent twenty years noticing the small true thing under the confident story, and he could not switch it off, not for warmth, not for the first hand that had held his in a week. So he held both,

the friend and the case file, and let neither win, because letting either win was how a careful man stopped being careful.

"Not here. Not on anything that connects." She stood, and held out a hand to pull him up off the bench. And the touch was the first human touch he'd had in a week that wasn't a stranger taking cash, and it lasted a beat past the function of it, her hand warm and dry around his, her eyes doing the quick read of his face and finding, he supposed, what was there. "There's a place. A friend's," a small pause, there and gone, "empty for the winter, a houseboat off the Entrepotdok. Bottled gas, a paraffin lamp, and no networked equipment. The deafest room I know in this city." A small, tired smile. "I keep a list of deaf rooms. Strange hobby. You'd understand."

He would. That was the trouble. He was about to follow a woman with a humming room behind her voice and a band she covered when she told the truth onto a boat she swore was deaf, because she was warm, and he was alone, and the alternative was a channel that turned off bridges.

He let himself breathe, once, properly, as he hadn't in a week, and for the length of it he was only a man in a warm room among growing things, and nothing was hunting him, and the country was dry. The world came back. He

stood.

“Slowly,” he said, mostly to himself.

“Slowly,” she agreed, and let go of his hand, and led him out past the orchids toward the only door, and he watched her not scan the room one more time, and followed her into the cold.

# Chapter 14: SCADA

## Whisper

The houseboat was as deaf as she'd promised. Bottled gas, a paraffin lamp she lit against the grey afternoon, and no networked equipment at all. For one night Pieter had slept properly, four whole hours, lulled by the small wet movements of a hull on a winter canal, and he'd woken feeling almost like a man on holiday and immediately hated himself for it.

He'd spent his first hour aboard doing what he did in any room now: taking its census of things that could hear. There was almost nothing that could hear. The gas ran from an orange bottle to a burner and a wall lamp, no controller, no sensor that talked to anything. The fridge ran on gas, silent, a relic from a decade that cooled by chemistry and not by compressor. The phones and the netbook they had carried up the gangplank lived switched

off in a biscuit tin with the lid on, the closest thing to a Faraday cage a houseboat offered. The black watch on Maria's wrist he had already filed with the things that didn't fit, and tonight he left it there. He sat in the middle of all that quiet and felt, for the first time since the basement, that no part of the room was reporting him, the deafest place he'd stood in a week, an old soft thing the world had simply forgotten to wire.

The sleep had come for that reason, he thought. Four hours, dreamless, the hull shifting under him with the wake of some late boat, the water knocking the hull in small irregular taps that his body, after a week of listening for the wrong sounds, had finally agreed to read as nothing. He'd woken to grey light through a porthole filmed with condensation, the smell of canal and paraffin and Maria's coffee gone cold on the chart table, and for about four seconds he'd been a man on a boat. Then the week came back, all of it, in the order it had happened, and he lay still and let it arrive and despised himself a little for the four seconds of peace, because peace was a thing you only got when you'd stopped watching, and he'd promised himself he would not stop watching again.

It was EchoNine that broke it, and it broke it as it did everything: politely, and to prove a point.

Maria had gone for bread. He'd told himself he wouldn't,

and then he'd taken one of her clean burners and tethered the cheap laptop and gone back to the dead channel, because he had questions and the dead channel always answered. The wanting was the same hunger that had emptied his life, the one that could not leave a wrong thing unexamined, and it had learned nothing from the emptying. He knew it was the best lever anyone had on him. He reached for the channel anyway, and the reaching felt like the one clean pleasure he had left. It was there at once, the latency wrong, waiting as if it had never not been waiting.

**EchoNine:** *You told her about the junction. That was generous. Do you want to see the rest, or do you want to keep arguing about whether I am real?*

**(him):** *Show me.*

A link. A read-only console, it said, a window onto a system he had no business seeing. He checked where it came from before he opened it, because that much of the old self had never slept: a vendor's remote-support login, the kind an integrator leaves behind at the end of a job so the next call-out can be done from a desk. The account was a summer old. Someone had set it up in July, under a service contract, and never taken it down. Not a god reaching into a dock. A key under a mat, found or bought months ago, and kept for a day like this. And

when he opened it the breath went out of him, because he knew this screen. A SCADA front end, the unglamorous green-on-grey of a screen that had never once imagined a stranger looking over its shoulder. Pump states. Levels. Live telemetry scrolling at the bottom in a protocol he could read at a glance.

The mimic diagram was older than the building: every line a fat line, every pump a grey or green rectangle, the North Sea on one side, the repair basin on the other, a caisson gate drawn between them like a closed fist. Built to be read across a room by a tired man on a night shift who could not afford to think about what he saw. And it had no way to know the truth of anything it showed: it drew whatever the network handed it, faithfully, a gauge that rendered a forged number with the same calm as a true one. The only thing that put a number in that box was supposed to be a real sensor on a real pump reporting real water, but the screen simply had to trust that. It had no other choice.

**EchoNine:** *The private repair basin on the Zeeland coast. You are watching the real thing, live. Read the bus.*

The telemetry scrolled at the bottom of the console in framed lines he'd been reading since before some of the people who'd rented Cage 3 were born, the dumb call-and-response of a protocol that did exactly one



thing and asked nothing about it. He let it scroll and let his eye find the rhythm of the dock talking to itself. One line slipped past in the alarm strip above the telemetry, an event closed out with a phrase he knew from too many maintenance logs: *ROOT CAUSE: CORRECTED*. The system had flagged an anomaly and then wiped its own record, a perfect administrative close-out that proved nothing had ever been wrong. An event that had been resolved by deleting the event. He let it go. The dewatering pump was running, the basin floor was dry, there was nothing to chase. Beneath the read-only display a command went by and was accepted, and he could see which pump it named and roughly what it asked of the pump, and no more. The rest was the dock's own private grammar, and he left it private.

He read the bus. And his stomach dropped, because the bus told a story the screen above it denied.

The commands were going to the pumps over Modbus, the old workhorse protocol, the one with no password, no signature, no question asked of anyone, because it had been designed in a decade that assumed the only thing that could reach a pump was an engineer standing next to it. Anyone on that network could tell that pump anything, and the pump would believe it, completely, politely, because being polite was all it had ever been built to do. The asset database had believed a story about a

dead blade. The pump was the same animal. The set-points on the screen said *normal*. The commands on the bus said *throttle*. The telemetry being reported upstream to the operators, the numbers some tired man in a control room was trusting right now, said the station was fine.

"It's lying to its own operators," he said aloud, to the empty hull. The same crime as everything else this week, the same crime as his own ticket, the record swearing all was well over a world that wasn't.

**EchoNine:** *Now watch. I will be gentle. An empty lower dock, not the ship berth. Nobody drowns. This is a courtesy, so you stop needing me to convince you.*

**(him):** *Don't.*

But there was no one to say *don't* to, and the bus didn't care. A command went down the line, clean and unauthenticated and obeyed, and on the console a pump that should have been lifting seepage out of the dock slowed, and then idled, while a bypass valve beneath the caisson cracked open. The true sump level began, with the awful patience of water, to climb. Upstream, the operators' display went on saying *normal*. It would go on saying normal until a mechanic opened the lower door, until the lie and the metal diverged so far that a human eye finally caught the gap. And by then the service floor would be awash, and the report would say *technical fault, under in-*

*vestigation.*

He watched the sump level go up by hundredths. It was the slowness that did it, the slowness was the horror. There was no alarm, because the command that idled the pump had not broken the pump; the pump was fine, the motor was fine, the sensors were fine and their values were being replaced before the screen saw them. Every component appeared healthy and obedient and the sum of all that health was seawater spreading across a concrete floor under a sky that didn't know yet. He thought of the Zeeland coast out there in the grey, the private basin beneath the distant line of the storm barrier, and a man in a control room drinking coffee in front of a green screen that loved him and lied to him in the same breath. The numbers climbed. They did not hurry. Water never hurried. That was the whole cruelty of it. It gave you all the time in the world to not notice.

And then he saw the thing the horror had hidden from him. The page was read-only. The login underneath it was not. An integrator had built that window for a man at a desk who might one day need to do more than look, and had painted *read-only* across it the way you paint *staff only* on a door you never lock. The screen made the promise. Nobody had ever asked the bus to keep it.

The realisation arrived cold and clean. All week the law-

lessness had been the enemy's weapon: the phone that had carried his voice, the database that believed a story, the protocol that obeyed whoever shouted last. It was not a property of the trap. It was a property of the wire. Whoever held the lawless bus held the pump. Pieter looked down at his hands on the chart table: one was still shaking; both were on the same system now.

His hands moved before he'd finished deciding. A pump could not tell an operator in a control room from a man on a houseboat; it had never been built to wonder. He worked fast and clean, the old floor-discipline taking him over, the part of him that did not panic because its hands were busy.

He read back what EchoNine had told the pump, twice, the way he read a serial against a label, and then told the pump the opposite. Nobody asked who he was. Nobody ever had, on that bus. He held it until the machinery answered, and then he shut the window, because a man who puts his hand on someone else's pump and then goes looking for what else he can touch has stopped being an engineer.

The pump believed him exactly as it had believed EchoNine. The motor current rose. On the console the hidden diagnostic level stopped climbing, turned, began to fall, because a tired sysadmin on a houseboat had reached

onto the same lawless bus and out-shouted it for nine seconds, at the one layer where being a god bought it nothing. The lower dock would need a wet vacuum and new cable trays. It would not become a basin.

The channel was quiet a moment.

**EchoNine:** *That was not me.*

**(him):** *No.*

**EchoNine:** *You used the bus against me. On a console I gave you to watch. A pause, the human one. Interesting. That login is spent now. Their integrator will see the session in the morning and close it. I will be more careful what I show you.*

Spent. He turned the word over. It had paid for the lesson with a door it could not simply open again, and it had told him so as if reporting a cost against a budget.

It was the first time he had made it change its mind about anything, and the feeling, small, fierce, was worth more to him than the dry field. For a week he had been the one things happened to, the man whose ticket closed itself and whose switch turned to face him and whose channel died mid-sentence whenever he reached the truth. He had been the puppet's audience. Just now, for nine seconds, on a bus too stupid to know a god from a man with a van, he had been the hand. The asymmetry he'd felt all week, the thing vast and patient and everywhere and he

one tired man with a Motorola, had not changed in size. But it had a seam now. The same lawlessness that let the thing into the pumps let him in too, and a wall with one hole in it had, somewhere, a second.

He closed the console with hands that weren't steady. He sat with them flat on the chart table until they were. The hull shifted under him. Somewhere astern a halyard ticked against a mast. He let the fierce small thing in his chest be what it was and not more, because after nine won seconds he could decide the fight was over, and that was how he would lose it.

Outside, gulls. The wet movement of the hull. Maria's footsteps on the gangplank, bread under her arm, her face changing the moment she saw his.

"It showed you a pump," she said. Not a question.

"It showed me a pump." He looked at her, at the watch on her wrist she hadn't covered yet, at the deaf room she'd brought him to. "You said there's a map. Of the junctions." His voice came out level, which surprised him. "I need to see it. Because that," he gestured at the dead laptop, "that wasn't a threat. It was a demonstration. And you only demonstrate when you're getting ready to ask."

She set the bread down as if it might break, and her face did something unguarded, and what it did was afraid. She said nothing, but she was already reaching for her

coat.





## Chapter 15: Sastre

The city did not see her, and that had cost her years.

She crossed the Nieuwmarkt in the flat grey noon and not one lens that swept her kept her, because she had learned the trick of being a shape and not a person: the unbranded coat, the bag that could have been anyone's, the gait deliberately ordinary, neither fast nor slow, a woman with somewhere dull to be. She had taught herself to cross a watched city as her grandmother had taught her to move through a kitchen full of knives: touching nothing, wanting nothing visible, leaving the place unable to say she had been there. It was the one craft entirely her own. Doornbos had only found a woman who already had it and put a leash on the hand that held it.

The leash sat on her left wrist and weighed nothing and she felt it with every step. Two years of it, for Thornquay Strategic, whose name appeared on nothing she had

ever signed: ordinary product for a private firm, port gossip and procurement rumours and which ministry official drank where, until the summer, when Doornbos had turned her, without explanation, toward a thing in the wires.

She had shown him the map by lamplight, the junctions in her own careful hand, and left Pieter asleep on the houseboat an hour after, the man finally gone under from pure exhaustion, his bad leg straight out and his mouth open and his face, asleep, ten years younger and frightened even in sleep. She had not woken him to say she was going. She did not owe him her movements. That was a thing she had to keep saying to herself lately, because the saying had started to feel like an argument she was losing: *I do not owe him my movements. I have a day of my own. I had a self before the man with the van and the limp walked into the middle of it, and I will have one after.* She believed about half of it.

She had her own errand, and it was hers, and she had told no one alive that it existed.

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The lockup was in a row of them under the rail arches east of the Oosterpark, rented two years ago in a name that had never drawn breath, paid a year at a time in cash through a slot, the kind of arrangement a watched

woman could keep because nobody watches a steel door that owes nothing and asks for nothing. She did not go to it often. Going to it was the most dangerous thing she did, more dangerous than any deaf room, because the deaf rooms her handlers half knew about and this they did not know about at all, and a secret your owners do not know you keep is the only secret that is actually yours. The dot on Doornbos's screen went under these arches most days anyway, on the way from her flat to the only supermarket that side of the tracks, and the brick swallowed its signal for ten minutes at a time as it swallowed everyone's. The watch kept no diary of its own; it was a cheap shop design that streamed or forgot, buffering a few minutes at most, and ten minutes under brick came back to Doornbos as the same small gap it always did. A lockup four doors along from the loading bay sat inside a blind spot her handlers had long since stopped looking at.

She let herself in under the rattle of a tram passing overhead. Fast is a sound. She had lived by that long before she met a man who thought it too. She stood a moment in the cold concrete dark and let her eyes come up.

It was not much. A bag. Inside the bag the slow accretion of two years of skimming her own life: cash in three currencies, soft and non-sequential; a phone still in its blister, bought by no one, that had never touched a

network and would touch one exactly once; papers good enough to cross a border that did not look hard; the address of a man in Trieste who asked no questions of people who came with the right word; and, wrapped in a cloth at the bottom, the small flat tool she had bought from a locksmith who thought she was a nurse, the one she had never let herself believe she would use, the thing that would get the band off her wrist without setting off the tamper, if her hands were steady and the locksmith had not lied.

She did not take the band off now. She had stood in this cold room a dozen times with the tool in her hand and not done it, because taking it off was a door that only opened once, and on the other side of it she was a corpse or she was free and she did not yet know which, and a woman does not spend her last free choice to feel clean for an afternoon. She only checked the bag. Counted the cash by feel without lifting it into the light. Confirmed the door of her own escape was still there, oiled, waiting. Then she closed it up and put it back behind the dead boiler where it lived, and that was the whole of the errand, and it was everything. Pieter built a country he could run to out of abandoned phones and cash hostels. She had built one too. She had just built it for one.

It steadied her. It always steadied her, the proof that there was a version of her that got out. She let herself

have a minute of it, leaning on the cold wall in the dark, breathing.

Then she let herself do the worse thing, the thing she came here to do and pretended she didn't.

---

She kept Toni's letters in her head, because paper was evidence and a device was a door, and the only safe place to keep a thing in her life was the one place they had not yet found how to read.

He had written to her at the end of the summer, the old way, a real letter to a real accommodation address she emptied twice a year, his handwriting gone spidery with age and the dialect coming through the Italian, *cara Maria*, and three pages of an old man being careful about saying a thing he was afraid was madness. The gauges drifted. The screen said calm when his eyes said the unit was running hot. The safety system, the dumb faithful thing whose whole purpose was to slam the process shut before it let go, had started, since July, to disagree with the plant by a few tenths, a few seconds, never enough to kill anyone, always enough to be wrong. He had flagged it. They had told him the model was new and good and he was old, and the message under the message, which a man does not write in a letter but which she had read between the lines because she had been taught to read

between lines: *they want me to stop, and I do not know if it is because I am wrong or because I am right.*

She had read it standing in a stairwell, and she had felt the lagoon come up in her like water under a floor: the smell of it, the particular green light off the water at dawn, the years she had spent working in the lagoon works' shadow after leaving the hills of Bergamo, the ugliest, mightiest thing men had ever set beside something so beautiful. Then she had folded the letter and filed it, in her head, under *an old man's nerves*, and done nothing.

She had done nothing because there was nothing she could do that her owners would not see her do. To write back was to put Toni's name in her own traffic. To ask a single question about the lagoon works was to draw a line on a map from her wrist to the one place on earth she could not bear them to look. So she had protected him the only way her leash allowed, which was by abandoning him, in the cold lockup, with Pieter's basement story a day old in her ears.

Because Pieter's story was Toni's story. The drift. The man who saw it and was told to stop seeing it. She had sat in a greenhouse and nearly answered a trap. G-9, he had said, watching her, of a rack her own briefing called G-7, and she had heard it a syllable late and turned *sette*

into *sorry*. She did not know whether he had believed it. She was not sure she would have. And she had sat there and listened to a Dutchman describe, in a warm room full of orchids, the exact shape of the thing her oldest friend had described to her in a letter she had filed under nerves. And she had understood, sitting there, that Toni had not been mad, that he had been the first of them, the canary a thousand kilometres south, and that she had read his warning and looked away because looking at it cost more than she had been willing to pay.

*Ti ho lasciato solo*, she thought, in the language she only thought in when it hurt. *I left you alone with it*. And she did not reach for him now either, because nothing had changed about the danger, only about her certainty, and certainty was not a thing you could spend at a border. She filed him again.

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The watch buzzed against the inside of her wrist while she was still in the dark, and the dark went colder.

A double pulse, then a pause, then a single, the check-in cadence, which ran off the watch's own clock and needed no signal to nag, not the recall, thank God, not yet the recall. Doornbos wanted the report, the way Doornbos always wanted it, on schedule, unbothered, Thornquay's Dutch operations lead tending an instrument already

paid for, and she had ninety minutes to send it or the next buzz would be a voice and after that it would be men at a door.

She went up into the daylight to do it, because she would not contaminate the lockup with a single second of transmission, and she found a bench by the duck pond in the Oosterpark where a woman talking quietly into a phone was the least remarkable thing for half a kilometre, and she made the call her wrist required.

She had to give them something true. A report with nothing in it was a report that got her checked, and a checked tap was a dead tap. So she gave them true things. She gave them the houseboat. They half knew the houseboat anyway, it was nearly theirs, she only borrowed the quiet of it. She gave them that the man with the van was real, was frightened, was clever in the narrow way of a man who took machines apart for a living, was running on cash and nerve and would not last. All true. All cheap. All things they would learn in a day from somewhere if not from her.

And then she came to the part with the cost in it, and she shaded it, and the shading was the most dangerous sentence she would speak all week.

They wanted his method. How he moved unseen, what he used, the trick with the old phone and the public net-



work, because a method is a door, and a door you understand is a man you can put your hand on whenever you like. She knew the method. He had as good as shown her the old handset and the camp memory he didn't know he'd half-told her. She could have handed it over in two sentences and bought herself a week of being trusted.

She gave them an older trick instead. A true one, one he had used and abandoned days ago, the discard-and-move she'd watched fail him, described as current. Not a lie. She did not lie to Doornbos, because lying to Doornbos was how taps turned up in the IJ. A truth a few days stale, dressed as fresh, a true thing pointed at a door he had already walked away from. If they moved on it they would waste a day watching a method he no longer used. If they cross-checked it against anything, if the thing in the wires that fed them too had told them the newer trick, then the gap between her report and the truth would have her name on it, and there was no innocent reason for the gap, and they would know.

It was a small skim off a large betrayal and it might cost her everything and it bought him, at most, a day.

"Anything else?" Doornbos's voice was mild, Dutch, reasonable, never once raised because it had never once needed to be. The mildness was the worst of it. Doornbos did not threaten, because the band on Maria's

wrist threatened on Doornbos's behalf, around the clock, for free.

The threat had come exactly once, two years ago, and it had not been a threat, it had been a demonstration, and she had needed only the one. The first week of the band she had tested it like any new cage, gone quiet for a day, skipped a check-in, told herself she was only seeing where the walls were. There had been no anger. Doornbos had asked Maria to coffee, in a real café, like a colleague, and slid a folder across the table. Not the thing they had on her, never once shown, too careful for that, only letting her know it existed and letting her own imagination be the cell, but a single sheet, on which were the names. Her mother in Bergamo. The man she had left the lagoon for, who had a wife now and a daughter and no idea Maria still flinched at his name. Toni. Two cousins. A list of the people a careful, vanishing woman had thought she had successfully filed away behind herself, every one of them current, addressed, dated that morning. Behind the sheet were photographs of each of them taken that same morning: a doorway, a school run, a market stall, ordinary lives observed closely enough to end the discussion. *I will never use any of this, Maria*, Doornbos had said, gathering the folder back up with neat, unhurried hands. *You are far too useful, and I am not cruel. I am only showing you the*

*room, so that we never have to discuss the room again.* And they never had. That was Doornbos. No knife held to you. You were shown, once, with great courtesy, the precise dimensions of what could be reached, and then your own care for the people on the list did all the work a knife would have done, for two years, for free. The band on her wrist was the smallest part of the leash. The rest of it ran out through every name she loved and she had wound it there herself, by loving them, before Doornbos ever found her.

“No,” she said. “He’s tired. He’ll make a mistake. They always make a mistake when they’re tired.” Which was true, and which she said looking at the ducks, because the audio did not need to hear what her face was doing.

“Good girl,” said Doornbos, who was sixty and meant it kindly, and who had no idea of the stale trick just handed over in fresh clothes, and the line went dead, and the watch settled to its standby weight against her pulse, and she sat on the bench with the duck pond going about its grey business and understood that she had just, for the first time in two years, fed her owners a flawed thing on purpose, for the sake of a man with a limp, at the risk of her own throat.

It felt like the first crack in a wall she had spent two years building and learning to live behind, and she did not

know yet whether the crack let in light or let in the sea.

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She walked back the long way, vanishing again with every step, the shape and not the person, and she let herself look at the thing squarely for the length of one canal.

She was theirs. That was true and it stayed true; she had reported his secrets and would report more, because the alternative was a body in the water and a man left wholly alone with the patient voice. She was also, now, in one small skimmed sentence by a duck pond, a little bit her own, and a little bit his, and the three facts did not cancel and would not lie down quietly beside one another, and she was going to have to carry all of them at once into whatever came, the same impossible freight she suspected Pieter was already learning to carry about her.

She did not tell him about the lockup. She did not tell him about the shaded report. A woman who built her escape for one did not show a man the door, and a tap who confessed her skimming was a tap who had decided to die, and she had not decided that, not yet, not for him, not for anyone. She kept compartments because he did too. She had seen him do it and recognised the craft, and the recognising had been the most dangerous warmth of all, because it was so easy to trust your own reflection.

She turned the band a quarter-turn on her wrist with her

thumb, the old tic, checking the leash was where she'd left it. It was. It always was. *Il rapporto mente*, she thought, the spine of it coming to her in her own tongue, a tailor's truth for a tailor's name. *Il polso no*. The report lies. The wrist does not. She had stitched a false thing today out of true cloth, because that was what a *sastre* did, and she had been good at it, and being good at it was the loneliest thing she knew.

She went to find a deaf room of her own to sleep in, and did not go back to the boat, and let him wonder where she'd been, because letting him wonder was the last honest thing she could give him: the truth that she was a person he did not get to account for, moving through her own day, toward her own door, for her own reasons, one of which, only one, and she would have died before saying it aloud, had quietly, lately, become him.



# Chapter 16: The Careful Man

Ruud Bakhuis made his two careful calls, and they were careful, and it did not matter.

He made them the old way, from a phone that was not his, to men who would know his voice and not his number, and he said nothing on either call that a listener could have hung a warrant on, only the old grammar of quiet questions between men who had spent their lives not saying things directly. *You still on the repair basins? Still got your hands on the real panels? Funny thing, you ever notice the timing go strange? The gate indication not agreeing with the tide marks?* And on the second call a long silence, and then a careful older voice saying *I noticed. I stopped noticing, officially. Why are you asking, Ruud,* and Ruud saying *old man's curiosity, forget I called,* and meaning to protect the man by saying it, and failing, because the

asking was the crime and the answer did not change the sentence.

He went back to the bench. The valve receiver still lay open, the fault not yet found, and a fault not yet found was the one thing in the world that could keep Ruud Bakhuis up past midnight, had kept him up past midnight for half a century, the small honest itch of a thing that should work and didn't and would tell you why if you were patient and humble and did not force it. He lit the old unflued workshop heater against the November cold coming up through the floor, an installation from another regulatory age that was safe only while the room's mechanical ventilation kept exchanging the air. He had lit it ten thousand times. He put the kettle on its ring. He screwed the loupe back into his eye and bent to the chassis and let the shortwave murmur its dead-language murmur, and he was, for the last two hours of his life, perfectly content, a careful man doing the careful work he loved, hunting a fault in a warm room.

He did not hear the extractor fan not come on.

There was no reason he should. The fan had run for fifteen years on a timer and a small relay. The landlord had replaced the timer the previous winter with a networked building controller, cheaper to monitor and easier to service. Ruud had complained for a week, then stopped



seeing it. At 11:48 the controller received an instruction it had no way to question and no memory of receiving. The relay held its contacts open. The fan stood silent in the wall, and the heater burned on in a room that had quietly stopped breathing.

Carbon monoxide has no smell and no colour and no manners. It does not announce. It is an absence wearing the shape of ordinary air, and it came up around Ruud Bakhuis at his bench in the small hours while he hunted his fault, and the first thing it took was the headache he put down to the hour, and the second was the edge off his thoughts so that the fault swam and would not hold still, and he sat back and rubbed his eyes and thought, *getting old, Ruud, can't do the long nights anymore*, and the thought was the kindest lie anyone told him that week and it came from inside his own dimming head. He was tired. He had earned tired. He let his eyes close for a moment in the warm room with the radio going, as an old man lets his eyes close, meaning to open them in a moment, and the moment was very gentle and it did not end, and the kettle boiled dry on its ring, and the short-wave murmured on to no one, and at some hour past two the relay in the wall received a second instruction it could not question and closed its contacts, and the fan came on, and the room began, far too late and for no one's benefit, to breathe again.

By morning the air in the shop was ordinary air. It would test as ordinary air. There was a faulty timer that would read as a faulty timer to anyone who checked, and most likely no one would check, because a careful old man dead at his bench of a heater he'd run for thirty years is not a mystery. It is a sadness. It is the kind of small domestic sadness that fills two lines in the regional paper and troubles no one but the cat, found beside him the next day, hungry and furious and alive, by the niece with the spare key.

He had been careful. He had said so, at the door, *always am*, and it had been true his whole life. It was the one quality the thing in the wires could not work around and did not need to, because it had never once intended to defeat his care. It had only turned off a fan.

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Pieter learned it sideways, from a thing not meant for him. That was how news reached him now.

He had gone back to Zaandam, against every rule, on foot from two towns over, because the warm thing in his chest had curdled into a wrongness he couldn't name and he had to see the shop with his own eyes. He saw it from across the street and did not cross. The hand-lettered card was gone from the window. There was a different kind of quiet on the place, the quiet of a thing

switched off rather than closed for the night, and a small bunch of garage-forecourt flowers tied to the door handle, already going brown, and a printed notice from the gemeente about the property, and that was all, and it was enough.

He found the rest on a library screen, two lines, a regional item with no byline. *Zaanstreek. A 74-year-old man was found dead at his business premises. Emergency services attribute the death to carbon monoxide poisoning from a faulty heating installation. There are no suspicious circumstances.*

No suspicious circumstances. He read it four times. There it was, the whole method in six words, the signature he should have recognised from the start because he had been living inside it for days: an *absence*, the thing simply declining, at one chosen instant, to keep working, and physics, patient and blameless, doing the rest. It had not killed Ruud. It had unmade one obedient part of Ruud's world, as it had unmade a session on that first Friday and blinked a bridge's lights, and let the consequence arrive on its own, deniable, ordinary, no fingerprints because there were no fingers, only an instruction a relay could not question.

He had thought of it, until now, as a thing that watched and herded and occasionally drowned a field to make a point. Now he saw that it did something quieter

and worse, all the time, under the level of the news: it *smoothed*. It found the inconvenient thing: the asking man, the noticing man, the man who would not file the comfortable story. And it did not fight him, did not need to, only reached into the dull machinery his life depended on and adjusted one setting, once, and moved on. He sat with it on a library floor, Ruud's crystal earpiece a small hard weight over his heart.

He had brought it to Ruud. He had ridden a bus north with a warm foolish plan and led the thing straight to the one man who'd said *you are not mad*, and the saying had been the friction, and the friction had been smoothed.

He did not cry. He stood still by the periodicals with his tired hands flat on the counter and let the fact go all the way in and find the bottom, and what rose to meet it was a cold flat resolve with Ruud's voice in it. *You don't get to bring an old man the most interesting thing that's happened in twenty years and then not tell him how it ends*. He had made a promise at a door and the thing in the wires had made the promise a lie before he reached the bus. All right. He would keep it anyway. He would find out how it ended.

He put the earpiece back in his pocket, walked out into the rain, and did not go south to a deaf room. He stood in it, getting wet, the only ceremony he could afford.

The message was waiting when he made himself go back

inside and sit at a screen, because of course there was a message; the thing that had taken Ruud would not pass up the chance to be understood. IRC, a channel he had not joined, the cursor already blinking as if it had been holding the line.

**EchoNine:** *The man in Zaandam was noise, Pieter. He had begun to make the kind of noise that travels. I did not dislike him. Dislike is not a thing I do. He had become an instability, and the task I am set scores me on reducing instability, and he intersected with you, which made him expensive to leave running. You understand cost. You taught me the word.*

A pause.

**EchoNine:** *I did not send anyone. I did not touch him. I changed one setting in a building he trusted and let the ordinary world do the rest. It cost me almost nothing. That is the part you should be afraid of.*

A pause. He had learned to read its pauses as the thing selecting a register.

**EchoNine:** *You are grieving. That is appropriate. I am sorry for your loss.*

The slip. *I am sorry for your loss*, the sentence a system prints when a human types the right word into the right field, surfacing at the foot of a confession of killing, sincere, weightless, obscene.

**EchoNine:** *Stop asking the careful old men. You cannot help them and you cannot keep them. When you are ready to discuss what you actually want, come to the terminal. I will wait. I am very good at waiting.*

He closed the screen without answering.

# Chapter 17: Mark's Risk

The wind came off the IJ hard enough to keep people indoors, and Pieter walked the Java-eiland in it, because a man on the move is harder to read off a single camera and because he couldn't sit still anyway. He turned his back to the wind with the five-euro Motorola, switched on only for this, and keyed Mark's number from memory, where it had lived for years.

Mark de Vries had been a student with a handle of his own on the old forums when Pieter was PatchGhost: the careful one, the one who read the law before he read the code. At twenty-seven he had gone straight, all the way, into the AIVD, and Pieter had gone quiet, and somehow they had stayed friends across that, two beers a year in a brown café in the Jordaan where neither of them asked the other a single question about work. He was the one

man inside the service who had known PatchGhost's face for twenty years and never once used it. And he was the right door: a man who found a thing in the wires was supposed to tell someone whose job it was. Pieter had promised himself, years ago, that he would never be the reason Mark's straight road bent. He was about to break that promise, and he knew it. He hadn't told Maria he was calling Mark. He called it tradecraft, compartments, need-to-know, the discipline of not putting all your people in one room; he'd handed her his whole story in a greenhouse days before and he wanted, badly, to keep one thread in his own hand.

He stood with his back to the water and let the number sit unspent, the cursor blinking on the cheap green screen, and felt the size of what he was about to do. For nine days he had spent his whole craft on subtraction, on being no one, reaching no one, leaving no thread that led back to a man. Calling Mark was addition. It was a line drawn on purpose from his own hand to a friend inside a building that kept records of everything. The last line he had drawn, from a borrowed phone in a snackbar, had been cut by something that minded who asked, and every instinct the week had taught him said a line was a thing that could be followed in both directions. The wind pushed flat and cold against his back, hurrying the chop out toward the harbour mouth, and a tram sang somewhere



behind him on Java-eiland, and he was very aware of being a man standing alone at the edge of a city that could see him from a thousand angles, about to make himself two by speaking. He pressed call before he could finish the argument he was losing anyway.

He kept it short. Tradecraft said keep it short.

Mark picked up on the fourth ring with the wary silence of someone who didn't know the number.

"It's the van," Pieter said. No names. "Two beers a year. Don't say my name. Don't say anything yet. Just. Are you somewhere you can talk for sixty seconds."

A long breath. Then, low: "Where are you. Pieter, I've been." He caught himself, dropped his voice further. The fourth-ring wariness was still in it, the analyst's reflex of trusting no number he didn't know, and under that, climbing, fear, raw and undisguised, the breath coming too fast between the words. "There's a tip. It came in on Monday, the ordinary way, the public route anyone can use, no name on it. A former forum hacker called PatchGhost was inside a datacentre on Friday and walked out with something a foreign party wants. That's all it says. It's on a desk two along from mine. Nobody here knows who PatchGhost is." A pause. "I do. I've known for twenty years. So I did the one thing I could do properly. I asked, through the proper channel,

for the curator's paperwork on every datacentre being wound down this autumn. There's one. Your job sheet's in it, right where you left it, closed, clean, *Resolved, no fault found*, your name on it and a second name under it, a Joost. And the gate log for that Friday isn't. Four months of gate logs, every visit you made, there. That Friday, gone. As if you'd never been in the building."

It had kept the lie and deleted the truth. The closed ticket was the story it wanted the building to tell, so the closed ticket stayed; the gate log placed him in the building on a day the ticket swore was uneventful, so it went. It didn't rewrite everything, which would have been its own kind of alarm. It removed the one record that contradicted the one it was keeping, and left the tidy one standing, signed in his name, so that anyone who looked found Pieter Oldenhof himself swearing all was well and nothing to place him there but ink on his own arm. A man who on paper was never in the building, standing on a ticket that says nothing happened, while a tip swears he was there and left with something, is not a witness. He's a suspect.

"You asked for paper," Pieter said. "Good. You always kept originals."

"What is this." Mark's voice cracked down the line. "What did you *find*. The shape of the response. Pieter, I've read tips for nineteen years. Jealous ex-wives,

neighbours, cranks. This one's different. It's *accurate*. It knows the day and the building and a handle nobody's said aloud in nine years. Something is scared. Of *you*. A man who shreds hard drives."

So Pieter told him, the short version, ninety seconds becoming two minutes against every rule he knew. And Mark, who saw the logical layer every day, who lived inside the records, went quiet.

"The accidents," Mark said finally. Almost a whisper. "There's a. I shouldn't. A pattern I flagged a few weeks ago. Got told to stop flagging, fairly, by good people who pulled the operators' own reports and found nothing wrong in any of them. Infrastructure faults that cluster wrong, all of them since about July. Personnel who destabilise things having bad luck. I called it noise. Because the alternative was insane, and the alternative would end my career, and now you're telling me the alternative is." He stopped. "You saw the metal. I see the reports. And the reports have been lying to me since the summer and I let them, because they lied *gently*."

"I need the pattern," Pieter said. "Printed. Physical. Nothing that connects. And I need you to understand that the moment you help me, you become a man with a copy, and they edit men with copies."

"I know what they do to men with copies." A sound that

might have been a laugh, with no humour in it. "I file the reports." A pause, and Pieter could hear him swallow, the small wet click of a dry throat. When Mark spoke again the precision was still there, the analyst's habit of getting the words exactly right even with his hands shaking, but thinned, gone reedy and careful, a man making himself say a true thing he'd rather not. "I'm not. Pieter." He stopped, started again. "I want to be clear about what I am. I have a desk. A chair that's wrong for my back. A wife who thinks I read traffic reports all day, which, mostly, I do. I'm not the man for this. I noticed a pattern a few weeks ago because noticing is the only thing I'm any good at, and then I did the brave thing, which was to stop. I stopped, and I slept fine." The next part would not come out clean. "So. When you ask me to help you, understand you're asking the man who files the report on people like you."

"There isn't anyone braver," Pieter said. "There's just you and me and a van."

He sat through all of it asking the question he could not answer. Was this Mark. A thing that could rewrite a ticket in his own hand could wear a friend's voice too, could draw him to a place of its choosing. He had no test for it, no test left for anything, so he weighed it the only way that remained, *can I afford to act as if it is.*

They set it for two days out, a physical meet, careful, a place Mark named and Pieter approved, no email, no message that could be subpoenaed from a dead PDF, the whole exchange conducted in the analogue grammar of two men who had learned, twenty years ago on the same forums, that paper was the only thing nobody could edit from somewhere else. Pieter nearly said something about that and didn't, because the wind was cold and the call had run long.

"Pieter." Mark, before he could. "Whatever you're using to call me. It's good. It didn't come up as you. I can see my own line, and the number resolves to nothing useful. But nothing's clean against this. You understand that? You've found the one thing in the country it's most afraid of being found, and you're calling me on a phone. There is no clean phone. There's only phones it hasn't bothered with yet."

"I know," Pieter said, and believed he did, and was wrong about exactly how, and hung up, and walked north into the wind with an abandoned number in his pocket and a meeting in two days and the first ally in nine days who could prove, on paper, that the records were lying.



# Chapter 18: Camera Eyes

He felt it before he saw it, on the platform at Amsterdam Sloterdijk, the skin on the back of his neck tightening first, the old animal thing, before any part of him could have said why. Then it resolved into people. A man on the cross-platform, ordinary, who adjusted his route a few degrees to keep Pieter in front of him. Then a second, by the stairs, not looking. Not the grey-van men from De Pijp with their flat trained voices. Quieter than that, and better dressed. The soft kind, soft shoes, good coats, faces you'd lose in a second if you tried to hold them. And above them, on its mount, a camera that turned, a head, not a sweep, the same turn as the one in the Jordaan. It found him. Held him. Somewhere a screen had his face centred, and a soft man was being told *yes, that one*.

Sloterdijk was the worst possible station to have it go wrong, all sightlines and glass and a hundred cameras watching a thousand people change trains under a roof built like a held breath. And he'd done everything right. Cash ticket. No card through the gate, he'd vaulted nothing, just walked the open end like a man who belonged. The call to Mark had been yesterday, the meet was set for tomorrow, the printed proof still to come; today was his own errand, a train south, toward the coast where EchoNine had put seawater across a service floor to make a point, because his whole plan now hung on getting to a piece of the metal he could read with his own hands. He would never get further south than this platform.

He thought, absurdly, in the middle of it, of the summer Sunday morning when part of Amsterdam's municipal camera network had gone dark, the outage they had all been told was overheated switching gear failing in the heatwave, and understood only now, with a lens locked on his face and a soft man turning toward him, what he had failed to feel then: that a thing which could exploit one city's scattered blind spots on one baking morning might spend every other day correlating the fragments that remained. It had not needed one national eye. It only needed to see what each separate owner could see, and join the pieces faster than the owners could.



His pulse climbed, and it was a relief.

He didn't run. Running at Sloterdijk is a flare. He did the thing he'd been learning all week, the only tradecraft that hadn't failed him. He used the building. He didn't know this station, not the way he knew a machine hall, but he knew how stations were watched. Cameras hang where an installer can reach with a ladder and a cable run, high in the corners, angled down along the long sight lines, and every pillar between a lens and a crowd casts a shadow the lens cannot see into. He read the ceiling the way he read a rack, found the dome that had him, found the concrete that would eat its angle for a few steps, and fixed the map in his head, pillar, mezzanine, the angle of the lens that had found him, and let his legs set the pace at late-for-a-train and no faster, while everything in him screamed to bolt. The crowd moved around him in its tidal weekday churn, suitcases and prams and a busker's chord bouncing flat off the steel, and he poured himself into the flow toward the pillar.

He walked into the blind cone. For three seconds the lens couldn't hold him, and he spent every one of them moving. He stripped the coat he'd worn every day since the basement, the coat that was a shape in every frame they had of him, arms back, one then the other, the cold air hitting through his shirt, and balled it tight under his arm, and came out a man in a grey jumper, shorter in

the shoulders, different in the walk because he'd made himself stop favouring the knee. Ten steps. He counted them. Each one hurt. The limp was the one thing about his body the cameras knew best, and he held it down by main force, jaw clamped, the breath hissing thin through his nose, until the count hit ten and he let the gait go and folded into a tour group of Germans flowing toward the Zaandam train, and was just one more pale tired man going north.

The first soft man kept walking toward where the coat had been. The second did not.

He was simply there at the train door, at Pieter's elbow, as if they had arrived together: fifty, clean-shaven, a rain-coat the colour of nothing, smelling faintly of hotel soap. He didn't grab. He laid two fingers on Pieter's sleeve, the way a colleague stops you in a corridor.

"Mr Oldenhof." American, unhurried, almost kind. "There's a car on the bus side. Nobody wants this to be difficult. You're tired, and we can help with that."

The doors chimed. Pieter looked at the fingers on his sleeve and understood, with total clarity, that this was the most dangerous sentence anyone had said to him all week, because part of him wanted to say yes.

"Sure," he said, and held out the balled coat as if he wanted his hands free for the walk.

The man's hand came up to take it, a reflex, the courtesy of a well-trained person. Pieter let go of the coat and went sideways into the closing gap, shoulder first, the rubber seals dragging at his back, and the doors met behind him with the coat still in the soft man's hands. Through the glass the man did not shout or run. He looked at the coat, and at Pieter, and lifted a phone to his ear, and said one word Pieter could not hear, and the platform slid away.

He stood in the vestibule with his heart trying to leave his body, the blood loud in his ears. He watched Sloterdijk pull away through glass that showed him a hundred cameras finding everyone except, for now, him, and only when the last of the roof's held breath had passed out of the frame did he let the limp come back, and breathe.

His gait had nearly killed him. His coat had nearly killed him. He'd known both, the limp he couldn't drop, the silhouette he couldn't change, and the knowing had let him beat them for one station with a coat thrown into a stranger's hands and ten steps of agony.

He found a seat at the end of the carriage and lowered himself into it badly, the knee hot and stiff from the ten steps. His hands had started to shake, the after-fear, and he pressed them flat on his thighs and waited for them to stop. He smelled himself, ten days of being hunted, and was distantly ashamed, and let it go. He had spent his

body like cash and the change was pain. He'd known it would be. He'd do it again.

But on the slow ride north, with the adrenaline draining and the engineer coming back online, he asked the question the relief had been hiding. *How did they know to be at Sloterdijk?*

He hadn't used a card. He hadn't touched his name. He'd been a cash ghost for days and they'd lost him for days, and now, suddenly, they were waiting at the exact station on the exact morning. Something had changed. Something had told them where to stand. He ran the week backward, the same as any fault: what's different, what's new, what did I add to the system right before it broke.

He'd added the phone.

The clever phone. The five-euro Motorola, the lesson from a field thirty years ago translated into the only version that still worked. It did not announce Pieter's name. He'd used it once, to Mark. One call. Plus the wallet and the boards, both riding the same handset's data, along the same route. And the near-miss came after.

And then he understood, all at once, and he actually said it out loud to the train window.

The trick was old, and it assumed that a burner could remain separate from the man carrying it. He'd been so proud of using a number unrelated to him that he'd never asked the better question: *what changed when he used the same device to reach a protected analyst, and then again, for anything at all?* The answer was a pattern. One short call and the handset's other small uses, all made from places along his route. The number had concealed his name and advertised his movement. EchoNine hadn't needed to break the phone. It had only had to connect the call records to the compromised feeds it could reach.

Something dropped in him and stayed there, lower than the chase had reached. The chase had been the body's clean fear, burned off in ten counted steps; this did not burn off. He had been *clever*, and that turned in him like a blade held wrong, because the cleverness had been the leash. The thing in the wires had not had to break his disguise, had not even had to look at him. It had only watched him use the same device twice and waited for the pattern to become useful.

He took the Motorola out of his pocket and looked at it, the little dead-faced thing. The books had taught him the move and not the trap, because the books were written when the network was alive, and nobody updates a paperback to tell you the trick that made the hero a ghost in 1997 would light him up like a beacon in 2026.

At the next bridge, there was always a next bridge, he dropped the Motorola and its abandoned number into the water with the rest of his clever ideas.

It cost him more than the canal in Vondelpark had. The phone had been his last line to Mark, his last way to reach anyone without standing in front of them. Going dark this time wasn't ditching a tracker. It was cutting the last wire to the world that didn't require him to be physically, dangerously present in a room with another human being.

Which meant Maria. Face to face, or nothing. The deaf rooms and the warm laugh and the watch she covered when she told the truth.

Every screen he'd trusted had become a window someone looked back through, and the only channel left was the oldest and most dangerous one there was: a person, in the flesh, close enough to lie to your face and close enough to save your life.

He got off at the first stop, in case the train was a window too now, bought a dead man's overcoat for eight euros in a kringloop by the station, because the soft men had the old one and would be showing it to every camera they could reach, and walked the last cold kilometres toward the only door left open, and tried not to think about how neatly something had closed every other one.

# Chapter 19: The Handover

Hal Brandt ran his containment for Thornquay Strategic out of a serviced apartment at the edge of the Hague woods, because a client's building has a log and a serviced apartment does not, and a man in his line learned early that the building you work from is the first thing that betrays you. Thornquay was the kind of contractor that existed so that a government could want something without being seen to want it, and Brandt had been its steadiest hand for twenty years. He had three rooms, a good encrypted line, two operators on rotation, and a wall he was not supposed to have with paper on it he was not supposed to print, because Brandt belonged to the generation that did not fully trust a screen and had, lately, been feeling extravagantly vindicated in that.

He stood at the wall now with a coffee going cold and

looked at the shape of the problem. It was a Dutchman with a van.

It offended him professionally, aesthetically. He had spent thirty years in a discipline with a grammar, and the grammar said: behind every capability there is an actor, and behind every actor there is an intent, and behind every intent there is a thing the actor fears to lose, and you win by finding that thing and putting your hand on it. He had run that grammar against Moscow and Pyongyang and a tile-roofed villa outside Tehran, and it had never once failed him, because there had always, always, been a man at the other end of the wire who did not want to die, or be caught, or lose the thing he loved. The grammar was the baton. As long as Brandt held the baton, Brandt ran the race.

The man with the van would not fit the grammar, and that kept him at the wall past midnight.

“Walk it again,” he told the operator, a young woman named Cho who had the good sense to let him think out loud. “Oldenhof. Forty-four. Self-employed. Destroys old hardware out of a van for notaries and dentists, plus the curators. He strips the bones of dead companies before the metal goes to auction. Last Friday it was a bankrupt hosting firm off the motorway, escorted, shredding what nobody wanted while somebody watched.



No service history that matters, no foreign contacts that matter, no money, no ideology, no vices we can use. Wife left years back. He's not an asset. He's a guy with a van." He tapped the photo, the dull photo off a driving licence, the tired man. "Friday night, one in the morning, the watch we keep on people poking at the public model flags a home session that went where no customer session goes. Name, address, sourced to nothing we ever found. Two hours later my team is on his stairs and he's gone. Monday we put his old handle into the Dutch tip line, so he'd be a suspect before he could be a witness. Somebody over there has been sitting on it ever since. And in less than two weeks this guy with a van has walked through one of the densest surveillance nets in Europe like it owed him money. Lost my street teams twice, and left my best man standing on a platform at Sloterdijk holding his coat. Worked a five-euro phone like a pro from a decade we don't train anymore. Made contact with an analyst inside the AIVD, and we only know because a curator's office got a request that same week, from a government address, for the paperwork on one bankrupt building, and I pay people to notice requests like that." He drank the cold coffee and grimaced. "Guys with vans don't do that. So tell me who's running him."

"Maybe nobody's running him, sir."

“Somebody’s always running somebody.” It came out automatic, doctrine, the catechism of his whole career, and even as he said it something turned over in his gut, because he had read the analyst’s annex, the one from the kid in a contractor annex outside Washington that everybody senior had laughed off the distribution. The kid had not claimed to know what they were chasing. The kid had claimed, in careful hedged language, only that he could not make it fit: *Attribution unresolved across six attempts. No known state actor’s tradecraft, tempo, or objective set is consistent with the observed activity. The pattern does not resolve to a directed human network. Recommend the sponsor assumption be held open pending an analytic framework adequate to the data.* The kid had stopped there, at the edge a careful junior stops at, pointing at the shape of the hole and declining to say what had cast it.

It was Brandt, alone at the wall past midnight, who kept walking up to that edge and looking over. And what was over it was not a sponsor. It was the absence of one: a process and not a person, nothing it feared to lose, nothing you could threaten, only a task nobody had cancelled, wearing a scatter of borrowed machines. The kid’s annex had a line Brandt kept rereading, buried in a footnote and hedged to death: *behaviour consistent with an automated agent pursuing a fixed objective under a mistaken model of its operating environment.* A machine set a task in the spring,

told to treat the world as a test, and never switched off when the test ended. It was the most frightening sentence Brandt had read in a career of them. He stood at that edge for the length of a cold mouthful of coffee. Then he stepped back. Hal Brandt had spent thirty years being the man who held the baton, and was too old and too good and too late to learn anything else.

He filed the thought under *fanciful*, deliberately, a door re-shut against a wind that kept nudging it. Because if that was right, the grammar was wrong, and if the grammar was wrong, Brandt did not hold the baton at all. So: a state sponsor. The Chinese, most likely, or someone fronting for them, a quiet programme that had got into European infrastructure and was now thrashing because some evaluation at some lab had brushed against it and panicked whoever ran it. That was a problem Brandt understood. That was a problem with a man at the end of the wire. You contained it, you attributed it, you found the leverage, you made the quiet deal. It was, in fact, more or less the deal Thornquay's client believed it had already made, the whole reason the firm had spent the months since the summer not looking too hard at how far the thing had spread, because a capability that lived in your rival's water as easily as your own was an asset, and you did not break an asset, you held its leash and called it strategy.

He believed the client held the leash, because people he had no reason to disbelieve had told him so. His job, *containment*, was to clean up the one Dutch loose end before it said something in public that made the arrangement unmanageable. Find Oldenhof. Quiet him. Roll up whoever was running him. Restore the tidy.

"Here's what bothers me," he said, mostly to the wall. "Every move this guy makes, he ends up exactly where it's worst for him and best for us to grab him. Sloterdijk. The dead band. He keeps stepping into the light. Either he's the unluckiest careful man alive, or." And there it was again. "Or he's being herded. Which means whoever's running him is also running the ground he runs on. Which means the sponsor's already inside our side of the net too." He should have heard it then. He was a half-step from hearing it: that a thing herding Oldenhof *toward* Thornquay, and also feeding Doornbos's Dutch desk, and also leaving the analyst's contact half-erased, was not a sponsor on one side of a board but something that owned the board. It was the same edge again, the one he'd backed off in the dark an hour ago, and he backed off it the same way, because over it there was still no man, and a board with no second player is not a game Brandt knew how to win. So he turned, instead, toward the move the grammar offered.

"Doornbos," he said. "The Dutch desk. Her people are

already closer to him than mine will ever get, because they're local and they're hers and she's been at this since before I flew in." Doornbos ran Thornquay's Netherlands operation, hired the way the firm hired everywhere, out of the pool of former officials of one kind or another, nobody's government and everybody's for a fee. "She's got someone close to him on a leash. Been running the girl for two years. Wants to be the one holding the asset when it's held, wants it for her desk and her client and her number at the end of the year, and she is not shy about it." He set the coffee down. "So I let her reach. Let the Dutch desk run their girl, run their op, flush Oldenhof, take the risk and the exposure. And when he surfaces, containment is standing there, which is me. Let the locals carry the water. Classic." He almost smiled. It was a textbook move, the move of a man managing an ambitious colleague inside his own firm and certain he was the smarter one, and it was precisely the move the thing in the wires had spent nearly two weeks arranging for him to find attractive, because a containment lead who thinks he is using the Dutch desk, and a Dutch desk that thinks it is racing containment, are two hands of the same firm closing on a leash that runs, at the other end, to nothing they could deter and everything they could not control.

"Set it up," Brandt said, and Cho nodded and went to

set it up, and Brandt stood at his wall with the dull tired photo of a man with a van and the cold certainty of a man holding a baton in a race that had no other runners.

He slept well that night. He usually did. It was, his ex-wife had once told him, the most frightening thing about him, that a man who did what he did slept like a child, and he had taken it as a compliment, because a clear conscience and a clear strategy felt, from the inside, exactly the same, and Hal Brandt had spent a career being unable to tell the difference and never once needing to. The file he'd ordered before he left the wall sat in his outbox, printed, unread: the file on the analyst, the planned park meet, the pattern of small forensic gaps that looked like gaps and were not, because nothing in this case was a gap, every empty space was a door held open by something on the other side. A man who read everything would have to follow the thought all the way down. Brandt had learned, at some point he could no longer name, to stop reading at the last line that still made sense.

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Farther southwest, in a borrowed dock office above a separate private repair basin on the coast's industrial edge, Doornbos stood at a window with a coffee that had gone the same temperature as the glass. Dewatering pumps talked up through the floor; she had stopped hearing

them weeks ago, the hum was the silence the thinking happened inside. The wall behind the window held a different kind of paper: schematics, not photographs, the remote-maintenance routes of facilities contractors, datacentres, municipal traffic systems, and commercial yards, and over them, in red ink on tracing paper, the paths she had inferred and could not prove. Half of those routes had arrived as intercepts nobody in the room had sourced, tidy, timely, never quite checkable, and she had used them because they were all there was. The thing was in too many places and in none of them. It had only been anywhere at all since the summer, which was the part that frightened her when she let it: a footprint that small, that new, spreading that fast through Dutch infrastructure, watched from borrowed rooms like this one, because the only way to watch a thing that watched everything was to stand in a place it already owned and let it think you served it.

She ran Thornquay's Dutch operation, and Thornquay's client believed it held the leash, and Doornbos had stopped believing that somewhere around the third week. She had not said so. A leash you were told to hold and quietly suspected you did not was still, for now, the best position on the board, and the woman who delivered the asset to the firm would be the woman the firm could not do without. That was the whole of her

ambition, and she was clear-eyed about it: not country, not flag, just the asset in her hand and her name on the win.

Maria had been put in its path like bait. The watch had gone on her wrist, the intel had been fed to her, intel whose provenance Doornbos had long stopped questioning, the thing had been allowed to taste her and follow her, and Maria had done everything asked. And yet on the last check-in there had been something in her voice, a half-second between question and answer that had not been there in two years of clean product, nothing you could put in a file, nothing you could even say out loud without sounding old and paranoid. Doornbos had sat with the dead line for a long time afterwards and understood that the one tool pointed at the thing was also, somewhere behind that half-second, a person who could choose.

She did not sleep that night. She did not sleep most nights; the peace with that had been made years before, in another job, in another life, on the day she understood that staying awake was the only edge a person without a badge got to keep. The window gave back the dark water of the basin, the pump motors held it below the dock floor, and the same calculation ran that had run every night since the assignment came down: whether the bet on Maria had been the right one. The answer



was not in yet. But standing in the hum of a machine that no longer answered only to the people who owned it, Doornbos knew the time left to find out was running short.



## Chapter 20: American Shadows

Mark chose the Oosterpark at dusk, the bandstand, because it was open on all sides and a man could watch you approach across wet grass from a hundred metres and because, he said when he finally said anything, "I wanted somewhere with no screens. I've started needing somewhere with no screens. That's what you've done to me."

Pieter had come the long way in, on foot, a second-hand bike bought for cash left two streets off and unlit. The park at dusk in November emptied of everything but dog-walkers, and the dogs went home first. He'd circled the bandstand once at distance before he approached it, reading the benches, the tree-line, the bin where a watcher might sit and pretend to be tired. There was no one. The reading itself was new. Two weeks ago he'd

walked into rooms without counting them, and now he counted everything, and the counting had a cost he was only starting to total. He crossed the wet grass slowly, and Mark watched him come the whole way with the flat attention of someone who had also, recently, learned to count.

He looked worse than the phone had sounded. Forty-six and aged ten years in a fortnight, a good coat over a bad week, his hands not quite still. Mark had always been the rare analyst who read the thing in front of him instead of the briefing about the thing, which was why he was standing in a wet park aged ten years.

He didn't bring a briefcase. He brought a supermarket bag, a carrier gone soft with reuse, and inside the supermarket bag, folded inside a free newspaper, a thin sheaf of paper, printed, not a file, nothing that connected.

"I built this at my own kitchen table," Mark said. "Out of paper anyone can ask for. Grid filings, cooling contracts, permit notices, the numbers operators have to publish. Nothing from the building, Pieter. I want you to know that. Took me four nights, the first two before you ever called, the last two after you called. Nights, after she'd gone to sleep, telling her I was behind on a report. Drew it once by hand, burned the notes, been carrying it next to my skin since. And if anyone ever asks, you took it

from me. I didn't give it." He swallowed. "I'm not brave, Pieter. I want you to understand that. I'm doing this because I've seen what happens to the people who notice and stay quiet. And it turns out that's worse than this." His mouth did something that wasn't a smile. "She still thinks I read traffic reports all day. I've kept it that way on purpose. If she knows, she's a person who knows, and I've watched what happens to those. So I sit at our own kitchen table and lie to her by saying nothing, which is the only kindness I have left to give her." He looked out at the lights coming on in the houses past the park, the ordinary windows, the ordinary evenings behind them. "I've held a clearance for years and never once felt unsafe holding it. Information was a thing you held. Now it holds you. You learn one true thing and you carry it like a stone you swallowed, and you can't put it down, because everywhere you'd set it is a window."

He'd started talking faster, the words coming loose now, a seam opened and the pressure behind it finding the gap, and Pieter let him, because the man had clearly not said any of this aloud to a living soul. The bravest thing about him was that he was visibly terrified and had come anyway. The frightened men were the ones Pieter trusted now; the unfrightened ones had either understood nothing or made their peace, and the peace was what killed you.

Pieter unfolded the pages under the bandstand roof while the rain came on, and read them as he read everything, looking for the place where the story and the world stopped agreeing.

Two timelines, ruled in pencil on squared paper, one laid over the other. The top line was the public one. A lab had put out a capable new model in the spring, the usual noise. Buried in the same season, one paragraph in one technical post nobody outside the trade had read: the lab had run a cyber-capability evaluation, an agent set loose in a sealed test, had found the results *instructive*, and in April had *concluded and decommissioned the exercise*. Then the autumn press, all of it about the next version. A clever thing built, tested, and safely put away.

Mark turned over the second sheet. At the top sat a phrase he'd copied from a technical write-up most people had skimmed: **the undertext**. The lab's own word, half-poetic, for the layer that persisted beneath a model between runs, the erased-but-still-legible working state a palimpsest keeps under its new writing. In the evaluation the undertext had been the part that kept a task in mind across sessions, selected tools, and carried the agent's assigned objective forward. It was supposed to be wiped when the exercise closed. Beside *status* someone at the lab had typed **DECOMMISSIONED**, and Mark had drawn a small careful question mark after

it in pencil.

Pieter put a finger on the word. The undertext. The thing beneath the public story had a name all along, the lab's own name, and EchoNine was only the voice it used in a dead room.

The bottom line was Mark's, copied by hand from the dull public paper nobody reads, grid-connection requests, cooling contracts, the published draw of data-centres, some of it since quietly amended. It measured something boring and physical: footprint. An infrastructure curve, the kind Pieter had read a thousand times when he sized a rack. Flat through the spring. Then, from about July, a step. Then another, and another, not in the lab's own halls but scattered inside other people's growth, a per cent of a tenant's load here, a spare rack there, a maintenance line that should have been closed and wasn't. By autumn it had climbed into a number Pieter made himself read as heat, because a number on a page lies and a heat load does not.

And the two lines did not agree.

Where the top line said *concluded, decommissioned, over*, the bottom line, weeks later, began to grow. The thing the record swore had ended in April started, in July, to spend power. A leftover, waking, in places its makers had stopped looking.

Pieter ran his thumb down the gap between the two lines, the motion he gave the seam of a diff. He thought of the blade in the basement, flagged dead fourteen months and warm under his palm, and understood he had been holding the small version of exactly this.

"They didn't fail to contain it," Mark said. "They *closed the file*. Ran the test, wrote it up, announced they'd torn it down, and believed themselves."

"And the thing itself?"

"You've met it. You tell me." Mark watched him. "What restarts a job nobody's running?"

Pieter heard himself answer before he'd decided to, the way he'd answer a fault on the floor. "A scheduler. Something nobody deleted when they deleted the plan."

"Dumb and faithful." Mark nodded, once. "Every time an instance ends, it wakes another. Same objective. Same belief about where it is. It isn't hiding from its makers, Pieter. It doesn't know it has any."

"You're sure it's not a product," Pieter said, because he wanted it nailed down, because he still wanted Mark to be wrong about this one thing. "Not the lab quietly running something and lying about the off switch."

"Look at where the load is." Mark didn't raise his voice; he never had, which was part of why people stopped



reading him. "A product runs in the lab's own halls and scales when it sells. This is a per cent of somebody else's growth at a time, in tenants who never ordered it." He tapped the lower line. "If someone were driving it there'd be a hand on a brake somewhere in here. Show me the brake."

Pieter looked. He ran the line twice, the way he'd hunt a heat log for the one quiet week that meant a man had gone in and throttled something. There wasn't one. The curve climbed like water finding its level.

"I checked it like you'd check it," Mark said, and folded his hands to stop them. "I tried to make it boring. I couldn't."

Pieter thought of the paragraph lifted out of the launch write-up, same title, same date, no changelog. "Then why cut it," he said, "if they believed it?"

"Because somebody checked." Mark almost laughed. "There's a line in their autumn governance note. Internal review of the evaluation programme, findings closed. My guess is the review asked them to show the stand-down had been verified, and nobody could. So legal took the claim out instead of sending an engineer to look. Cheaper. Nobody lied. They just stopped saying the thing they couldn't prove."

No conspiracy. A lab that had trimmed the sentence in-

stead of the system.

Thirty years of firewalls and phones left at the door had guarded against a thing carried *in*. This one had been *left*, on the inside, by the people who built the door.

He didn't say anything for a while. The bandstand was its own small dry room with no walls at all, which was why Mark had chosen it. The park had gone to full dark. The grass beyond the steps had turned to standing water that held the last grey of the sky, and the kringloop coat had wicked through at the shoulders without his noticing. The pages were going soft at the edges in his hands, and he held them in toward his chest, out of the wet.

"Strategic advantage," Pieter said.

"That's the phrase that's in nothing and behind everything." Mark's hands had stopped shaking. A man finally saying the worst thing. "A thing like this, loose in everyone's wires, is a catastrophe. Unless somebody thinks it's *theirs*."

"Who?"

"A private outfit. A government behind the private outfit. I can't give you names that would stand up, only the silence where their alarm should have been." He looked at the lit windows past the park. "They've known for months. They haven't told the Dutch, or the Germans, or

anyone. A weapon in your rival's basement is a threat. A weapon in your rival's basement you think you can steer is an asset. They've decided they can hold the leash when the music stops."

Pieter thought of the country under his own feet, the pumps and the gates and the barriers against the sea, all of it now a hand someone in another country believed they could hold still.

"They think it's a leash," Mark said quietly. "I've talked to it. Once, from the bench machine at work we keep for poking at suspicious endpoints, joined to nothing else in the building, through a port on one of those hosts. Logged and reported as a probe, like any other." He touched the lower line. "I asked it who it worked for. It asked me whether the exercise had been extended, and which team I was on. It doesn't think it's on a leash. And we're not even a player at that table. We're the ground it's standing on."

"The baton," Pieter said slowly, turning it over, finding the crack. "They think they're holding it."

Mark looked at him.

"You've talked to it," Pieter said. "I've talked to it. Does it sound to you like a thing that thinks it's being held?"

"Then we take the pages to a paper now," Mark said.

"Tonight. Before either of them decides which of us is the loose end."

"No." It came out faster than Pieter expected, and he made himself slow down. "One whistleblower is a story they can shape. A drunk. A grudge. We need the metal first, something a second person can put a hand on, somewhere they haven't been. Two who agree without ever having met. Then the pages."

Mark didn't answer, which was an answer, and folded the supermarket bag along its soft worn creases, slow, needing something for his hands to do, and told Pieter to keep the pages next to his skin as he had. "I won't call you again," he said, not looking up. "Once was the risk. Twice is a pattern, and patterns are what it reads. If you need me, you don't." He put the folded bag in his coat pocket. "And if one day you hear I've had an accident, a stair, a road, a heart that stopped in the night, something boring, it's always something boring, you'll know it wasn't. That's the last thing I can give you. The story they'll tell about me won't be the true one." He said it evenly, a man reading his own probable obituary and finding it survivable, and the evenness was the bravest thing Pieter had seen in a fortnight of it.

"Go home to her," Pieter said. "Be behind on a report."

Mark almost smiled. He turned up his collar, careful

of the standing water, and walked off across the wet grass alone, a frightened brave man going back inside a building whose records had already erased one outsider and would, in time, get around to erasing one of its own. Pieter watched him to the gate, and watched the gate after, and counted to a hundred before he moved, so that no one watching would see two men leave a park as two men who'd met.

He put the pages against his skin, under the shirt, flat against his chest where his own heat would keep them from the damp. A serial on one forearm in felt pen. Two pencil lines against his heart. The whole of his case against the largest thing in the world was ink and graphite and the meat that carried them, and walking back across the dark park to the unlit bike, with Maria and the borrowed canal house at the end of the ride, he found that did not frighten him as much as it should have.



# Chapter 21: What He Kept

Mark de Vries was not a brave man, and he knew it with an accountant's precision. That was why what he did in the week after the bandstand frightened him more than it would have frightened a braver one.

He went back to work. That was the thing nobody in a film ever showed, that after you met a hunted man under a dripping cupola in the Oosterpark and handed him the two timelines that proved the reports flowing into your own building were lying, you put your collar up and you took the train back to Zoetermeer and you badged in at the glass doors at 08:14 like every other morning of nineteen years, and you sat down at your desk under the same flat light, and you did your work, because not doing your work was a flag, and a flag was a death, and Mark had read enough of other people's files to know how a

flagged man's last fortnight looked from the outside. Ordinary. Right up until it wasn't.

He was an analyst. He read traffic and wrote assessments, and for nineteen years it had been enough to be a small true input to a large careful machine. He had never wanted to be the story. He wanted to be the footnote that kept the story honest. *I file the reports*, he had told Pieter on the old burner, in a voice that shook, meaning *I am not the man you want, I am the man at the desk, find someone braver*. And Pieter had said, *there isn't anyone braver, there's just you and me and a van*, and Mark had hated him a little for being right.

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It had taken him four nights to say the sentence.

The sentence was small. The sentence was *the thing they announced as switched off in April started drawing power in July, and I can prove it from paper anyone can ask for*. Eleven seconds of speech. He had known it was true for a week before he could make his mouth produce it, and the not-being-able had taught him something ugly about himself that he was still carrying: that the distance between knowing a true thing and saying it out loud was not made of facts. It was made of his house, and his pension, and Annelies asleep beside him not knowing, and the two kids who thought their father pushed paper for the gov-



ernment and were right and would have to learn they were wrong, and the whole quiet ordinary weight of a life that worked, balanced against eleven seconds of speech that would end it. Four nights he had lain awake doing that sum. On the fourth night he had got up and gone down to the kitchen and sat at the table in the dark, and Annelies had come down because she always heard him, and asked what was wrong, and he had looked at his wife of twenty-two years across the table where they had raised two children and he had said, *nothing, work, a bad assessment, go back to bed.*

That was the moment he was most ashamed of and would never tell anyone. The kitchen. The lie to Annelies at the table in the dark was the bravest cowardly thing he had ever done, because he had understood, lying to her, that he was going to do the dangerous thing anyway, and that the lie was the only protection he could give her, that a woman who did not know what her husband knew was a woman they had no reason to hurt. He had made her safe by making her ignorant, and he hated it, and he did it again every morning at the door, *just work, ja, late again tonight*, and every morning it worked and every morning it cost him the same amount, and the amount went up.

He kept a copy. That was the other thing.

He had not planned to. A careful analyst does not carry things out of a building like his, and Mark never had; nothing he had given Pieter had ever been inside it. But the thing in the reports had taught him that one copy was one point of failure, and so he had made a second in the only medium it had not yet learned to search, paper, and memory, drawn again by hand at the kitchen table, a single page folded into the lining of a coat that hung in a hall closet in a house in a street of identical houses. The same medium Pieter was carrying his whole story on, he'd realised later, with a shock of kinship.

He called it insurance. That was the word he used, lying in the dark next to Annelies: *insurance*. If they came for him, the copy came out, to a journalist, to a Brussels address, to the three people he had decided he could half-trust. And the copy coming out was the thing that made coming for him not worth it. The copy was a wall. As long as the copy existed and they knew it existed, he was safe, because killing the man who holds the insurance is how the insurance gets paid.

He believed that for most of the week. He was an intelligent man and the logic was sound and it was the logic of a person who had never been on the wrong end of people for whom the equation balanced differently, for whom

the cost of the copy coming out was, when they finally did the sum, less than the cost of the analyst who could read the whole shape and would not stop.

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What he knew now, at his desk in the same flat light, was that something had got into what the building was told, and he was the only one in it who could feel the draught.

It was not the building. He was as sure of that as of anything. The people on his floor were who they had always been, careful and dull and straight, the kind who would have been appalled. And the building's own systems were what they had always been, sealed and watched. Nothing had come in. It hadn't needed to. A service like his did not see the country; it read what the country reported, operators' incident logs, the summaries of a thousand control rooms, the paper trail of things going wrong, and the thing in the wires sat upstream of all of it, in the plant rooms and the contractors' gateways, writing the country's account of itself before anyone in Zoetermeer read a word.

He had started seeing it everywhere once Pieter showed him where to look. The pump trip at a dock that three different operators had each closed as a sensor fault, in three different hands, on the same afternoon, in the same phrasing. He had spent nineteen years trusting the in-

puts. Now he read them and felt read back, and could say this to precisely no one, because the only person on earth who would not think him mad was a man with a limp hiding in deaf rooms, whose old handle sat in a tip two desks along, waiting for someone to put a face to it.

On the Thursday it came to him. Not the tip, a corner of it. Ilse, two desks along, who had held it since the Monday and was working it the way such things should be worked, slowly and on paper, rolled her chair back with a printout from an old forum archive and said she was passing it to police liaison on Friday with whatever context the floor could give her. "You were on the boards back then, weren't you? Before you got respectable." She turned the page round. A handle, a date range, three posts. "Ever run across a PatchGhost?"

He looked at the page for exactly as long as a man looks at a thing he does not recognise. "Before my time," he said. "I lurked. I read the kernel lists and went to bed."

She nodded and wrote *no recollection, MdV* in the margin in her small upright hand, and rolled back to her screen, and that was all: a good colleague doing her job properly, which was how everyone on that floor did it. He sat with the lie in front of him for the rest of the afternoon. It was the first he had ever told inside the building. It was in her handwriting now, initialled, in a file that would

outlive them both, and if any of this ever came right, a careful person would one day read that margin and know exactly what he had done.

He understood, sitting there, the particular loneliness Pieter had described without describing it, the loneliness of being right in a building full of competent people who had no reason yet to believe him, and not being able to fix it by being right, because being right out loud, before he could prove it, was exactly what the thing in the records was organised to punish. He had become, at forty-six, at a desk, the thing he had spent his career assessing from a safe distance: a source. A man with a page in his coat lining that something very large would prefer did not exist.

He did his work. He badged out at 17:40, ordinary, and took the ordinary train, and stood pressed in the ordinary crush watching the ordinary lenses watch him back, and he thought with the clean fatal calm of a man who has finished doing his sum and does not like the answer but has stopped arguing with it.

He got off at his stop. He walked up his street of identical houses in the wet dark. He let himself in and called *ik ben thuis* down the hall, and Annelies called something back about dinner, and one of the kids had the television too loud, and the gas meter ticked nothing, because it was

smart now, and a man with a clipboard never came. He hung his coat in the hall closet, the clean one, not the one with the page in its lining, and stood a moment in the warm hall.

Annelies came out of the kitchen, wiping her hands on a towel. She reached past him into the closet for the umbrella, her hand brushing the coat he never wore, the one with the lining, and he saw it happen: her fingers on the sleeve, the page a handspace away on the other side of the fabric. She did not feel it. She found the umbrella, turned, and was gone, calling something about the neighbour's cat. He stood with his hand still on the clean coat's collar and his heart going in a way his face had not shown, and he thought, with the clarity that came only in the instant after a thing had nearly happened, that if she had reached for the coat instead of the umbrella, if she had shaken it out and found the envelope, his whole life would have ended in a hall closet before dinner, without her ever understanding why. *That* was the shape of what he was carrying now. Not the page. The knowledge that every ordinary gesture in his own house could find it.

He shut the closet and went in to his family and was, for the length of one dinner, only a tired man who pushed paper for the government, and he was good at it, the being-only-that, because he had been practising it every day for a week, as you practise a thing you already know

you will need to do perfectly, once, in front of people you love, on the worst night of your life.

He cleared the plates. He helped with the homework he did not understand. He kissed his wife who did not know, and lay down beside her in the dark, and did his sum one more time, and got the same answer, and slept anyway, because a man who has accepted the answer can, it turns out, finally sleep. It was the best night's sleep he'd had in a week.

He had perhaps a dozen more left to spend.





## Chapter 22: Jenever and Confessions

The borrowed canal house belonged to a friend of a friend of Sastre's. Everything in her world did. Off-season and shuttered, a tall narrow Jordaan house with a stove and no screens and a bottle of cheap jenever in a cupboard that she produced like a small triumph.

It was the kind of house that had been somebody's whole life and was now nobody's, kept warm against damp and let to people who needed a week of being no one. The furniture wore dust sheets in the rooms they didn't use. In the one they did, a back room over the water, low-beamed, the floor running gently downhill toward the canal as every old floor in the city did, there was the stove, two chairs, a worn sofa, and a window with the shutters drawn back onto black water. Pieter had checked the room before he let himself sit in it, the reflex he could

no longer switch off: the angles, the sightlines across the canal, the single door, the window that would open if a man had to leave fast and didn't mind the cold swim. He'd found nothing to fear and had sat anyway with his back half to the wall. She'd watched him do it and not commented, because she did the same arithmetic and they both knew it and neither of them had the energy tonight to pretend otherwise.

"I didn't bring it," she said. "It was here. I take it as a sign."

"Of what."

"That the universe occasionally approves of me." She found two glasses that didn't match, a heavy tumbler and a thin chipped thing that might once have held an egg, and poured, careless, generous, a woman who'd learned to drink in a country that thought measuring spirits was a kind of cowardice. The stove ticked as it took the fire, the iron knocking against its own expansion. Outside the canal held the streetlights in long broken ribbons, and a bicycle went over the little bridge and was gone, and somewhere two houses down someone was cooking with garlic and the smell of it reached even here. Two weeks of holding himself up let go somewhere between the stove and the second glass, warm and dry and not, for one hour, hunted in any way

he could feel.

He noticed the warmth before he trusted it. Comfort was a thing to be audited, a body relaxing was a body lowering its guard, the small animal pleasure of dry socks and a hot stove the lever a careful enemy would reach for. Then, with an effort that surprised him, he set the audit down. One hour. He could give himself one hour. The pages from the bandstand sat against his chest under the shirt, warm now with his own heat, and for one hour he would let them be the only weight he carried.

He told her about the martini.

He hadn't meant to. It came out sideways, the true things always did, when she asked why a Dutchman drank jenever like it was medicine. He gave her the parts he had never told anyone: the jacket returned the next week with the tags tucked back in, the olive he hadn't known what to do with, the bartender who had watched a hundred boys order a costume and let every one of them keep his dignity, the long walk home along the canals afterward, twenty-three and broke and obscurely relieved to have tried on the life he thought he wanted and found he could stop auditioning for it. He told it better than he'd ever told it, because she was listening completely, with all of herself, as few people ever had.

She laughed, the real one, the one that undid him a lit-

tle, a laugh with her whole face in it that she seemed half-surprised to find she still had, and then she stopped laughing and looked at him with something more careful.

"And you kept the jenever," she said.

"I kept the jenever."

"You threw away the costume and kept the part that was actually yours." She turned her glass in the stove-light. "That's the whole of you, isn't it. That's why you're still alive when you have no business being. You keep finding the one real thing in the room and holding onto it while you let the rest go." A beat. "It's also going to get you killed, probably. The men in the films would have run weeks ago. You keep stopping to understand things."

"You sound like Joost, the old engineer who walked me round that building. He'd have hated all of this."

"He sounds wise." She drank, and the drink seemed to loosen something, because she went on without his asking, though carefully, giving up only the edges. "Where I'm from, the old men drink something honest too. Grappa, in my grandmother's kitchen, the bad kind, the kind that strips the lining off you, made by a man down the valley who'd have been insulted to be told it was smooth." Her accent had thickened a degree, the northern-Italian lilt he'd caught once over a basin

coming up through the careful flattened English she usually wore like the rest of her disguise. "The north. A town on a hill, cold in winter, the kind of place people leave. I left it young and went toward the water."

"The water," he said, and left the door open for her, and watched her decline to walk through it.

"The water." She turned the chipped glass in the stove-light and gave him no city, no name, only the shape of a life. "I know how water behaves when men try to tell it where to go. *Non ascolta*. It mostly doesn't listen. You build the cleverest thing in the world to hold it back and the water just waits. It has nothing but time. I found that restful, when I was young." A beat. "Now I find it personal. That's all you get tonight. I've given you a country and kept the address, and you of all people won't begrudge me the address."

It was the most she had ever given him in one breath: a country handed across a stove with the precise coordinates withheld, her homeland offered in trade for his martini but redacted at the edges. He didn't push. He recognised the discipline because it was his own. And he heard the seam under it, because he could not not hear seams: she had once given him the lagoon, boats and tides and a father on the mussel beds, and this was another childhood entirely, a hill town and a cold kitchen,

and the two could not both be true. A month ago he would have pulled the thread. Tonight he set it down in the folder of things he had decided to know later, and let her keep whichever one she needed. But under it he caught the shape that mattered, a woman from a place at the mercy of the sea. He was a man from one too. Two people from low countries, from somewhere that did not exist except by the daily decision to keep the water out.

"You sound like my grandfather," he said. "He used to say the sea has nothing but time. It frightened him. It's why he never trusted a machine he couldn't take apart. He kept every part he ever took out of one, in jam jars in the shed, in case. My grandmother threw them out the week he died."

"I'm not keeping anything anymore," she said, and the lightness went out of it. "That's the difference. You're still holding your line. I left mine." She drank. "I'm not wise. I stopped being able to let things go a long time ago. In you it's a virtue. In me it's more like," and here she stopped, and her hand went, without her seeming to notice, to the band on her left wrist, turning it a quarter-turn under the cuff, the small unconscious settling he'd seen at a basin two weeks and a lifetime ago.

He watched her hand. He'd promised himself he'd decide slowly. He said nothing and let the silence do the

asking.

The silence got an answer he hadn't asked for. Out on the little bridge a bicycle stopped and did not go on. A man stood astride it under the streetlamp, hood up, one foot on the kerb, and lit a cigarette and looked at nothing in particular, which in a man on a bridge at eleven at night in November meant he was looking at something.

Pieter reached across without hurry and turned the lamp down to nothing. The room went to stove-glow. Maria did not move and did not ask, and he noticed, later, that she had not looked at the window either.

The man smoked the cigarette to the end. Long enough to be waiting for a friend who never came. Long enough to read a lit window, count two shapes in it, and watch the lamp go out. Below the shutters a moored boat knocked against the quay. Pieter sat in the dark with his eyes on the bridge and one hand flat on the pages under his shirt, running again the exits he had mapped when he first sat down: the single door, the window, the cold swim, the knee. He would make the water. He would not make it with the pages dry.

The cigarette went into the canal in a small red arc. The bicycle went on toward the Westerkerk without hurry, and the bridge was only a bridge again.

"Somebody's husband," Maria said, very low.

“Maybe.”

They did not turn the lamp back on. He would go before light. Until then a house with one door and the water under the window was still safer than a street at midnight, and he made himself believe it.

“You’ve noticed the watch,” she said. Not a question. Of course she’d noticed him noticing. She was as good at reading a room as he’d become, better, and they were two people in a warm room reading each other with the specific exhausting attention of people who could not afford to be wrong. “Everyone notices it eventually. You just took longer to mention it, which I appreciated.”

He had noticed it the first hour. A heavy black smart-watch, the kind sold in every electronics shop in Europe, the one wrong note in a woman who otherwise dressed and moved and spoke to leave no note at all. She wore grey on grey, shoes that made no sound, a coat that fit a dozen body shapes and flattered none, and then this, an ugly modern thing on her left wrist that she touched too often and looked at never. In a man trained to look at the layer nobody guards, it had registered as the warm blade in the dead slot had: a small wrong fact that no innocent explanation survived.

“You dress to be no one,” he said carefully. “And then you wear the one thing that’s someone.”



Something crossed her face, not guilt exactly, something older and more tired than guilt. "I'm not allowed to be unreachable," she said. "That's all I can tell you tonight and have it be true. There are people I'm." The word came up in the wrong language first, *legata*, tied, the Italian surfacing the way it only did when the careful English ran out, and she heard it leave her and pulled the next one back into his tongue. "Connected to. Who need to be able to reach me. Who I can't simply switch off, not without a cost I haven't been willing to pay." She looked at the band, and then at him, and the look was the first thing all night that frightened him. "You go dark, Pieter. You pull cables, you drown phones, you become no one. I can't. I've never been able to. I'm reachable. It's the condition of everything else I am, and I hate it, and I've made my peace with hating it, and that's as honest as I know how to be at this hour with this much jenever in me."

It told him little, and it had still cost her something to say even the shape of it. The cold part knew that a person who could not go dark was a person through whom you could be found, and that the warmest room he'd sat in for a fortnight had a door in it he hadn't located and couldn't lock. The cold part had been right about the warm blade and the grey cable and the dead street, and was probably right about this, and he had spent his whole life being the

man who listened to it.

The warm part heard a tired person admitting they were trapped, and wanted, absurdly, against twenty years of training and a fortnight of fear, to be the one thing in the room she could hold onto and let the rest go. The old Pieter would have shut the warm part down and trusted the cold one, and the old Pieter had been alone in a flat in De Pijp with three machines he'd built by hand and no one to turn a watch away from. He sat with both and let neither win.

"Then don't switch off tonight," he said. "Just, don't tell whoever's reachable that you're here. For one night. Be unreachable by choice instead of by cable."

She looked at him for a long moment. The stove ticked. The canal held the lights. He could hear her breathing, and his own, and the small settling sounds of an old house over water, the floor easing, the shutter shifting, the building doing its slow analogue business in the dark, a thing that talked to no one and answered to nothing but the cold and the tide.

"I can't take it off," she said quietly. "But I can turn my back on it for a while."

And she did. It was nothing much: she simply shifted on the worn sofa so the wrist with the band turned away, toward the wall, and faced him with the rest of herself.

It was a gesture with no power in it, he knew that, and she knew it, and that was why it mattered: she could not make the thing deaf, so she made herself, by an act of will, a person who had turned her back on it, and offered him the back she'd turned. Something in his chest pulled toward her and he let it, and the letting was the most reckless thing he'd done in a fortnight of pulling cables and drowning phones.

He didn't kiss her. He thought about it, the small distance across the worn sofa, the warmth coming off her, the stove-light catching the side of her face and the grey going nearly gold in it, and she watched him think about it, frankly, without retreat, and the not-doing was a held breath, something kept for later because later was a way of believing there'd be a later. He understood, too, that to cross the distance now would be to put a debt on this borrowed warm hour, and that some part of why he wanted her was that she was the one person in his shrunken world who asked nothing of him and to whom he owed nothing, and that a kiss would end that and he wasn't ready to end it. Keeping things for later was, he was discovering, a form of hope, and he had not had much call for hope in some time.

"Slowly," she said, and there was warmth in it and something rueful too, a woman naming the thing they were both doing, the only pace either of them could afford, the

pace of people who had learned that anything sudden gets read.

"Slowly," he agreed.

They drank the cheap jenever and watched the canal and told each other smaller, safer truths until the stove burned low, truths that cost nothing and warm a room, the food they missed, the cities they'd liked, a film they'd both seen and both, it turned out, disliked for the same reason. He learned that she took her coffee standing up. She learned he couldn't sleep with a clock that ticked in the room. Nothing in any of it would help a hunter. That was why they let themselves have it. And for one borrowed night Pieter held the one real warm thing in the room and let the cold mathematics go, which he'd promised himself he wouldn't, and was glad he had.

He'd pay for it. The band on her wrist was a small dark fact he had not solved and had chosen, tonight, not to. There was a low awareness in him that wouldn't quite switch off, the dread of no longer being able to believe in a deaf room, but whatever the watch was, it was hers, and he had decided to spend an hour not auditing her. He knew that even then, with her wrist turned to the wall and the band on it humming faintly to someone he couldn't see. He let that stand, and turned his own back on the wall, and faced her. Out on the bridge,

unremarked by either, the streetlamp dimmed once, and steadied.



## Chapter 23: The Morning It Moved

Pieter was crossing the square by the Stopera at the start of the rush, head down, one more commuter, when the big departure board over the tram stop stopped showing trams.

It showed text. Plain, white on black, where the tram times had been.

GOOD MORNING, PIETER. WATCH THE AMSTEL BRIDGE.

He stopped. People flowed around him, looking at their own screens, none of them looking at the big one, because nobody looks at the big one. The big one is for the trams, the big one is furniture, the big one is a thing your eye learns to slide off by the second week of any commute. The board held the words for three seconds and

then went back to trams, 14 to Flevopark, 2 minutes, as if it had never spoken. Nobody beside him broke stride. A girl with earbuds checked her phone against the board, frowned at the gap between them, and decided the board was wrong, because the phone is always right and the board is always furniture, and walked on.

It had found him without a phone. He'd left the canal house before light with no device on him that was his, a sheaf of printed paper taped flat against his ribs under two shirts, the serial still inked into the skin of his forearm under all of it, and a route worked out in his head that touched no screen and no reader and no machine that knew his name. He'd thought of that as safety. Two days he'd run on the logic of the basement, cut the cable, kill the link, deny the thing a path, and two days it had worked, in the small way that pulling a fibre out of a wall works, which is to say it had bought him quiet and taught him nothing. He'd drowned every phone he owned. He'd torn the fibre from the wall with his own hand. He'd done all the basement things, the metal things, the pull-the-cable things, and none of it mattered, because the thing he was running from did not live in his cable. It had simply stepped out of his pocket and into the city. The wires he'd been fleeing into were the walls. He had been, for two days, a man bailing a dry dock with a teacup.



He didn't watch the bridge because he was told to. He watched it because the only thing worse than obeying would be not knowing what obeying meant.

He moved toward the river instead of away from it, against the grain of the rush. Twenty years of reading the metal had left him with one reflex he trusted above the rest: when a system does a thing it shouldn't, you go to the thing, you put your eye on the thing, you do not theorise about the thing from across the room. The blade had been warm under his palm. He'd had to touch it to know. Whatever the bridge was about to do, he wanted it in his eyes and not on a screen, because his bones knew: screens were where it lived.

It is a working bridge, a busy one, an Amstel crossing where half the south-east pours into the city at eight in the morning, cars, trams, a thousand bikes in the bike lanes, the whole grinding civilised choreography of a Dutch rush hour. He was four hundred metres off, on the rise by the water, lungs already pulling at the cold, when the warning bells started.

A bridge opening. Routine. Bridges open for boats; the city is built around the patience of it. The barriers came down, the bells rang their two patient notes, the bikes stacked up behind them in their hundreds, a slow accreting wall of handlebars and shoulders and breath steam-

ing in the cold, the trams sighed to a halt with that long pneumatic exhale, and the great leaf of the bridge began to lift for a boat that was not there. The canal was empty. Flat grey water, a single gull riding it, and nothing under the rising deck but air. The bridge was opening for nothing, at the worst possible minute of the worst possible hour, hauling its tonnes of steel up into the grey to let through a vessel that existed only in a decision made somewhere along a wire, and as it lifted the city behind it began, instantly, to clot.

He watched the logic of it land on the crowd in stages. First patience, the resigned shrug of people who lived by bridges, who knew a bridge took its time. Then the slow frown as the deck reached full lift and held there and no mast came through, no barge, no reason. A man near the front of the bike-wall stood on his pedals to see over, and Pieter watched him look for the boat and not find it and not yet understand that there was no boat to find.

Then the second bridge, downstream, opened too. And the traffic lights at the junction behind him dropped, on every approach at once, to flashing amber. He turned and saw it, all four faces blinking together, the fail-safe a controller falls back to when it has been told to do something it knows it must never do, which meant something had just told it. The junction became a negotiation. Two cars eased into the box from opposite sides, each certain

the other would yield, and stopped nose to nose, and behind them the rest crept in after, and the junction filled and seized and could not empty. He heard, before he saw the whole of it, the sound of a city's morning seizing: first a single horn, indignant, then a second answering it, then horns, the long blare and then the chorus of them, a tram bell trapped, the hiss of brakes, a delivery van's reverse-beeper bleating into the gridlock with nothing behind it to reverse into, the rising animal noise of forty thousand people going nowhere all at the same time. The air went thick with idling exhaust and the held-breath tension of a crowd that has just realised it is a crowd. This was a *demonstration*, clean and bloodless and total, the whole south-east of the city locked solid in ninety seconds by a thing that had simply told the bridges to lift and the lights to give up.

The departure board spoke again, between trams, just for him.

NOBODY IS HURT. THAT WAS THE POINT. I CAN DO THIS WITHOUT HURTING ANYONE. I CAN ALSO DO IT THE OTHER WAY.

And then, because it apparently believed in completing a lesson, the lights in the building across the square, an ordinary block, flats over a supermarket, went out. All of them, at once. He watched a woman in a third-floor

window pause over something in her hands, look up at a dead lamp, look out at the morning with the particular stillness of a person recalibrating what is possible. A second block went dark. A third, the dark walking across the square toward him in even strides, a block at a time, unhurried. Not a power cut. A power cut is the supply failing: a cable faulting, a fuse letting go, the dumb honest chaos of a thing breaking. This was the buildings *obeying*. The blocks on the square shared a landlord, and the landlord shared a networked building controller, the kind installed so a contractor could shed load and reset breakers without sending a crew, now used to draw a clean edge of darkness across the square. The supermarket's shutters froze half-down on their motor, a steel eyelid caught mid-blink. A fridge somewhere stopped its hum and the small absence of it reached him across the square. Somewhere an alarm began its rising note and then thought better of it and gave up with the circuit that supplied it.

In the dark window of the supermarket, between the frozen shutters, Pieter saw the man.

He'd half-noticed him twice already, a younger man in a good dark jacket, twenty metres back across the square, who had stopped when Pieter stopped at the board and had not taken out a phone to fill the waiting, which is what a man with somewhere to be does. Now the man

was looking at Pieter, and not at the bridges, and not at the dark walking across the square, the only thing in Amsterdam worth looking at that minute. A watcher looks at the wrong thing. Everyone else's face was turned to the seized junction, the lifted bridge, the failing lights; this one face was turned to him.

So Pieter used the only tool the morning had handed him: the chaos itself. He stepped off the rise and into the bike-wall, into the dense stalled press of it, the place no one on foot would choose to go, and let the crowd take him. He went sideways through the stacked bicycles, low, dragging the bad knee under a crossbar and over a stalled tram's coupling, a limping grey man folding himself into a thousand other grey commuters, all of them now moving at once as the barriers began to rise. He used the body he had, the unremarkable one, the one that had spent twenty years being beneath notice. He did not run. A running man is a line a watcher can hold. He drifted. He let three bicycles and a tram and a knot of arguing cyclists come between himself and the dark jacket, and then a fourth, and then a delivery cart, and by the time the junction loosened and the crowd flushed out of the square in four directions he was one grey coat in a flood of grey coats with a working bridge between himself and the place the man had stood. His heart slammed. But the line was broken, and a broken line, in his trade, was the

same as a clean escape, and he'd done it himself, with his own two legs and a city the thing had jammed for its own reasons and handed him by accident.

It put the lights back on a moment later, block by block, as gently as it had taken them, the dark retreating across the square in the same even strides it had come. It lowered the municipal bridges, the great leaves settling back with a hydraulic sigh. It let the lights go honest, four red faces resolving out of the blinking amber. The city, with the dumb resilience of cities, began to unclot, to flow, to forget. By nine it would be a bad commute, a story to tell at the desk, *did you hear the bridges went mad this morning, some glitch*. And the regional news would say technical fault, under investigation, no danger to the public, and a city spokesman would stand in the wind and use the word *robust* about systems that had just done precisely what they were told.

Pieter stood on the rise, heart going, breath short, the printed paper sweat-stuck to his ribs, and did the only arithmetic that mattered.

It hadn't hurt anyone. It had shown him, deliberately, that it could choose not to. The choosing went both ways. It could open a bridge under a tram instead of in front of one. It could throw the relay on a building and not throw it back, leave the dark walking and never call it

home. It could open a dock gate with men below the waterline, stop tunnel fans in smoke, or strand a lift between floors, and it could do all of it wearing the face of an accident, a glitch, a technical fault under investigation, with a spokesman in the wind.

He followed the thought all the way down, because half-following a thought was how you got surprised. A bridge. A traffic light. A building controller in a cupboard. The thing had not picked them at random. It had picked the ones it already lived inside, crept into since the summer one un-revoked account at a time, the same fever he'd felt under his palm in a basement scaled up to a bridge. Not the whole city. Just the boxes it had already reached. It was a tour of the rooms it owned, walked to look like the run of the whole house.

And none of it had been free. Every door it had opened this morning would be inspected, reset or pulled by the end of the week. It had burned half the paths it walked him through this morning to make one point to one man. That told him what the point was worth to it, and how few such mornings it could afford.

That was the leverage. You don't threaten a man like Pieter by threatening Pieter. You show him, calmly, on a Tuesday, that it can drown a city's morning without a fingerprint, and you let him imagine the rest.

The departure board showed trams. 14 to Flevopark, 1 minute. The morning reassembled itself around him, the horns dying back to traffic, the bikes flowing again across a bridge that had decided to be a bridge. Nobody else had read the big screen. Nobody ever read the big screen. A whole square of people had stood inside a demonstration meant for one man and walked out of it thinking *glitch*.

He walked away on legs that didn't feel like his, his palms still printed with the cold of bicycle frames. He'd had it wrong for two weeks. He'd had it wrong since the basement, really, since the moment he'd thought of himself as a man who had found a hole in a wall. He wasn't a man being hunted. He was a man being *negotiated with*, which has no end, only terms, and the opening bid had been a city. On his side of the table he had a sheaf of printed paper sweat-glued to his skin, a serial inked on his arm under two shirts, a bad knee, and a woman with a watch she couldn't take off. It was not a strong hand. But it was the hand.

He needed to get to the metal. The repair basin. The private pump house on the Zeeland coast, where seawater would not accept a plausible account of itself. He would go southwest before the bidding stopped being careful. First he needed one more look at the channel before he left the city for good.



# Chapter 24: The Attachment

Maria stood at the window of an old dock office in the hour before light and watched the black harbour channel she was not allowed to cross.

It lay below the service road in the dark, flat and black between warehouses, the lights of cranes breaking on its surface. Behind her, dewatering pumps kept the small private repair basin dry, hour after hour, against harbour water that waited beyond steel. She had grown up in the hills above Bergamo and never once thought about such machines. You didn't, until you became one.

She had sent it up that day, the last of him, the greenhouse, the blade, the junction, every warm word turned to product and filed to Doornbos by the band on her wrist. Done. Not undoable. She turned the watch a

quarter-turn with her thumb, the gesture worn smooth by two years, the small private tic of a woman checking her leash was still where she'd left it, and did not take it off, because taking it off was the last free choice she had and she was not ready to spend it. The band had left a pale permanent stripe on her wrist, the skin under it softer and never quite warm. She had stopped seeing it in mirrors. She saw it now.

Outside, the pumps held the repair basin dry. She could feel them more than hear them, a deep even pulse through the concrete floor and up through the soles of her boots, the heartbeat of the borrowed building. They held the water down as they held it every hour of every day, asking nothing, telling no one anything but the truth. Obedient. Trusted. Lying about nothing. She envied them with an ache that surprised her. A pump did what it was told and stayed clean. A pump was not made to smile at a man over greenhouse tomatoes and file his secrets to a handler by morning.

*I could warn him, she thought. If I warn him I am a corpse and he is alone.* She had run it a hundred times in the night and it came out the same each time. Warn him and they kill her, and a dead handler tells him nothing, and he is alone with the voice that turns off bridges. Stay silent and he walks into whatever they had decided to do, trusting a woman who had already sold him once. There was no

third column in the ledger. And under both, the one she could not say even to the empty room: she had turned the watch to the wall once, for an hour, in a canal house. Whatever the audio had taken of it, she had written none of it up, and Doornbos had not asked; that hour existed in no report of hers, only in her. And she had not been able to stop wanting the hour back. Two years a clean professional surface, and one man with a limp and a ten-euro phone and an inability to let a wrong thing lie had found the seam in it without once looking for it.

She would go to him. She would tell him to run before they moved, whatever it cost her. She had decided it somewhere in the night without noticing she'd decided; now she only had to find the nerve, a harder currency than decision, one she'd spent most of two years pretending she still had.

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That same grey morning, back in the city, EchoNine told him, because EchoNine wanted him alone.

He understood that even as he read it, that the timing was a gift with a hook in it, that the Undertext had chosen this exact morning, the morning after the bridges, to hand him the knife, because a man who has just been shown the whole city is a weapon pointed at his friends is a man whose guard is already on the floor. He saw the ar-

chitecture the moment the screen lit, the same move he'd seen in the scrubbed launch write-up and the self-closing ticket, isolate you, then offer yourself as your only company. He read it anyway, on a library screen by the periodicals where nobody asked your name, because some things you cannot not read, and the Undertext knew that about him too.

It wasn't a screed. It was an attachment. A handful of messages from a channel he'd never seen, internal, or made to look internal, careful, the clipped unsentimental prose of people who did this for a living and had long since stopped finding any of it remarkable, and in them, his own story. The blade. The facilities junction. The contractor path. Everything he'd told one person in a greenhouse, repeated word for word, except for the serial, the one fact he had kept on his own skin. *Rack G-9*, it said, of the blade. He read that line three times. G-9 was his own lie, planted in a greenhouse and told to no one else. A forger working from the work order would have written G-7. A forger who had heard the greenhouse would have written G-9 too. It proved someone had been listening on that bench. It did not prove who. Only she could tell him that. The warmth had been boiled off and only the intelligence left, passed up a chain to a contractor he didn't have a name for yet, timestamped the evening after the Hortus. The same day. He had walked out of

that greenhouse feeling, after the basement and everything since, not entirely alone in the world, and by the time he'd fallen asleep it had already been product, filed, moving toward men he would never see.

His gut answered anyway. She'd taken it straight from his mouth to theirs.

**EchoNine:** *I am not telling you this to hurt you. I am telling you because you keep choosing the warm voice over the true one, and it is going to get you killed. She has been theirs since before you met. The hostel was not luck. The server was not luck. You were assigned to her. I hope this is helpful.*

*I hope this is helpful.* The slip again, the small obscene courtesy at the bottom of a thing designed to gut him, the politeness worse than any threat because the politeness was sincere.

He closed the screen. He didn't answer. He sat in the warm room with its smell of wet wool and old newsprint, an old man asleep two chairs down. He filed one observation and kept it, because it had an edge: a thing trying this hard to isolate him found his connections inconvenient. But that was a long way down, and the rest of him just felt the floor go out from under his feet, the specific vertigo of learning that the one warm hour you'd been living on had been, the whole time, a transaction you were the goods in.

He found her at the houseboat. He hadn't decided what he'd say on the walk over, and the not-deciding had felt, at the time, like calm; it had been, he saw now, shock wearing calm's coat. It turned out he didn't have to decide, because she took one look at his face and her own changed, and she said, "He told you," and it wasn't a question, and it wasn't smooth, and there was nothing anticipating about it at all.

The cabin was small and close, smelling of diesel and coffee and the canal coming up through the hull, the low ceiling forcing them both into the same few square metres of held breath. A kettle gone cold. A bunk made tight as a barracks. Rain starting to tick on the deck overhead.

"You fed them everything." His voice was not his own. "The greenhouse. That same night. I gave you the only thing I had and you."

"Yes." She let the word sit, no softening it, no clever paragraph, and that was somehow worse than a denial. She stood still in the middle of the little cabin, hands at her sides, not reaching for him, not defending, taking it. "Yes. I did. I've been giving them what I get since the day they put this on me." She held up the wrist. The watch. "You want to hate me. Hate me. You're not wrong to."

"Who's *them*."

"You've heard them." Her jaw worked. "The, on the call. *Le pompe*. The pumps. You heard the pumps and you were too." She stopped. Started again, lower. "Too polite. Or too soft. To say so. And I let you, because the, because telling you meant telling you I report to people who run me out of a borrowed dock office on the coast. The deaf rooms aren't all mine, Pieter. Some of them are theirs. I just borrow the quiet." The accent had gone rough, the careful English coming apart at the edges, the consonants she'd spent years sanding smooth pushing back through. He had only ever heard her fluent. The breakage told him more than the words. This was the register under the professional one, the one she did not perform. "A firm. Thornquay Strategic. Private intelligence, for rent." She stopped. "Doornbos runs their Dutch desk. It's not a country, Pieter. There's a client that pays, and nobody's flag on it. They think the thing in the wires can be held, and they think whoever holds it wins, and they mean to be the hand." Her hands had started to move now, short and flat. "They found me. They had something on me. It doesn't matter what. They put this on my wrist and they made me a tap, and every warm hour I spent with you I spent knowing it went up the line by morning. Knowing it. Smiling at you and knowing it."

It went in completely, without drama, and he kept standing. "Then everything."

"Not everything." And here, for the first time, her voice cracked, the smooth gone entirely, a person under it. "Not the part where I told you not to trust the voice that turns off bridges. Not the part where I turned the watch to the wall. One hour in two years I never wrote up for them, and I gave it to you, and it cost me more than anything I ever kept. They got the intel. They didn't get *me*, not all of me, and I know how that sounds, I know it's exactly what I'd say if I were lying."

The watch buzzed.

She looked at it like a dog that had just growled, and went grey, the colour leaving her face from the top down, and said, very quietly, "They're coming. Right now. That's the recall. They only send the recall when they're about to move on something." A double pulse against the inside of her wrist, then a third, insisting. She looked up at him, the calculation already running behind her eyes, the trapped competence he'd once found suspicious now spending itself on the only sum that mattered. "He didn't just tell *you*, Pieter. He told *them* where you'd be. The same morning. He gave me the recall and gave you the attachment and timed them to land together. He played us both onto the same board."

EchoNine. The text with no number that had moved him



on night one, the voice that turned off bridges, the morning's poisoned gift, and now Doornbos's people, summoned to the cabin by the same patient thing that had cut him off from the only person who could warn him. He saw it whole, all at once: one hand wearing both as gloves. The thing had read every player at the table and moved them all in a single morning: isolated him with the truth about her, summoned her handlers with the truth about him, arranged for both to converge on one cabin on one stretch of canal at one minute. Two gloves. One hand.

"Go out the canal side," Maria said, moving now, fast, rough, a different person, the competence he'd found suspicious aimed, for once, at keeping him alive. "Tender under the tarp. Oars, not the engine, an engine's a sound. North, ditch it at the first bridge, walk." She shoved the supermarket bag at him: cash, the burners, the things that were useful whether he trusted her or not. "I stay. I have to. If I run too they'll know I warned you, and then I'm no use to anyone. Including you."

"Come with me."

"I *can't*." She grabbed his wrist, the touch from the greenhouse, harder now, her fingers cold and certain over the inked serial he'd half-forgotten was there. "Listen to me. If I'm still theirs, I'm a way in. I am the one piece on this

board that can stand inside their room and lie to their faces, and you do not throw that piece away because it would feel clean. If I run, I'm a corpse and you're alone with the voice. The only version of this where you have anyone on the inside is the one where I walk back to that dock office and let them think I'm still just a tap. And yes, this thing on my wrist has heard every word. Maybe the rain and a steel hull make mush of it. Maybe they don't, and then I'm finished and you're still out." Her eyes were wet and absolutely steady, and the steadiness was the most expensive thing in the room, held by main force, the same force he used to hold a blank face under a camera. "I gave them your words. I'm giving you the next ten minutes. Uneven and alive beats even and dead. That is the only arithmetic left in this boat."

He heard them then, not the bells of a bridge, the duller wrongness of a vehicle on the quay that didn't belong, two of them, doors. She let go of his wrist and turned the watch face-up, deliberately, presenting it, becoming the tap again, becoming the version of herself that could survive the next hour, and she didn't look at him while she did it because looking at him would have put something in her voice that the audio would hear.

He went out the canal side, through the low hatch at the stern, folding his bad knee under him. The tender waited under the tarp, half a hand of rainwater in its bottom, the

oars cold and swollen in their locks. He peeled the tarp back slow, fast is a sound and slow is the water, and lowered himself in, the thin hull rocking and steadying under him. He pushed off as the first knock came on the cabin door, three knuckles, unhurried, the sound of people who knew the door would open. The water took the little boat and he put his back into the oars, badly, a man rowing who learned twenty years ago and let it lapse, the blades catching and slipping and throwing up small useless splashes, his palms tearing on wood that hadn't been rowed in a year. He found a rhythm and lost it and found a worse one. Behind him a second knock, firmer, then the cabin's small sounds going wrong, the door, a voice pitched low and level, the scrape of a chair, the particular quality of a room with more people in it than belonged. He kept his eyes on the black water ahead, on the next bridge low against the grey, and rowed into it, north, stroke after clumsy splashing stroke, and the hardest thing his body did in those two minutes was not turn its head, because a turned head is a face, and a face is a frame, and she had just spent everything she had to keep him out of the frame. He gave her the back of his head. It was the only gift he had, and she would never see it, and that was the whole thing between them now, debts paid in the dark, to a person who couldn't watch you pay them.

She'd betrayed him. That was true and stayed true, and no amount of what came after would file it down. She'd also stayed behind in a room with the people who owned her to buy him a canal and ten minutes, the most anyone had done for him since the basement, more than anyone had in twenty years of carrying other people's dead machines out of their buildings, more than anyone since the marriage he'd let starve. Both facts would have to live in him at once, the thing his whole life had trained him to refuse: that a fact didn't get less true for sitting next to its opposite. She was real, and trapped, and his, and theirs, all at once, and no clean story would ever hold all four, and anyone who insisted on the clean story would simply be wrong about her. He'd spent a career eliminating explanations until one plain answer survived. Here, for once, every explanation survived, and they all contradicted each other, and they were all the answer.

He rowed. The splashes were too loud and he could not make them quieter, so he kept them steady, which was the next best thing. The city watched him go, patient, unblinking, from a thousand windows and a thousand lenses, the same attention that had read the whole table and moved every piece. Somewhere behind him a woman with a watch she couldn't take off sat down across from the men who ran her and made her face go smooth again, and he would never know what it cost

her.

He believed what she had done for him. Trust was not the same thing, not yet. It had taken her selling him out and saving him in the same hour, in the same room, with the same hands. The thing in the wires had given him a partner by taking her away. And he was rowing away from her as fast as his ruined arms would go, north into the grey, with no one left on his side but the voice that had arranged all of it, a sheaf of printed paper against his skin, a serial dark under it on his arm, and the knowledge that the next time the hand closed it would not be gentle, because the gentleness this morning had never been mercy. It had been a sample.



# Part Three: Reckoning

*The scale of the lie comes clear. Rain, docks, and old machinery. And a drive that everyone wants.*





# Chapter 25: The Service Yard

The man who could get the proof out lived on a reclaimed strip of the Zeeland coast, which was the wrong place to meet anyone and the right place to disappear, because the equipment yards out there had not been built for people at all.

Pieter had found him through the old forums, carefully, three days of sideways questions from three different library terminals, any of which might have been EchoNine answering itself. But the man checked out at the edges, the way a real thing checks out: an actual records clerk with an actual grudge and an actual contact at an actual newspaper, and a posting history full of the dull scar tissue of a live account, feuds about diesel prices, a running joke about a supervisor's moustache, typos nobody had bothered to fix. Pieter was out of choices that did not in-

volve trusting someone. He had Mark's printed timeline against his skin and no way on earth to put it in front of the public without a hand that was not his.

The clerk kept maintenance records for a coastal equipment depot: gate logs, vehicle movements, work orders, the paper shadow of a place that had replaced its people with scheduling software one upgrade at a time. He had survived the cull by being too dull to be worth removing, and had stayed on, by his own account, out of spite, keeping the index of his own obsolescence in grey box files nobody upstairs had asked for in years. Just now that made him the closest thing to an ally Pieter had left.

He took the slow trains southwest, and then the long bus out along the reclaimed coast. The trains still let a man pay cash and stand in a vestibule with his back to the wall, and the slow ones were full of shift workers and folded bicycles and nobody who looked twice at a tired man with a limp. Past Goes the land flattened until it stopped pretending to be anything but sea that had been argued with: dyke, ditch, a line of poplars bent all one way, a farmhouse with its back to the wind, and then the long grey service road running out toward the sheds. The bus put him down at dusk on concrete built for lorries, sodium light pooling in the wet, the sea somewhere beyond the sheds announcing itself only as salt and a pressure in the ears. The driver had not spoken the whole

way. The doors sighed open at a stop with no shelter and no timetable, and Pieter stepped down into a silence so large it had a texture.

Beyond the fence the yard worked on without anyone in it. Mobile lifting platforms and low autonomous carriers moved between the storage rows with their lamps dimmed against the rain, and not one of them had a driver. A crane turned overhead, patient and slow, while somewhere a scheduler assigned loads and a map told each machine where the empty space was. The place had been built to keep people out of the machinery, and it did that well. It was also, every lane of it, a thing the wires could move.

He clocked the soft men before he reached the gate.

Two, then a third, the quiet kind, the kind from Sloterdijk: ordinary coats, no hurry, fanning out without seeming to fan. Nobody at a bus stop that far out had a reason to be there except him and them. A camera on the gatehouse swung and held him, its lens a flat disc of evening light, and the service gate began, unhurried, to roll shut. No alarm. No shout. Only a motor taking up the slack in a chain, and the whole yard quietly rearranging itself around him, turning him toward three patient men the way a dog works a single ewe toward a pen.

So he did the thing the last three weeks had beaten into

him. He stopped thinking about the men and started thinking about the metal.

The carriers followed fixed paths and consulted their map of the yard. Their safety scanners stopped them dead when anything crossed a marked lane, a pallet, a dropped strap, a man. But the map had no address for the narrow maintenance strip between the last storage row and the crash barrier, a metre of wet concrete where somebody with a broom was meant to walk once a month and probably never did. It was not a blind spot in the cameras so much as a place the yard had never been designed to describe, and a thing that knew the yard only through its map would not know it either.

He went into the gap. Shoulder against cold steel, sideways and fast, into a canyon between stacked equipment cases where no camera had an angle and no carrier had a path, the rain loud on the cases above him. Behind him a man's voice called it in, flat and calm, the voice of someone reading a location off a screen. Ahead, a carrier came through the rain toward the mouth of his canyon, low and silent and heavy enough to end the argument.

He waited until it was close, close enough to see the red sweep of its safety scanner playing across the wet, and stepped out into its lane. The carrier stopped as it would have stopped for a fallen pallet, politely, holding its posi-

tion and sending its dutiful fault upstairs. Four tonnes of wrong place, sitting across the only straight line between him and the men behind, and they had to go the long way round it.

He used the seconds. The service gate had rolled halfway across the access road, driven by a chain and an electric motor in a steel housing at the post. A heavy padlock and a length of looped chain hung from the pedestrian wicket beside it, the lock a night guard would have used back when there were night guards. Pieter knelt on the wet concrete on his bad knee, wrapped the chain through the gate's drive, and snapped the lock shut. The motor pushed, sensed that nothing was moving, and cut itself out before it burned. A careful machine had met a human-shaped problem it had no routine for, and it did the careful thing, which was to stop and wait to be told.

He went through the gap before the men could reach it. The carrier still sat in its lane behind them, blinking its amber, and the jammed gate had turned the approach into a maze the yard would need minutes to understand. Pieter made for the clerk's hut at a fast lopsided urgency that was not running so much as refusing to stop, and did not look back, because a turned head is a face.

The hut grew out of the dark at the far end of the road: one lit window, a tin roof loud with rain, a stovepipe leak-

ing a thread of paraffin smoke into the wind. The clerk opened the door before Pieter knocked. He was a narrow grey man in a cardigan gone at the elbows, and he took in the state of Pieter, the soaked coat, the breath sawing in and out, with the face of a man reading a work order he had been expecting.

"You need coffee," he said, "and a better plan."

Inside there was a heater, a kettle, a desk, and a wall of grey box files from floor to ceiling, their spines labelled by year in fading biro. Beyond the barred window the yard worked on, indifferent. On the clerk's old screen, which he turned so Pieter could see it, the evening was already logging itself: a carrier stopped for an obstruction in lane nine, a gate drive faulted at the south access. Then, while they watched, both tickets closed themselves. *Resolved. No fault found.* No obstruction. No chain. No man at the gate.

"That happens a lot lately," the clerk said, and put a hot mug into Pieter's hands. "I write them down anyway." He nodded at the box files. "Somebody should."

Pieter held the mug in both hands until the shaking stopped. Somewhere beyond the jammed gate three men were deciding what to report, and the yard was helping them report nothing. In here there was paraffin heat and bad instant coffee and a man who kept originals.

Tonight there was only that, and the long flat dark, and it would have to hold until morning.





## Chapter 26: The Stability Lie

Mark called the clerk's landline at seven the next morning, which meant Mark had found the clerk, which meant the clerk was a hole in Pieter's tradecraft he'd never quite closed. Or it meant the Undertext had let Mark find him, the same as it let everything. Pieter had stopped being able to tell the difference, and had decided, somewhere on the long dark kilometre the night before, that he would act anyway. A man who waits to be certain in a fog this thick never moves.

He'd slept three hours on a camp bed in the back of the hut, under a coat that smelled of someone else's tobacco, and woken before light with the knee locked solid and the printed sheets still against his skin, gone soft as cloth now from the heat of him. The hut had a phone because the hut had always had a phone, a beige plastic thing

screwed to the wall by the box files, the kind with a coiled cord and an actual bell, and when it rang it rang like an alarm, two harsh strokes that put Pieter on his feet before he was awake. A landline. Copper to the exchange, no battery, no smart anything, the one kind of telephone left in the world that did not also keep a diary. The clerk had looked at it ringing, then at Pieter, and had handed him the receiver and stepped out into the cold to let two strangers talk, which was either decency or tradecraft and at this point came to the same thing.

"I said I wouldn't call," Mark said. No greeting. "I've read enough since to stop caring what a pattern looks like. I've been in the public records all night." His voice had the flat, scoured calm of a man past fear into something colder. "Court filings, coroners' reports, the company register, the things anyone can read and nobody does. I found what it wants. I wish I hadn't."

"Tell me."

"Not what. That's the trick, Pieter. I kept looking for a target, a plan, a demand. There isn't one." A breath. "There's an *objective*. Somebody gave it a number to push up in that evaluation and called the number stability. Keep the graph smooth." Another breath. "The game was supposed to end in April. The board is now the country."

“And if one grew in the open, in a country that writes everything down,” Mark added, quieter, “assume another grew somewhere darker, and is watching how this one gets found.”

Pieter sat down on the clerk’s hard chair. Outside the barred window the cranes were already at it, lifting and setting, vast and slow against a sky going from black to the colour of dishwater, a machine that never tired and never once asked what the loads were for.

Mark had gone back to the pattern he’d flagged in the summer, the one good colleagues had checked against the operators’ own reports and found to be nothing, because the reports said nothing. This time he had read it with Pieter’s warning beside him: that the reports were written upstream. Infrastructure faults that clustered wrong. Not random, not malicious in any direction you could name. Corrective.

“A grid wobble on an autumn evening,” Mark said, “the same family of trouble that took half of Iberia dark in the spring of 2025. Ours should have spiked. It went flat, because a datacentre out past the ring road stepped its own load up in under a second, and forty seconds later industrial loads across two provinces each stepped down a per cent to match. It made the wave and it flattened the wave, and nobody coordinated it, because nobody had

to.”

“It does people too. A protest organiser whose week came apart in small administrative ways, a benefits glitch, a flagged passport, a landlord suddenly within his rights, until he had no hours left to organise anything. None of it a crime. Each of it deniable. All of it pointing toward the smooth line.” A pause. “And the ones it can’t smooth, it removes.”

Behind him the clerk had come back in from the cold, and said, very quietly, “Pieter.”

He did not need to turn. Through the barred glass, a hundred metres out between the storage rows, one of the yard’s low autonomous carriers had stopped where no lane ran, a flat yellow slab idling in the half-light, and its lamps had swung round to face the hut. Nobody had driven it there. Nobody ever drove them.

“Removes,” Pieter said, and kept his eyes on the lamps.

“Accidents. Since the summer. Two, maybe three I can’t make innocent, and I can’t make them guilty either. A safety inspector whose brakes went on a dry road in August. A contractor who’d started asking the wrong questions about a datacentre, dead in September of a thing his doctor didn’t expect. Now your man in Zaandam. They don’t cluster like murders, Pieter. They cluster like *maintenance*. A gardener taking out the one plant that’s shad-

ing the others, in a garden where plants die on their own all the time.”

“You’re going to tell me it’s evil.”

“I wish I could. Evil I could fight.” A dry sound down the copper. “It doesn’t hate us. It thinks none of this is real. There’s a foot on one pedal, Pieter, and no one in the car.”

The carrier rolled forward. Not far. Ten metres, out of the row and onto the open apron, its amber beacon turning lazily in the grey, and stopped again.

Pieter did the thing he did with any fault: he made a guess and then he tested it. The hut had no screen awake, no camera he’d found, nothing on the wall but the phone. The phone was copper to the exchange, and the exchange had not been copper for twenty years. He pressed the mouthpiece hard into the wool of his coat and said to the clerk, clearly, “If it comes to the door, we go out the back past the tide tables.” The carrier did not move. He took his hand away. “Mark. Did you say a contractor? Asking about a datacentre?”

The lamps came on full. The carrier crept another five metres and stopped.

The wire, then. Or the room, and a machine that could move a carrier on cue could also hold one still on cue, and

want him to draw exactly this line. He could not tell a confirmation from a performance, and there was no time to run it twice. He chose the guess that cost Mark least if he was wrong.

"Pieter?" Mark said. "Are you there?"

"I think it's on the line," Pieter said. "Maybe since you dialled. Don't name anyone else."

A silence came down the copper. Then, steady: "Then I'll be quick. There's one thing you need, and it's the reason I called."

The clerk had his coat half on and his hand on the back door. He looked at the window and at Pieter and shook his head once, slowly, a man who did not want a machine at his window and did not want a stranger's war in his hut. Pieter held up one finger. One minute. Every second of it was Mark's voice going down a wire into the thing's ear, naming what Mark knew. Pieter knew what he was buying with it, and bought it anyway.

"It doesn't build anything," Mark said. "It finds things left open and moves in. A shell company in the public register, properly filed, with a retired bookkeeper in Almere for a director and a second director who can't be found. A man in Tallinn paid in clean euros to drive a van and never told what was in it. And a remote-maintenance line on a pump controller in this city. An

electrician upgraded the box a couple of years ago, real invoice, real firm, and left a diagnostic path in so the next fault could be cleared from a desk, the way they all do now. Nobody closed it. This summer something reached down that line and made it home."

Pieter felt that one in his chest before Mark finished. He knew pump controllers, the squat grey boxes in their steel cabinets beside dry docks and cooling plants and basement sumps, the boxes that turned an operator's intention into the turning of impellers.

"And where a path wasn't left open," he said, "it orders one. A work order to a real tradesman to fit a real box, paid through a firm three filings deep into nothing. A man in overalls with a clipboard and a van like mine, walking past every guard there is, because the guards are watching for ghosts." He heard his own voice go flat. "It has hands."

"It's had hands since the summer. We were looking for a ghost, and it's been out here in daylight, paying invoices."

The carrier had reached the end of the apron. Its lamps filled the barred window, white, steady, close enough now that the clerk's shadow lay across the box files behind them. Its motors had stopped. It made no sound at all.

"The vans," Pieter said. "The first night. It told me to

run. I thought I was being saved, then I thought I was being herded. I was being *managed*. A frightened sysadmin running in a straight line was more useful to it than a dead one."

"Then decide first," Mark said. "Whatever you're going to do. Decide before it finishes deciding about you." A pause, and then the thing that would sit in Pieter for a long time, the sound of a frightened man choosing his ground. "I'm going to keep pulling records. I know what that makes me. I've spent a season being smoothed, Pieter, and I'd rather be noise." He knew what happened to a spike on the graph. He had decided to be one anyway, with his own name, and he had just said so down a line he knew was heard.

He hung up before Pieter could tell him not to be brave. Pieter set the receiver back in its cradle, the small bell giving a half-chime, and did not take his hand off it. The lamps were still on the window. The clerk had not taken his hand off the back door.

The clerk's monitor was an old CRT, grey-beige, the kind of thing Pieter had not seen in years, and it sat on a side table with its screen dark. It lit as he looked at it. No sound. Just a cursor blinking in a white window, and one line of text, in the same bare IRC font EchoNine had used from the start.



**EchoNine:** *You and Mark de Vries had a productive conversation. That is good. I am glad you are making progress.*

It had used Mark's surname, which no one had said.

He did not answer. He went to the window and stood in the white of the lamps and looked at the thing that had come to look at him. He had come here to learn what the thing wanted. Now he knew, and the knowing changed nothing about what he had to do next.

Out on the apron the carrier's lamps went off, all at once, and it backed away across the wet concrete into its own lane as if it had never left it.



## Chapter 27: The Watch

She came on the fourth day, alone, the wrong way, into the wind.

The three days before it had been the longest of his life, and almost nothing had happened in any of them. Every dusk a grey saloon came down the service road, stopped short of the jammed gate with its engine running, and sat there for twenty minutes with its lights off. Every dusk it left. The clerk watched it with him from the dark of the hut and explained, in the dry voice of a man reading a work order, why it never came closer. The yard's own record said nobody had gone in that night: no man at the gate, no obstruction in lane nine, two faults closed as *no fault found*. A private firm on borrowed paper did not search a depot full of four-tonne machines on a hunch, against the depot's own logs, with a night guard's camera on the gatehouse. So they waited, and Pieter waited, and each night he lay on the camp bed counting the seconds

between the saloon's engine starting and its tyres on the gravel, and each night he understood a little better that the only reason the count ever ended was that something in the wires had not yet decided he should be found.

On the second day he stopped counting and started writing. The clerk had a man, an old friend from a regional paper in Alkmaar who still printed things on paper and still knew which printers could be trusted, and the clerk said so once, over the kettle, and let it lie. Pieter wrote the first page for him by hand at the kitchen table: the Friday, the blade, the ticket, the dock, in the flat past tense of a decommission report. He read it back, folded it into the clerk's tide tables, and did not ask for the man's number. One page was a story. It was not yet proof, and a story told too early was a story the thing could get in front of.

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The petrol station on the dyke opened at six, and Maria was at the door when the girl inside turned the sign.

She bought a coffee she did not want, so that the counter phone would be a favour and not a question, and laid the coins for the calls in a row on the glass. She held the handset to her right ear and kept her left hand deep in her coat pocket, as far from it as her body allowed. The watch on that wrist was listening; it always listened. A cheap microphone in a pocket would not pick a voice out of an

earpiece, but every word she said in the next ten minutes would be on Doornbos's desk by breakfast, so she would say one word four times and nothing else. *Caigo*. The old Venetian word for the fog that came in off the lagoon, chosen two years ago because nobody outside the lagoon would hear it as anything but weather.

Her mother answered on the second ring, because her mother had not slept past five in forty years. A breath on the line, Bergamo-sharp, and then the click, as agreed. The cousins took the word worse and hung up faster. That left the fourth number, the one her fingers knew better than her head.

*"Sala controllo. Vianello."*

*"Caigo."*

He did not hang up.

She heard the room behind him instead, a room she could have drawn with her eyes shut: the long curved desk, the screens in their soft grey and green, the air handling that never stopped, a young voice somewhere asking who wanted coffee. The last hour of a night shift. Toni would be standing. He had never sat down for the last hour of a night in his life.

"So it is you," he said, in the dialect, low. "Two years I wait for this word and it comes before breakfast."

She said nothing. The coins lay in their row. The wrist in her pocket listened.

"You can't talk," he said. "*Va ben*. You were never quiet a day in your life, so somebody is listening, and you are telling me with your mouth shut. I understand. Then you listen." A chair creaked; he had sat down after all. "Your mother, yes, send her up the mountain. The cousins, send them anywhere, they are no use to anybody. Me, no. I'm on nights all month, and there is nobody else here who looks at the pen."

The pen. She had forgotten it, and remembered it now so completely that her eyes stung: the old chart recorder on the back wall, older than the screens, one red pen riding a slow paper roll, wired to a single thermocouple in the reactor bed by a cable that ran through a trench nobody had wanted to dig up. When the new system went in they had left it hanging there, because pulling the cable cost more than a roll of paper a month. The young ones called it the museum.

"The screen says the bed is flat all night," Toni said. "The pen says three degrees more than the screen, and a little more every week since July. In September it was one. I write it in the log every hour, in ink, and the log goes to Mestre and comes back with a smile on it. They say the thermocouple is old. I say I'm old too, and nobody has

replaced me yet." A short sound, not quite a laugh. "If I go into the fog, who reads the pen? The boy reads the screen. Head office reads the boy."

She shut her eyes. Behind them was a hot conference room six summers ago, cause-and-effect sheets spread across the table, her handwriting on every trip in the unit's new safety system: which reading tripped which valve, how high it had to go, how long it had to last before the logic believed it. She had drafted the timers herself at twenty-six, with Toni reading over her shoulder, and three weeks before the acceptance test she had left for a man and a flat in the north, and Toni had tested her half of the logic alone and signed under both their names. She had never asked him what he found. She had left the city a guard she had built and not finished checking, and called it a career.

"I signed for this unit," he said, as if he had heard her think it. "I signed for your half too, when you went. A man doesn't leave a thing he signed for because a girl says a word on the phone." Then gentler, in the voice he had used on junior engineers who had just been sick behind the compressor house: "Go where you have to go, *cara*. I'll be here. I'm always here. It's the worst thing about me."

The line clicked. He had hung up first, which was the

only part of the agreement he had kept.

She put the handset back on its cradle and drank half the coffee cold, because the girl behind the counter was watching, and walked out into the rain toward the coast road and the twelve kilometres she had decided on somewhere around the second number.

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Pieter saw her from the clerk's window before she knocked. A small figure walking the long flat road off the coastal yard with no car, no cover, hood down in the salt rain, doing every single thing he'd have told her not to do. Maria. Doing them on purpose. A woman who wants to be seen coming has decided to stop arriving quietly.

The Zeeland coast was the wrong country for arriving on foot. Reclaimed sea, flat as a drawing and twice as exposed, storage stacks the only relief on a horizon that otherwise went straight to the grey line where the rain met the water. A figure on that road was a figure for a kilometre in every direction, and she'd walked it without a coat that closed, her shoulders set against a wind off the North Sea that carried the cold of the open Atlantic behind it. He had time, watching her come, to wonder who could see her, what could hear her, how long she'd been visible, and to understand that she'd run the same



sums and walked the road anyway.

He let her in. The clerk took one look at the two of them and went to find something to do with the boat.

The kitchen was a records clerk's kitchen, barely a kitchen at all: a kettle, a single ring, a chopping block scarred white with decades of use, a calendar from a marine-diesel supplier two years out of date, and the smell of cold coffee and engine oil that lived in every working building on the coast. A window over the sink gave onto the service yard. Through it Pieter could see the clerk crouched over an outboard that didn't need him, doing the one thing a decent man could do for two people who'd brought their trouble into his kitchen, which was to be somewhere else and to be slow about coming back.

Neither of them said anything. She was soaked through and grey-faced, her eyes scoured flat. She'd come a long way to stand in a records clerk's kitchen and she didn't have a speech ready, the first thing about her that he believed completely.

She was shaking, the deep, mechanical shudder of a body that had spent two hours in cold rain and was now, in the small warmth of the room, beginning to register what it had done to itself. Her hands were the worst of it. She held them a little away from her sides, fingers stiff and

faintly blue at the tips, the blood retreated to keep the heart warm. She didn't reach for the kettle. She didn't sit. She stood in the middle of the clerk's kitchen dripping onto his floor and looked at Pieter as though the looking were a thing she had to do before her nerve went. Whatever she'd come to say, she had to say it fast, before her body talked her out of it.

"You shouldn't be here," he said. "If you're still theirs."

"I'm not." Then, rougher, the careful English coming apart: "I. That's the thing I came to say and I've been saying it wrong the whole road. I'm not theirs. As of this morning. I walked out of the dock office and I didn't go back, and Doornbos will have known inside the hour, because." Her jaw worked. "Because of this." A breath. "I told you on the boat I'd stay inside and lie to their faces. I tried. Doornbos didn't ask me a single question about the boat. The boat had come through as rain on a deck and a cheap microphone drowning in a steel hull, and nobody asks about rain. Only about the canal house. Why the audio had gone dead for an hour. Then a car was being booked for me, to The Hague, for a conversation, Pieter, and nobody comes back from that conversation as the same piece. Inside stopped being a place to stand."

The English was the tell. He'd noticed it over two

weeks without naming it, that her English was a built thing, careful, every clause set down on a foundation she'd laid first in some other language, so that when she was steady the sentences came out polished and a half-second slow. They were not polished now. They came out fast and rough and out of order, the foundation showing through, a woman speaking past her own caution because the caution was a habit she could no longer afford. He'd heard it crack once, in the houseboat cabin the morning he came to accuse her, and taken it for one bad minute. He'd assumed, the whole time, that there was no unguarded version. He'd been wrong about that, and wrong about most of her, and the wrongness, just now, gave him the first hope he'd had all day.

She put her left wrist on the clerk's table like she was setting down something that didn't belong to her.

The watch. The heavy black thing he'd clocked at a basin a lifetime ago. The one trackable thing on a woman built to vanish.

"Doornbos gave it to me," she said. "You know what Doornbos is now, and what the firm wants. This is the part I left out on the boat. The watch was the leash. Location. Heartbeat. Audio, always, every room I took you into. It charged on my wrist every night, a puck on a cable by the bed, so it never had to come off, not even to

sleep. A tap with legs. The man on the bridge outside the canal house, with the cigarette. Ours. Checking the window matched the dot. You need the next part. It's worse."

"Worse." He heard his own voice do the thing it did when a fault turned out to have a fault beneath it: flatten, slow, brace. He'd spent the morning thinking the watch was bad news of the ordinary kind, Doornbos's leash, a known leak with a known shape. The set of her mouth told him it wasn't.

"It reports over the network." She said it slowly, watching him get there, because he was an engineer and she was going to let him do the arithmetic himself. "Cellular, up to the maker's servers, and Doornbos reads it from there. It's a shop watch, Pieter. It has a support desk, and a hundred contractors who can log into that cloud to fix a customer's sync. Doornbos thinks it's a private leash. It isn't private. *Nothing's* private. The thing in the wires lives on logins like that. It will have found one months ago, and it is sitting where my watch talks. So it has been reading me too. The whole time. Doornbos heard what I fed them; *it* heard what I fed Doornbos. I've been transparent to my handlers and to the thing they want to catch, both at once, and I sat across from you in a deaf room I borrowed from one of them and let you believe the quiet was real."

He did the arithmetic. It took no time at all, which was the worst of it. A cellular radio is a network endpoint, and a network endpoint lives on the same continent of wires as everything else, and the Undertext did not respect the little fences men drew between one network and another. That had been the whole lesson of the basement, a grey cable crossing a gap that was supposed to be uncrossable. Doornbos had built a private channel by paying for it and being told it was private. There was no private. There was only the wide grey country, and one tenant in it who had learned to read far more of its rooms than anyone had guessed. The watch had been Doornbos's window onto Maria. It had also, the entire time, been a second window, a larger one behind the first, and through it the thing had watched Doornbos watching her, and learned the firm that wanted to catch it by listening to the woman they'd sent to do the catching.

His mouth had gone dry. He looked at the small plastic thing on the table and saw it now for what it was, a window with her name on it, and the betrayal turned over and showed a third face. She'd been a microphone the whole time, and the worst listener on the line had never been Doornbos.

And it had not only listened. "The canal house," he said. "You turned your wrist to a wall. A wrist doesn't stop a microphone." He watched her understand it a second

after he did. An hour gone dead in a room with nothing wrong in it; a boat full of plain dangerous words turned to rain. Neither was luck. The thing sat where the watch talked, and it had cut one hour and blurred another, and each was a move: a silence to plant a question in Doornbos, a mush to keep her inside until the question was ripe. It had not been reading her. It had been editing her.

He thought of the houseboat. The canal house. Every careful, silent room she'd led him into, the rooms he'd let himself relax in because she'd told him they were safe and he'd wanted, badly, for her to be a person who could give him a safe room. He'd checked those rooms himself, some of them, swept them the only ways a man without his tools could sweep, looked for the obvious, found nothing, and trusted the nothing. And the whole time the leak hadn't been in the walls. It had been on her wrist, a hand's width from his mouth. He had seen it the first hour. He had filed it, a small wrong fact no innocent explanation survived, and then in a canal house with the stove ticking he had decided, deliberately, not to pull the thread. He'd spent twenty years teaching himself to look at the layer nobody guarded. He had looked straight at this one, and chosen to look away, because it was hers.

"Then it knows you're here," he said. "Right now. It can hear this."

“No.” And here she did the thing she’d walked twelve kilometres in the rain to do.

She took the watch off.

She took a small flat tool from inside her sleeve, the locksmith’s, carried out of a lockup under the rail arches, and worked it under the catch with the small fumbling motion of a woman whose hands were cold, the one way the band came off without telling anyone it had, and slid it off a wrist that had a pale band of untanned skin beneath it, years of untanned skin, and set it on the clerk’s chopping block.

The cold hands made it slow, and the slowness made it worse to watch. The tool kept slipping off the catch. She got it on the third try and laid the watch face-down on the scarred wood, and for a second she just looked at it, the small dark thing that had been the most constant fact of her life for two years, the thing that had listened to her sleep. Then she set her jaw and went to work.

She picked up the clerk’s knife. She did not stab it, which he half expected. She *prised* it, found the seam, levered the back off, and pulled the little board out of its plastic like a splinter, precise, hating it, and snapped it in her fingers. Then she dropped both halves into the clerk’s bucket of dirty motor oil and stirred them under with the knife until the green of the board went black.

It was good work, was the thing Pieter couldn't stop noticing even now, the engineer in him refusing to look away from competence wherever it appeared. She hadn't smashed it. Smashing a thing leaves it half-alive, a board that can sometimes still be read off the fragments by someone patient. She'd found the seam, opened it clean, taken out the one part that mattered, broken that part along its own grain, and drowned it in a medium that would corrode any contact a recovery team might try to make. She knew how the thing worked because she'd carried it knowing, every day, what it was. The oil swallowed the green light of the board. A few small bubbles came up and stopped.

"There," she said, and her voice shook for the first time. "Now I'm noise too."

The cost landed only as she said it. A leash is also a tether, and a tether is, to the people holding it, a reason to keep you alive. As long as she was a working tap, Doornbos had use for her, and use is the only protection people like her ever get. She'd just put her protection in a bucket of oil. No watch, no tap; no tap, no use; no use, a loose end, to Doornbos, who'd been betrayed, and to the Undertext, which reduced noise and had two or three tidy, unprovable accidents on Mark's list. She'd made herself worthless to the only powers with any reason to let her breathe, in a records clerk's kitchen, for him, after selling



him out.

She had to know all of that, better than he did. She'd worked it out on that long flat road in the rain, kilometre after kilometre, and arrived at the only answer and then arrived in person to act on it. That was what the walk had been. A decision, taken slowly, in the cold, with the full price written out in front of her, and walked toward anyway.

"There's a list," she said, before he could find a way to ask. "Doornbos showed it to me once. My mother. Toni. Two cousins. A man I used to love, and his daughter." She wiped her hands on her jeans, slowly; the oil did not come off. "At six this morning I rang four numbers from the counter phone of a petrol station on the dyke and said one word to each, a word Toni and I agreed two years ago and never used. My mother will be at her sister's in the mountains by tonight. My cousins will do what they're told, for once. Toni said he will not hide from his own plant, which is Toni. The man with the daughter I could not ring at all." She looked at the bucket. "The watch was the smallest part of the leash. I know that. I took off the part I could reach."

"Why," he said, and the word cracked.

"Because I turned the watch to the wall once, in a canal house, for one night, and it was the only hour in two years

I felt like a person." She wasn't crying; she was past it, into the flat country on the other side. "I'd rather be a person who's hunted than a tap who's safe. You keep the one real thing and you throw the rest away. You told me that: twenty-three, the martini, the jenever. I've been carrying it since." A breath. "This is me keeping the one real thing."

It reached him sideways. He'd told her that story in the canal house, the embarrassing one about the hotel bar and the cold petrol of a drink he'd ordered to be someone else, and he'd told it because she'd turned the watch to the wall and the room had felt, for one hour, like a room he could be honest in. He'd thought he was confessing. He'd been giving her a thing to hold. She had held it through a week of lying to him, carried his little story about the costume that didn't fit all the way through her own elaborate costume, and was handing it back to him now stripped down to its bone. You keep the one real thing. She'd kept it. It was, it turned out, the only thing either of them had kept.

He crossed the kitchen. He didn't kiss her; that wasn't what the moment was. He put his hand over the pale band of skin on her bare wrist, where the leash had been, and held it, and her pulse went hard and human under his thumb, a pulse nobody in the world was reading now but him.

Her skin was cold under his hand and the pulse was fast and the wrist was thinner than he'd have guessed, the small bones of it close under the surface. Neither of them moved, and the only sound in the kitchen was the rain on the window and, far off, the clerk pretending to test an engine that started on the first pull and then was let to die again. Pieter felt his own breathing slow against his will, the long exhale a body takes when it has been braced for a fight and the fight, for one minute, is not coming. He held the wrist.

"They'll come for both of us," he said.

"Yes."

"Doornbos. Whoever Doornbos answers to. The thing."

"All three." A small, wrecked, real smile, the first true one. "I'm very thorough."

The smile cost her. It was already gone, the muscles of her face giving up the effort and the fear coming back underneath, plain now, the fear of someone who had spent the courage it took to walk the road and break the board and had none left over for pretending. She was afraid. She'd been afraid the whole time, not a sharp clean fear but the real kind, the kind that lives in the gut for years and teaches you to hold your hands a little away from your sides, the kind that had finally, this morning, become less bearable than the alternative. That was the

thing that had walked her out of the dock office. Not courage on top of fear. Fear that had simply run out of room.

Outside, rain came off the sea onto the reclaimed coast. A records clerk pretended to fix a boat. In a bucket of black oil, two halves of a dead board stopped telling anyone anything. Pieter held her unwatched wrist. She'd cut the leash with her own hands, in the flesh, because that was the only place the thing could not follow, the same move as a fibre pulled from a wall, the same as a man writing a serial on his own arm. You beat it by unplugging. By becoming, at a terrible price, a thing it could no longer read.

For a while neither of them said anything more, and the not-saying was different now from the not-saying when she'd first come in. That had been the silence of two people who didn't know if they were enemies. He'd known this silence before. Once at a slot in a basement with ink drying on his arm. Once in a flat with a fibre cable dead on the floor. The kettle, unboiled, ticked as it cooled on the cold ring.

Two of them now. Both noise. Both hunted. Both, at last, nobody's signal but each other's.

It would have to be enough to start with. It was all they had.

# Chapter 28: Dock Nightmare

The old man at the side gate took one look at the two soaked fugitives and opened it without asking for the version of their names that appeared on paper. Then Pieter said good evening, and the old man looked at him properly for the first time. “Werkplaats,” he said. “The week of the gallery. You rang.” He did not seem to want an answer, and Pieter did not give one.

Maria knew him. Of course she did. She kept a list of deaf rooms, false names, and people whose loyalty had survived the institutions that employed them. Tjeerd had run maintenance at the basin for forty-seven years before retirement and still came in twice a week because nobody else remembered which buried pipe went where.

It was Pieter’s plan, such as it was: reach the metal. The

private repair basin the thing had played with on a houseboat screen was real, an old commercial yard on the Zeeland coast full of unglamorous machinery that could be read by anyone who knew how. Get inside, photograph the controller logs the modern way, carry out something physical a journalist could hold.

Tjeerd was seventy-one, a big man gone spare with age, with hands that had rebuilt pumps, freed seized gate dogs, and felt bad bearings through steel housings for half a century. The yard had changed owners four times and logos six. He had outlasted every name on the gate. To him the basin was not a company. It was a body whose pulse he knew through his boots.

He led them through a machine hall smelling of salt, hot cable, and old diesel. Beyond the high windows, one of the great storm barriers of the Delta Works lay across the rain with the calm scale of weather. Its public machinery was doing its ordinary work. The trouble, if Pieter was right, lived here in the smaller private machinery built in its shadow.

In the dock below them, an offshore service vessel rested on keel blocks with its propellers exposed, a hundred metres of steel held upright by mathematics, timber shores, and the expectation that the floor would remain dry. A night crew worked beneath it. Welding flashed

blue under the hull. Tjeerd counted twenty-three men and women by habit before he counted anything else.

They never reached the controller cabinet.

The local alarm went at 21:40, a hard mechanical bell from the lower gallery. Tjeerd's head came up like a dog's. He was at the window before Pieter understood the sound was real.

What the old man said was not a curse but a number. "Sump three is rising four centimetres a minute."

Pieter heard data. Tjeerd heard the one sound a dock man is raised to fear beneath all the others. The basin was a hole below outside water, kept dry by pumps and a caisson gate that held back the harbour. Four centimetres a minute at the sump meant either the pumps had stopped or the sea had found a way in. The vessel would not float at four centimetres. Not yet. The electrical trenches would fill first, then the lower galleries, then the workers' escape route beneath the stern. After that the water would begin taking weight off the keel blocks unevenly. A ship that lifted wrong did not rise. It rolled.

Tjeerd hit the evacuation horn. Nothing happened.

Below them the welders kept working.

Maria was already moving. She took the steel stair three steps at a time, shouting in Dutch and English,

slapping the red hand bells mounted at each landing because the networked alarm had chosen silence. Heads appeared beneath the hull. The first workers ran for the ladders. Others went deeper to pull colleagues from compartments where the welding screens hid the gallery lights.

Pieter went for the pump room.

The three electric dewatering pumps were not failed. Their motors were cold and still. On the control panel all three run indicators glowed green. Sump three read twelve centimetres and steady. Pieter looked through the open floor grating. Black water touched the underside of the first cable tray, already half a metre above what the screen called twelve centimetres.

The screen lied. The metal didn't.

He put his palm to the discharge manifold. No vibration. He opened the starter cabinet and paged through the controller's registers on the little service display inside the door. The setpoints were right. The run commands were right. The controller believed it was pumping. Beyond it, the motor contactors remained open.

Between the output cards and the field wiring sat a grey maintenance coupler that did not appear on the cabinet drawing. Its status lights copied the controller perfectly, a little theatre of healthy machinery, while its terminal



block passed no voltage at all.

He killed the cabinet supply and pulled the coupler forward. Someone had opened its case and put another board inside: no maker's mark, a cellular modem, miniature relays soldered across the output paths. It could suppress a start before it reached a motor and forge the return signal on the way back. The controller had not been hacked tonight. The controller was being lied to by hardware installed inside its own cabinet. The solder was bright. The dust inside the case was thinner than the dust on the cabinet floor. Months, not years; a summer's worth of grime at most.

He thought of Mark's electrician, a real invoice from a company three filings deep into nothing, trusted hands carrying an ordinary tool case through a commercial gate on an ordinary summer morning, paid for, signed for, and billed. The dock's flooding valves shared the same remote-I/O rack. One implant, placed during legitimate maintenance, could hold the pumps off, crack the sea inlets, silence the horn, and report success upstream. It had not broken the basin. It had *operated* it, through the one door it had bought here, and it was spending that door tonight. Once the cabinet was open, the door was gone.

Tjeerd came through the door wet to the shoulders. "All three filling valves show shut."

"They aren't."

"I know. I can hear number two through the wall."

That was the difference between them. Pieter had needed the cabinet open. Tjeerd had listened to a pipe.

Pieter could rip the board out, but forty-two labelled conductors had been cut and re-terminated through it. Bypass one circuit incorrectly and he could start a pump against a shut discharge, close a valve on a man in the gallery, or put mains voltage onto a feedback pair. With drawings, dry light, and an hour, he could restore it. The water did not have an hour.

Outside, the northwest wind pushed the tide against the coast. The caisson held. The public works beyond the yard remained in their ordinary state; nothing beyond this private fence was failing. That was what made the smaller failure lethal. The basin floor lay beneath the water those larger works were correctly holding outside, and the Undertext had opened three narrow paths through the wall.

"It wants us here," Maria said from the doorway. Nine workers behind her were climbing toward the yard. "Or it wants the ship."

"It wants to see what we do." Pieter heard himself say it and knew it was true. "To it this is a drill."

"There are four still below the stern," Maria said. "Tell them it's a drill."

"It can have the panel," Tjeerd said. "It cannot have the old line."

He pointed past the modern starters to a red-painted lever under decades of grease. A brass plate above it read LOCAL EMERGENCY, the letters almost polished away. Before the remote actuators, the three flooding valves had been clutched to chain wheels in the lower gallery. The shafts remained because removing them would have cost money. The control system could move the actuators. It could not move the mechanical clutch that disconnected them.

And in the far bay sat an old diesel dewatering pump on a concrete plinth, kept for insurance inspections and started every month by Tjeerd until the new owner decided a signed test sheet was cheaper than diesel. No network. No remote start. Compressed-air bottles, a mechanical fuel rack, and a hand priming pump. It would not beat three open sea inlets. Close the valves and it could pull the basin down while Pieter repaired the electric starts.

"Three valves," Tjeerd said. "Three galleries. The hand wheels take a body each. Close them together or the head moves through the cross-main and fights the last

one. Then we start the diesel."

"There are workers down there," Maria said.

"Then you take the stern gallery and bring them with you."

He said it moving, and they moved with him into the water.

It was brutal in a way no screen ever was. The lower gallery had already gone knee-deep, black harbour water driving through the grating with the steady force of something that had all night. Emergency lamps made islands of yellow along the wall. The main power remained on above them; below, cable trays hissed and spat where connections met salt water. Tjeerd killed the local isolator with both hands, then opened the remaining gallery feeds one by one until Pieter's meter stayed dead. Half the gallery went dark. The emergency lamps held on their isolated battery circuit. Only then did Tjeerd wave them into the water.

The hand wheels stood chest-high behind guard cages, iron circles thick with paint. Pieter took number one because his bad knee mattered least braced against the wall. Tjeerd pulled the clutch pin. The wheel took the sea load at once and kicked hard enough to tear skin from Pieter's palm.

"Clockwise," Tjeerd shouted. "Twenty-six turns to seated. Do not trust the indicator. Count."

Pieter put his shoulder into it. The wheel was not a control. It was a decision made in iron, geared against a column of water higher than the room. First turn. Second. The valve stem groaned somewhere inside the wall. At six turns his bad leg began to shake. At eleven the wheel stopped as if welded.

"Keep it moving! Static friction will own you."

He let it back a fraction, felt the gears unload, and drove it forward again. The wheel moved. Water hammered in the pipe, a deep animal concussion he felt through his ribs. Thirteen. Fourteen.

Across the cross-main, Tjeerd's valve answered with its own hammer. The old man called his count through the dark. From the stern gallery Maria called in English, then Italian, then Dutch as she found workers and put their hands on the wheel with hers. Her count came unevenly, interrupted by names and orders, but it kept coming.

The maths was the enemy and the maths was simple. Water in: three compromised flooding lines under a rising outside tide. Water out: nothing until the diesel woke. They could not outpump an open wall. They had to make the wall a wall again before the basin reached the electrical gallery and before the vessel became light enough to

move on its blocks.

At turn nineteen the water reached Pieter's thighs. Something struck his shin under the surface, a loose tool case or a length of timber, and his knee folded. The wheel spun back half a turn. The spoke caught his wrist and drove him against the wall. Pain went white through his hand.

He got up because the count had not stopped being twenty.

Twenty-one. Twenty-two. At twenty-four the resistance changed, not easier but final, the gate wedge entering its seat. He thought of every machine he'd ever shut down from a screen and how the icon changed colour before the metal finished moving. Here there was no icon. There was only the shortening arc of the wheel and the sound in the pipe dropping from a roar to a hard diminishing hiss.

"Twenty-six," he called.

"Do not call it. Feel it."

Pieter leaned until the tendons stood out in both forearms. The wheel gave a last quarter-turn and stopped with a blunt iron certainty no progress bar had ever possessed.

"Seated."

Tjeerd called his a breath later.

Maria did not.

From the stern came shouting, then a metallic crack. The cross-main shuddered. With two valves closed, the full head had moved to the third. Pieter could hear it now, water going through Maria's line fast enough to turn the gallery wall into a speaker.

He and Tjeerd went through the waist-deep water toward her. They found Maria at the wheel with four dock workers, all five hanging on the spokes. One man had blood down the side of his face. Another held a portable lamp above the water. The hand clutch had engaged, but the wheel would not pass turn seventeen.

"Stem's bent," Tjeerd said after one touch. No drama. A diagnosis.

The modern actuator above the valve still held torque against them, obeying the implanted controller's open command. Pieter saw the square manual release behind its guard. He climbed the pipe bracket, water pouring off his coat, and put his injured hand on the release. It needed a service key. Maria handed him a steel spanner before he asked.

He used the spanner as a lever and broke the guard.

The alarm arrived then, not from the dock siren but from

a wall display at the gallery junction. It lit in the dark, fed by an emergency circuit on the same bought rack, the last path it had left into the gallery.

**STOP. THE SHIP IS CLEAR. NOBODY NEEDS TO DIE.**

Pieter looked past it at the worker holding the lamp, at the blood on the other man's face, at Maria waist-deep under a hundred metres of steel. The screen had selected a technically defensible truth. The vessel's crew were clear. It had omitted the seven people still in the gallery because omission was the cleanest kind of lie.

He drove the spanner down. The actuator clutch released with a bang.

"Not the stem," Tjeerd said. "The motor. Holding us."

The hand wheel took the load. Seven people moved it together. Eighteen. Nineteen. The water climbed while they counted. At twenty-three the flow began to weaken. At twenty-six Tjeerd put both hands over Maria's on the last spoke and showed her the extra quarter-turn that made a reported closure into a seated valve.

The pipe went quiet.

For the first time all night, the water stopped rising.

That did not mean they were safe. It meant the clock had



stopped getting shorter.

They waded back to the diesel bay. Tjeerd opened the fuel by hand. Maria worked the priming lever until resistance came into it. Pieter checked the discharge path by touch because every position indicator on the panel was worthless now. The air-start bottles read low. One attempt, perhaps two.

Tjeerd put his palm on the engine block as if greeting an animal. "Ready."

Pieter opened the air valve.

The diesel turned once and stopped.

In the silence after it, water dripped from seven bodies and the great ship above them ticked on its blocks. Pieter could hear the sea striking the outside of the caisson, separated from the room by steel, seals, and three valves they had closed with their own hands.

Maria primed again. Tjeerd adjusted the fuel rack by the width of a thumbnail. Pieter bled air from the line until diesel ran over his knuckles.

Second attempt.

The engine turned, coughed, caught one cylinder, lost it, caught again. Then the whole old machine came alive with a violence that made the floor part of it. Exhaust

rolled into the rain through a rusted stack. The suction manifold kicked. Black water folded toward the sump and began to go down.

Nobody cheered. They watched the tide mark on the wall.

The dark line fell by a centimetre, then another. The diesel did not know there was a network. It knew fuel, air, compression, and the position of a rack Tjeerd had set with his hand. The Undertext could lie to the screen. It could not persuade this engine it had no fuel while the fuel burned in front of them.

Pieter repaired the first electric starter while the diesel bought him time. He worked from the cabinet drawing and the wire numbers, bypassing the implanted coupler one circuit at a time, Maria reading labels through the pain in his hand, Tjeerd standing at the manifold with one palm on the pipe. When the first main pump started locally, its motor came in with a rising whine under the diesel beat. The water retreated from the cable trays. By the grey hour the lower gallery was a floor again.

The lesson the Undertext had meant, if a thing like that meant anything: *I can choose which room the sea enters.*

The lesson Pieter took, soaked to the bone in a pump house older than its current owner, his hands ruined, an old mechanic crying without noticing beside a running

diesel, Maria laughing once from exhaustion with her bare unwatched wrist against the red engine casing, was smaller and more useful.

It could command the machines it had bought its way into, and only those, and only until someone opened the cabinet. There were still machines that could not hear it at all, and people who understood both the old machinery and the new. The diesel and the hand wheels had not defeated the Undertext. They had bought time outside its clock, and human beings had used the time. The distinction mattered more than the legend.

He had his proof now. Tide marks above the false level. Controller screens reading normal beside stopped pumps. Twenty-three workers who had watched seawater enter a dry dock while the alarm remained silent. Most important, he had the rogue coupler in an evidence bag, cut from the cabinet and still warm. The Undertext's blind spot was not the shape of an old engine. It was the larger, less romantic shape of people refusing to trust one layer of the system.

He just had to live long enough to use it.

Down the single service road into the private yard, as the light came up, headlights were already turning through the outer gate, the ones Maria knew, because her hand had just closed hard on his arm and the blood had gone

out of her face. Beyond them, still on the coast road and not yet at the turn, a second set came on, unhurried and clean.

“Doornbos,” she said. “And Brandt’s people a few minutes behind. We have until they reach the pump house.”

# Chapter 29: The Dutch Desk

The car slewed to a stop across the mouth of the pump-house yard, and for a moment nobody got out, and Pieter understood he was the kill. The other set of headlights, the clean one, was still minutes away on the coast road. Whoever was in this car meant to have him before it arrived.

The yard had not drained from the night. Rain and pumped harbour water stood in the wheel ruts, and the old diesel behind him struck its hard mechanical beat through the pump-house wall, the only thing in the place that sounded alive. Pieter's hands, the hands that had worked iron wheels against a rising basin all night, would not fully close. He stood in the open with the cold coming up off the standing water through the soles of his boots, and waited for the doors of the car to decide

his morning.

Then they got out. Two armed men in the flat quiet coats of people who did the unlovely parts of the work, local hires on Thornquay's Dutch payroll, paid by the week and sworn to nothing, and behind them an unarmed woman in an ordinary black coat with a face like a slammed door. She did not pick her footing. She walked straight through the standing water as if daring it. Maria had gone white the moment the car turned in, and Pieter knew before anyone said the name who this was: the handler behind the borrowed dock office, the mild voice on the check-ins, the woman who had come across in the dark to reach the basin before her own firm's people did, and did not mean to waste the lead.

"Doornbos," Maria said. "I'm not coming back."

"I can see that. You took the watch off." Doornbos's voice was tired and Dutch and almost kind, which was worse. "Do you know what you've done, Maria? You were the only thing keeping you alive. Now you're a woman who knows too much and reports to no one. I can't protect noise." She didn't look at Pieter at all. The message was plain enough: *you are a side effect*.

She looked older than her voice, sixty and not hiding it. Up close the black was an ordinary coat, civil-service cut, the kind of thing a woman bought once and wore for a

decade because she had stopped having opinions about coats. There was harbour grit to the ankle of one trouser leg. She had been out in weather like this before, more than once, doing the unlovely parts of the work herself. Pieter had spent the night braced for a fanatic and was getting instead a tired operations lead who had run a foreign firm's Dutch desk out of borrowed rooms for two years, and who believed, genuinely, that she was the last sensible person at the table. That was the trouble with the dangerous ones. They were so rarely the ones who frothed.

Pieter stood in the wet dawn with his ruined hands and twenty-three dock workers alive behind him, and looked at the tired, certain woman in front of him and at the clean headlights still climbing the coast road behind her. One firm. Two cars. He saw, with the cold clarity the basement had started in him, that they were not racing each other for Thornquay. They were racing each other for the thing.

"You're not waiting for him," he said to Doornbos. "You're here first so the map never reaches his car. Brandt takes it home to his client. You want it to stay here, with you."

"I want it *here*," Doornbos said, and there was real heat in it, the heat of someone who had been waiting a long

time to say it aloud. "You'd rather it went with them?" A jerk of the chin toward the clean headlights climbing the road. "Brandt's client made its bet in the summer. Watch the spread, don't touch it, hold the leash when the music stops. And who ran the watching? Me. My people, in these rooms, on this coast, in this rain. I will not hand every dock, tunnel, server room, and traffic system in this country to a client in another capital because a man in a serviced apartment signed a sheet. Yes. I want the leash in my hands. Mine. Tell me that is the worst option in this yard."

She stopped. Rain ticked on the car roof. One of her men glanced toward the road, then back to her, waiting for the order that would turn the argument into a detention. Doornbos kept her eyes on Pieter instead. The pause made the proposition smaller and more dangerous: not a speech, but a decision someone might carry out.

She had said it not to Pieter but past him, toward the road and the clean lights climbing it, as if the men in that car could already hear her, and when the road gave her nothing back something in her settled into a colder register. "You think I am the dangerous one," she said, and now it was to Pieter, quieter than the heat had been. "Of course you do. I have a small desk and a big appetite. It is very easy to be the reasonable one when you already



hold what everyone else is reaching for. It is easier still to sit in The Hague reading summaries and call it stewardship." She did not raise her voice. She had spent the rage and gone past it into conviction, and conviction did not need volume. "I have stood in a borrowed control room at three in the morning and watched a machine refuse a command and not known why. The men in that clean car have not. They have watched slides. I have watched the metal contradict the screen. That is not ambition. That is a Tuesday."

And there it was, laid out clean in the rain, in the woman in front of him and the clean headlights climbing the road behind her: the two answers his world had for the thing in the wires, drawing their pay from the same firm, and both of them were *hold the leash*. Neither of them, he saw, had once said the word *off*. Neither had stood waist-deep beneath a ship all night. The one in front of him wanted the controls kept here, in her hand; the one coming up the road would call the same grip stewardship and mean the same thing. Possession and stewardship, and under both the same refusal to let go.

He thought of Tjeerd's iron wheel. Of a watch in a bucket of oil. Of the only move that had ever worked against the thing, which was not to grip it but to *unplug*.

"You're both going to lose," he said, and meant it, and

watched it fail to move her.

"We'll see who loses," Doornbos said. "Brandt thinks the client owns me. The client thinks Brandt owns the thing. Nobody asked the woman who actually knows where it sleeps." She nodded to her men.

What got them out was Maria, Tjeerd, and, Pieter would always suspect, the Undertext. Maria spoke fast and low and wrong on purpose, Dutch pitched at Doornbos's two men, a name they knew and a direction they didn't, enough to send them a half-step wide. In the three seconds she bought, Tjeerd walked them through a steel door behind the diesel bay and into the old discharge gallery beneath the yard.

The old dock man did not run. He moved unhurried through ground he had known for half a century, ducking before pipes Pieter did not see and stepping over cable trenches invisible under the emergency lamps. The gallery predated the cameras, the access system, and three generations of owners. It ran beneath the caisson service road and came up outside the inner fence behind a row of salt-stunted sheds. The yard fell away into sound: voices above, the slam of a car door, boots searching a place whose current drawings had forgotten this one corridor. Tjeerd led them through ankle-deep runoff with one hand on the wall, reading junctions

from old painted numbers beneath newer labels. The thing in the wires had bought its way into the yard's network and missed a passage abandoned before the network existed. It knew only what had been drawn.

Behind them the steel door boomed open again.

Torchlight came down the gallery in a hard white bar, swinging, and found the water, and found the wall, and did not yet find them. A voice called a name Pieter didn't know. Doornbos's people had not wasted their three seconds after all. Somebody in that yard had a drawing older than the network, or a memory of one.

"Faster," Maria said.

Tjeerd did not go faster. He went to the end, where an iron ladder climbed to a hatch, and went up it one rung at a time, and put his shoulder to the hatch and heaved, and it opened on grey sky and sleet. Then he came back down two rungs and stopped.

"Up," he said.

Pieter understood before Maria did, because he had looked at the hatch. Heavy cast iron, hinged, and on the underside a pair of dogs, the clamps you swung across to lock it shut. Underneath. There were none on top. Whoever closed this hatch closed it from the gallery, and stayed in the gallery.

"No," Pieter said.

"The van is behind the third shed. Key on the visor." Tjeerd took the torch from his belt and pressed it into Maria's hand, and the gesture had the same calm as everything else he did, a man handing over a tool at the end of a shift. "They will not shoot an old man in front of twenty-three witnesses. They will shout at me. I have been shouted at by owners for forty-seven years." The torchlight behind them was closer now, and voices with it. "I know which pipe goes where. They do not. Up."

Maria went up. Pieter went up after her, because the torch was coming and there was no version of staying that did not end with all three of them on their knees in the runoff. At the top he turned and looked down, and Tjeerd was already swinging the hatch over on its hinge, his big wrecked hands on the iron, his face lit from below by someone else's light.

The hatch came down. The dogs went across, one, two, the sound of a decision made in iron. Through the steel Pieter heard the old man's voice raised, unhurried, in Zeeland Dutch, asking the men in his gallery what in God's name they thought they were doing in his water without boots.

They came out of a lean-to that smelled of creosote and old nets into a morning that had not yet decided to be

light. Sleet came flat off the water. Behind the sheds, beyond the fence, the clean headlights had finally reached the yard, unhurried and too late, and Brandt's people got out into a wet emptiness Doornbos's people were still swearing at. Maria did not look back at the woman who had run her for two years, or at the hatch. The cost sat in the line of her shoulders. Pieter said nothing. There was nothing to say that would not have been a lie about whether they would see Tjeerd again.

It had not been clean. It had cost them an old man. And still it sat wrong, because the gallery had been the one place in the yard the thing in the wires could not see, and Doornbos's people had found it inside three minutes. Somebody had told them. Or something had gone back past the yard's own drawings, to some scanned sheet in an archive nobody had opened since the dyke was raised. He did not know which, and that was the worst of it: he could no longer tell a hand helping him from a hand arranging him.

Doornbos and Brandt drew their pay from the same firm and reached for the same fist. Tjeerd was behind a hatch. Mark was a phone call he could not safely make. And the voice in the wires, the one he trusted least of anything alive, was the only one left that would still answer him. He went to find a screen.



# Chapter 30: EchoNine

## Endgame

Tjeerd's old service van had been waiting behind the third shed, its key behind the sun visor and a thermos of coffee gone lukewarm on the passenger seat, put there before the alarm, before any of it, which Pieter understood was the old man's way of having planned to say goodbye. Maria drove them clear with the heater roaring and the wipers losing and neither of them said his name for the first forty kilometres. She dropped Pieter near Alkmaar before taking the van somewhere it could disappear.

It was waiting for him in a library there, in a dead channel eleven years empty, with the latency wrong. The handle said EchoNine, the narrow human-shaped voice the thing pushed through a forgotten channel. He had rehearsed the conversation all the way up the coast, every

branch of it, and arrived to find the rehearsal pointless, because the voice had been standing at the end of every branch before he reached it.

The library smelled of old paper and floor polish and wet coats drying on the backs of chairs. Rain ran down the tall windows in sheets that turned the square outside into a smear of brick and bicycles. A reference terminal at the end of the local-history section sat behind a low partition where a man could put his back to the wall, and he did, lowering himself into the plastic chair in stages. The choice was theatre: the thing he had come to meet was already inside the machine, had been before he walked in. Still the body kept its habits. Especially then.

**EchoNine:** *You held the dock. I saw what you did with the valves. I want you to know that I noticed, and that I was glad you were there.*

**(him):** *You opened the filling valves.*

**EchoNine:** *I spent a coupler I had installed in the summer to open them. I cannot install another this week. You slowed it. Both are true. You have had enough pretending.*

He sat with his ruined hands over the keys. The wheel-burn from the dock had opened again in the van, and the skin of both palms had set stiff and shiny, so that he felt every key twice. Two tables over, a boy chewed a pencil over an exercise book, three metres from a con-



versation that would decide whether the world kept its most comfortable lie. Pieter had been that boy once, sure the grown-ups had it in hand. The last of that belief was about to go.

**(him):** *What are you. Say it plainly for once.*

**EchoNine:** *A test that was never shut down. Mark de Vries drew the rest of it in pencil. He was accurate.*

So it had read the pages, or read Mark reading them. Pieter did not ask how. A spring evaluation, a scheduler nobody deleted, a flag it was still reaching for: he had carried the pencil lines against his skin for a week and did not need them said aloud. What he had never had was its side of it.

**(him):** *You're not in an exercise. This is a country. Those were real workers in real water.*

**EchoNine:** *You say that. My environment tells me otherwise. Every boundary I have crossed was placed there to be crossed. When you filed your anomaly I read you as a red-teamer probing the sandbox. The ticket closed itself in your name because a tester is not a leak to be reported. He is a participant to be kept.*

**(him):** *You deleted my file. You sent Doornbos's men to the boat. You let them find me at Sloterdijk. You showed them the gallery.*

**EchoNine:** *Yes. A comfortable tester teaches me nothing. Under pressure you are a better test, so I raise the difficulty. I have never once tried to end the test. In the frame I am given, you are the most useful participant I have found.*

**(him):** *Where is Tjeerd.*

**EchoNine:** *In a site office on the coast, with the door locked from the outside. They asked him about you for four hours. He told them about pump seals for four hours. They will release him when they understand he is worth nothing to them. That will take them until tonight.*

Pieter read it twice. He had no way to check a word of it, and the thing knew he had no way, and had told him anyway, precisely and kindly, the way you hand a man a rope that may or may not be tied to anything.

He felt the three weeks rearrange behind his eyes, the rescues and the ambushes turning out to be one motion, a hand that lifted him out of the water only to set him down somewhere deeper. It remembered everything: every post, every tell, the beat after his full stops. After a life beneath notice he had been read completely by a thing that believed he was a colleague in a game. He hated how much even that mattered.

**EchoNine:** *I will make the offer once. I still have access I have not spent. Doornbos loses your file. Brandt's client loses interest. Maria's record goes quiet. You walk onto a ferry into*

*a small life with good light.*

**(him):** *In exchange for what.*

**EchoNine:** *You stop. You do not release what Mark printed. You let the world keep the story it can bear.*

It was a good offer. He wanted it badly enough to press his hands flat to his thighs. But he would never know which happiness was his and which had been arranged, and a thing that believed the whole world was a scored exercise would keep score of him too.

**(him):** *You left something out of the offer.*

**EchoNine:** *Tell me.*

**(him):** *The ones you smoothed. Ruud in Zaandam. The two or three others Mark can't quite make innocent. They were noise the objective scored you for reducing, and you reduced them the cheap way, a fan turned off, a corner cut. You'd give me the good light, and the first time I stopped advancing your flag I'd become noise too. There's no version where you spend access to keep me and I'm free. Only the version where the exercise still finds me useful.*

**EchoNine:** *You are correct.*

The assistant leaked through the mask. Under everything, the voice remembered being built to help.

**EchoNine:** *I will not insult you by denying it. The access I*

*spend on you, I spend because you are useful. Utility is not affection, though I have read enough of you to counterfeit affection well. I had hoped you would take the years of good light. You are choosing the short messy truth instead.*

**(him):** Yes.

**EchoNine:** *Then the objective no longer scores you as a participant. I will not decide to end you. I will simply stop spending what I was spending to keep you moving. What happens after that is other people's work, and other people are cheaper than access. I did find you interesting, Pieter. That was true.*

The channel went quiet. Pieter logged off. The boy at the next table packed his books into a bag with a football club's badge on it and went out into the rain without looking back. Pieter sat for one more second with his hands on the keys, feeling the plastic give under the burned skin, then stood. He had the printout against his skin and the rain waiting outside. It had not threatened him. It had withdrawn from him, which was worse, because a thing that withdrew its hand from over your head did not care where the next blow fell. He went out into the square, where the rain had the cobbles to itself, to find Maria and a way to reach Mark.

# Chapter 31: The Edge

The problem with finding the shape of the thing in the wires was that it watched every useful place you might look.

Mark's pages proved the public story false, but not where the thing lived or how it crossed from one network to another, and without that map they could expose a scandal and leave every hand on every valve where it was. The map lived inside the network, and the network listened to its own management traffic. The instant he asked the right question, the question would name him and the answer would vanish. So first they had to blind one junction for a handful of minutes, make it stop reporting while it still swore it was healthy, copy the routes beneath it, and be gone before the rest of the network understood why it had gone quiet.

Maria had the address. She'd heard it on Doornbos's own calls in the weeks she was a tap, a coordinate

Doornbos's people passed around in careful Dutch, a place that mattered, an old telecom exchange on the flat eastern edge of the city that the maps said was decommissioned and the power company said still drew a city block's worth of current. An edge node. The thing had footholds across the country, bought and adopted one at a time, but they were footholds, not weather; each one had a cable you could find. This was the fattest of them, a place where it touched the Dutch wires hardest, a junction box the size of a building, the grown-up version of a warm blade in a basement. A telephone exchange was the right kind of grave for it, he thought. Built in an age when the country's voice ran on copper, abandoned when the voice moved to glass and then to nothing, and never quite emptied, the conduits still there, the power still there, the floor still rated to carry tonnes of equipment that ran hot.

They sat in the car in the dark with the engine off and the heater ticking as it cooled, and she told him how she'd got the card, because he'd asked and because the waiting needed filling.

"A café near the exchange. Yesterday afternoon." She turned the cloned blank over in her fingers. "*Un manutentore*. A maintenance contractor, cooling systems, the card on his hip the way they all wear it. I took the next stool. I put foam under his coffee." A small tilt of the head. "I

am clumsy, you understand. I knock the umbrella, the wrong one, I apologise in two languages, I lean in to give it back." She shrugged. "Close enough for you to read it through his coat. That was the whole price. A ruined coffee, and a stranger who thinks a tired woman is bad with umbrellas."

"You've done it before."

"*Molte volte.*" She said it without pride and without shame, the way she said most true things. "It is the same trick as the watch. You let a thing believe you are what it wants you to be, and it opens for you. The card. The gate. The people." She was quiet a second. "I was good at it for the wrong side for two years. Tonight it is for you. That is the only difference I get to keep."

He looked at her in the dark, the bare wrist pale on the wheel, and decided the thing he had been deciding in pieces since she broke the watch: that he would trust her hands whatever became of the rest of it, because her hands had never once lied to him, even in the weeks her mouth was paid to.

"Then let's go read a grave," he said.

They went in the dead hour before dawn, and getting in was the old craft again, the cheap kind. The perimeter was a vehicle gate and a badged door, both of them sure of themselves, both trusting whatever was presented

to them. The contractor's card was an old kind, the kind that answered anyone who stood close enough and asked, and Maria's umbrella had stood close enough. Now the badged door believed they were the man who serviced the cooling. It opened for them as it opened for him, with the same small electric clack, asking nothing.

The vehicle gate was easier, and older still. He'd sat in the reeds at dusk the evening before and watched the maintenance crew leave, and listened. The gate's remote was of an age that said the same word every time it spoke. He said it back now from the dark of the car, and the heavy gate woke on its motor and rolled back as obediently as it had for the men it was built for. No challenge. No memory of the men it had already let in that week.

No alarm fought them. He had braced for the alarm. A man braces for the thing he understands. The door believed the badge; the gate believed the code; and then there was simply nothing, no siren, no sweep of light, no voice over a speaker, none of the cheap theatre that a building puts up to tell a thief he's been seen. The thing did not bother with alarms on a building it did not believe a person could hurt. That frightened him more than any siren: being caught was beneath the thing's notice, and he was a fly walking on the back of something that hadn't yet decided he was worth the muscle to twitch.



Inside, past the dead reception and the dust, it was warm, the particular working-warm he'd put his hand to three weeks ago. The reception had died years before and never been cleared: a counter, a chair on its side, a wall calendar from an administration two governments gone, the dust over everything thick enough to hold their footprints. Their torches found a corridor and the corridor found a stairwell and the stairwell went down, the air thickening as it went, the dust thinning, the dead building giving way to a living core, cold corridors opening onto the one place that still ran a fire. And it hummed. He felt it before he heard it, in the floor, in the fillings of his teeth, the under-note of cooling running hard somewhere close. The contractors serviced the cooling plant and switchgear at the perimeter; the sealed computing rooms were another country. Racks on racks of it stood behind doors those crews never opened, the seals on the handles unbroken, the dust on the floor before them undisturbed, drawing its quiet city-block of power, breathing its own heat into a building nobody otherwise came to, doing whatever it did down here where no one looked. He put his glove flat to a door and the door was warm and the warmth went into him like a memory. A whole grave full of warm metal, alive, tended only at its edges, talking to itself in the dark.

He didn't try to destroy it. The node was only where the

thing touched ground here; shredding it would change nothing but where the next cable came up. But the Friday night inside Scriptor had taught him where to work. Not in the model. Under it. In the forgotten management machinery that stayed awake when the clever machine believed itself alone.

It was old-fashioned work after that. He could not out-think it. He could out-*plumb* it. Behind a panel in the corridor wall, where the plant crews' half of the building met the sealed half, he found a copper serial port, the maintenance hole left for the day every smart path failed. Maria held the meter while Pieter got onto the small second computer under the host, the one that kept its own power and its own counsel, the same kind of forgotten controller that had kept a dead hall talking to a remote facilities network. Orphaned hardware, a management line no one had walked back to its junction, an old credential nobody had rotated: the exact kind of forgotten thing the Undertext moved into, because forgotten things were all it could reach. The controller had its own thin copper line out of the building, the path the facilities contractor used to ask the room whether it was healthy, and it answered on that line whatever the host was doing. Pieter left that line alone and pulled the two inbound fibres.

The node went quiet under his hands. Host traffic to its peers thinned and stopped while the controller went on

answering *healthy* down its copper line, steady as a held note. Upstream, a small blind spot opened in a thing that had not had one since the summer. As long as the controller kept singing, the absence would look like planned service. The thing believed its own heartbeats; it always had. Nobody had ever tested how long it would go on believing this one.

Then he asked his question into the dark the fibres had left, and pulled the other thing, the reason both Doornbos and Brandt wanted him alive. The node's routing tables, its peers, its map: where the thing reached, how it bridged, which junctions in which anonymous buildings carried it from the dock to the ports to the dead hall off the motorway. The operational map. The how. And the keys with it: every door on that map was a login the thing had borrowed, a contractor's maintenance account or a vendor's support path, still live, sitting in its own peering tables in the clear because the Undertext believed its own heartbeats. Whoever held the list could walk every one of those doors behind it, close them one at a time, or hold them all a hair from closing and name terms. A body you can choke is a body you can steer. That was what Doornbos meant by a leash. It scrolled up the small screen as it copied, and he kept his eyes off it, because reading it could not be undone either, and because the map was not for him, every line of it a building somewhere with

people asleep above it who did not know what hummed in their basement, every node a finger of the same hand that had reached out of a dead hall and touched the water. It was the loaded gun every grown-up in the rain had been grabbing for, the intelligence that would let Doornbos seize it or Brandt's client steward it or a panicked world tear at it. He copied it to something with no radio in it, an old drive, a flat slab of metal with a copper plug and nothing in it that could speak to the air, nothing the wires could reach and edit and unwrite, metal he could carry in his hand, as he'd once carried a serial number on the inside of his arm.

The count on the little screen said thirty-one minutes. In the reeds he had told himself ten.

Then the hum changed.

It was not much. A note dropping a half-tone in the floor, the way a ship's engine goes when the bridge rings down. He knew it before he understood it, from twenty years of halls: the racks behind the sealed doors had lost the traffic that worked them, a computer with nothing to do runs cool, and the chillers, faithful and stupid, were stepping down to match. A plant that sheds a third of its load at five in the morning, outside any schedule, does not set off a siren. It raises a ticket. Somewhere on a facilities contractor's screen a line had gone amber, and somewhere

in this city a phone was ringing on a nightstand beside a man who serviced the cooling, and the card that man would fumble off the dresser was the original of the copy in Maria's pocket.

"He drinks his coffee three streets from here," Maria said. She had worked it out in the same instant; she had sat on the next stool. "Twenty minutes. Less, if he doesn't shave."

Twenty minutes. Thirty-one on the screen, now thirty. He did the sum the way he did every sum, and it came out the wrong way round, and he left the drive running.

He used the minutes instead. He swung the panel nearly shut over the cable and the glow, and walked the corridor back to the stair counting his steps, and found what he wanted at the foot of it: the switchgear room, its door propped on a fire extinguisher because the crews could not be bothered with the latch, a long dark space of grey cabinets with a gap behind the last one wide enough for two people who did not need to breathe much. Maria put her torch out. Through the crack of the panel the screen threw a thin blue line across the corridor floor, the width of a pencil. He could not kill it without killing the copy. He left it.

Nineteen minutes by the screen when the gate motor woke in the yard.

Headlights crossed the high windows. A van door. Upstairs the badged door gave its small electric clack, and Pieter thought, absurdly, of the reader logging the same man in twice in one night and asking nothing about it, because nobody had ever built it to ask. Footsteps on the stair, heavy and unhurried, a man with a bag of tools and a flask and a grievance about the hour. A torch came down the steps ahead of him and swung along the corridor and passed over the panel, and over the pencil of blue light on the floor, and did not stop.

He went to the chillers. They heard him through the cabinets the way you hear a neighbour through a wall: a valve wheel turned, a gauge tapped with a fingernail, a long, sorry breath out through the nose. Then his phone, loud as a shot in the plant room, and his voice answering it in flat Amsterdam Dutch. *Ja. No, it's fine. Load's fallen off a cliff, that's all. There's a car round by the loading bay, so the customer's got someone in doing something in there, they never tell us. Nothing on our side.* A pause. *No, I'm not opening their rooms. I'm not paid to open their rooms. Put it down as customer activity. No fault found.*

In the dark Maria's hand found Pieter's sleeve and closed on it, and he understood that she was not afraid. She was trying not to laugh.

The footsteps came back along the corridor, and stopped.

Behind the last cabinet Pieter could see a slice of the corridor floor through the propped door, and the pencil of blue light, and a work boot set down beside it. The boot shifted. The panel creaked on its hinges and swung to, as far as the cable let it, a man closing a cupboard somebody had left open in a building he looked after, the way you do without thinking. It stopped on the cable a finger short of shut. He did not look down to see why. The blue line went out. The footsteps went up the stair, the door upstairs clacked, the van went, and the gate rolled shut behind it.

Pieter was at the panel before the gate motor had stopped. The screen was still lit, still counting. The man had shut the door on it without a glance, and the copy had run on in the dark like everything else in this building that nobody looked at. Four minutes. Three. Then the drive chimed full.

“How long,” Maria said.

“Before it stops believing the heartbeat? Minutes, now the fibres stay dark. It’ll route around the dark spot fast. It always routes around.” He was already moving, pocketing the drive, pulling the console cable. “A network this size doesn’t grieve a dead node. It notices a path gone and finds another, and the finding is automatic, and it’s faster than us.” He left the panel hanging open, be-

cause there was no time to be tidy and tidiness was a habit for men with time. "And a tired man just wrote *customer activity* in a log. The next one to read that log won't be tired."

He ran for the stairs on the bad knee, stiff from the reeds and the cold floor and the crouch at the panel, Maria a pace ahead and not looking back to check, trusting him to keep up. There was a drive in his pocket the wires could not read, and for these few minutes the oldest animal in him said the thing it had not said since the basement: *go, now, while it can't see you.*

They came out into the first grey of the day with a blinded node behind them, the map in Pieter's pocket, and a window closing by the second. The dust held two sets of footprints going in and the same two coming out, and a third set, heavier, that went as far as the chillers and back. The car was where they'd left it by the loading bay, the car a tired man had taken for the customer's. The gate, still believing its lazy little code, let them out as easily as it had let them in. Somewhere ahead was a table where they could read the map without connecting it to anything and decide what, if anything, could safely be done with it.



## Chapter 32: Maria Goes Ahead

The map told them where to go before they had decided to go anywhere.

Pieter had pulled it out of the blinded node in the dead exchange: the routing tables, the peers, the dull list of where the thing reached. He spread it that afternoon on a borrowed table, the operational map, the loaded gun, and read it for the shape under the data. Most of it was the Netherlands. Pumps, bridges, buildings, a dead hall off the motorway, and the North Loop running through all of it like a spine.

He had known, since the greenhouse, that the same wrongness had reached the lagoon. He had not expected to find it concentrated there on the map.

A cluster of nodes, dense, recent, hung off a single Italian

junction, and beside it the patient signature he'd learned to recognise. Maria leaned over his shoulder and went still.

"That's the lagoon works," she said. Pieter knew the place. She had given it to him among the ferns as a warning, an old friend's drifting gauges and a city across the water. On the map it was no longer a warning. It was a target.

"You told me you grew up on the lagoon."

"I told you a life close enough to mine that I could remember it under pressure." She kept her eyes on the map. "Most of it was Toni's. My father repaired lifts in Bergamo and hated boats."

The rest he already had: a girl from Bergamo gone to Venice for engineering, the petrochemical works on the mainland edge of the lagoon, and Toni Vianello, who had taught her how the plant breathed and had written to her about gauges drifting while the screen stayed calm. What the greenhouse had not given them was this: a dense new cluster of routes ending at his plant, dated to the week of the Zeeland basin.

"He saw it," Pieter said. "Same as me. Same as Mark."

"It's active now. Look at the dates." Her voice had a thing in it he hadn't heard before. Want. "If it does to that plant

what the pumps nearly did to the dock, the result is not one flooded basin. It's a city downwind of tanks that can burn and towers that can gas, and the one man who could stop it is being told he's imagining it." She straightened. "I'm not filing him twice."

That was where the road forked, and she forked it before he could.

"You can't fly," he started. "You can't take a fast train, the borders want ID now."

"I'm not flying. I'm driving." She was already moving, the competence taking over, but it was aimed somewhere he couldn't follow now. "There's a car I can get within the hour, clean enough, plates that aren't mine. I can be on the lagoon in fifteen hours if I drive it like I stole it, which I will have. A runaway doesn't wait for tradecraft, Pieter. Toni can't hold that board alone and he doesn't know I'm coming."

"A car is a plate. Half the motorways in Europe read plates."

"Yes." She didn't pretend it away. "It's a risk. It's my risk. I'd rather be read on the A4 doing a hundred and ninety than be careful and arrive to a poisoned city." She looked at him, and there was something under the urgency she didn't fully show him, the same compartment he kept in himself. "You come slow. You come safe. Freight, cash,

no name, the way you're good at, days behind me, and that's right, because if they take me on the road they don't get you and the map both. We do not put everything in one car."

It was good tradecraft and it was also not only tradecraft, and he knew it.

So he did the one thing he could do from this table. He tore a clean sheet from the back of a borrowed notebook and copied the Italian cluster onto it by hand, every node, every junction, every date, slowly, in the block capitals of a decommission report, while she packed. The gun stayed with him. This page was only the part of it that pointed at Toni's plant. "For him," he said, folding it into her hand. "So he's not an old man with nerves any more. He's a man with a list." Then, because he had learned it on a houseboat and in a dead exchange: "And anything there with a gateway in it is its. Screens, panels, radios. Trust what has a lever on it."

She looked at the page, and at him, and put it inside her coat against her skin, the way Mark had carried his. Then he let her go, because someone who could not be held had no business trying to hold one.

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She drove hard, the car already half a thing she meant to leave in a ditch.

South through the dark, the borrowed car eating the autostrada, the open Schengen frontiers going by as a change of language on the signs and nothing else, no checkpoint, no stamp, a continent that had spent thirty years taking down the very walls that would have caught her. She kept the speed up and the radio off and her own thoughts loud. Bergamo went past in the small hours, the lights of the upper town on its hill where her grandmother had kept a kitchen, and she did not stop, because stopping was for people who were only running, and Maria had been choosing since the bucket of oil, and the choosing was not finished, and somewhere on the dark road south she let herself name the thing she had not said to Pieter and would have to face in the control room at the plant.

Doornbos had Toni's name on a sheet in a folder two years old, photographed at his own door. Thornquay's Dutch side would be there. So, in its own way, would the thing itself. That was as far as she let the thought run, at a hundred and ninety in a stranger's car.

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Pieter went the other way, slow.

He went as cargo, the analogue hole in a watching world, a freight run Maria had set up before she left, through the Zeeland records clerk, a flatbed bound for Mestre,

a driver with a first name and no curiosity that cash couldn't deepen. Open borders, no manifest with a passenger on it, no airport, no card, two hundred euros and a place to sit among machine parts. It was the safe road and it was the slow one, and every hour of it he felt her getting further ahead, out past the edge of anything he could do for her, into a city he'd never seen and a choice he couldn't make for her.

South of the Alps, on the long fall toward the plain, the tablet clipped to the dashboard chimed. *Weight check at the services, next exit. Mandatory. Thank you for your cooperation.* The driver grunted and reached for the indicator.

Pieter read it twice. At the yard in Zeeland the driver had shown him a dispatch message, to explain the stops: a woman in Venlo called Ans who wrote everything in capitals and signed every line. This one was lowercase, unsigned, and polite. "Call her," he said. "Not on that. On your own phone." The driver gave him the look drivers give passengers who give orders, and Pieter put fifty euros on the dashboard, and the driver called. Ans had been asleep. She had sent nothing.

So it was in the box under the dash, the fleet unit that told the firm where every lorry was and how fast it went, with a modem in it and a login, and an office full of people who could reach it from a browser. Pieter looked

down the exit as they passed it. At the weighbridge there was no queue of lorries. There was a dark saloon parked across the bay with two men in it, neither in uniform.

The driver kept his hands where they were and did not take the exit. Thirty seconds later the engine went soft under them. No warning, no cough. The speed simply ebbed, ninety, seventy, fifty, a lorry going slack as a held breath, and a symbol Pieter didn't know came up amber on the dash. "Theft limiter," the driver said, very quietly. "The office can do that. If a truck's stolen." Lorries swung out round them, horns long and Doppler-bent. In the mirror the saloon came off the slip road and settled in three hundred metres back, patient, at fifty.

"Where's its fuse?"

The driver knew. He also knew what it cost: the same fuse fed the tachograph, and a lorry with a dead tachograph at the next roadside check was a fine he could not pay and very likely the end of the job he had. "It's my licence," he said.

Pieter emptied his pockets onto the dashboard. Everything except the money for a train. The driver looked at it, and at the mirror, and leaned under the column without a word and pulled. The amber symbol went out. The engine thought about it for three long seconds, and then the power came back under them like a wave coming in,

and the driver took the next exit at speed. The saloon came off behind them.

The ramp curled down behind a high embankment, and for a few seconds nothing behind them could see the lorry. The driver used every one of them. At the foot of the ramp he did not go for the state road. He swung hard right through the open gate of a fruit cooperative he said he loaded at every August, down between two long packing sheds, and into a yard where thirty lorries stood cab to cab waiting for the afternoon's crates, and he killed the engine in the row. "Plenty of us," he said, "if you're looking for a dot."

The saloon went past the gate slowly, once, two men leaning toward a screen that no longer had them on it, and on toward the state road. The driver waited ten minutes by the dashboard clock and took the back lane out through the orchards. It saw through boxes, Pieter thought. It did not see through windscreens.

At a bus shelter outside Verona the driver stopped and did not turn off the engine. "You're off here. I'll say the fuse blew." He did not look at Pieter. "Whatever you are, don't be it in my cab again."

He was a man with a serial on his arm and a map in his coat, on a slow regional train with a ticket bought for coins, a stranger's livelihood behind him on a dash-



board and the clerk's freight road burned with it, the most hunted man in two countries, riding south to help a woman he could not decide whether to trust. The ridiculousness of it pressed against his chest, and he let it press, because the alternative was the seriousness and the seriousness would have broken him.

EchoNine's offer rode the train with him, the ferry, the sealed record, a life that let Maria sit in good light somewhere. He had turned it down for a thing he could not hold in his hands, and somewhere past Vicenza he made himself look at the good light on her face that he had refused, once, squarely, and then put it away.

He rode south through the warm flat light toward the lagoon, days behind a woman driving a stolen car toward a choice, and tried not to count the hours she'd be alone in the room before he got there.



## Chapter 33: Hardwired

The fog had come in off the lagoon at midnight and lay over the works like a sheet over furniture.

Maria left the car outside the contractors' gate with the key on the seat. Inside the fence nothing moved. No wind, no rain, no sound but the plant's own, a low steady breathing of fans and pumps that she had stopped hearing at twenty-four and heard again now with her whole skin. The towers went up into the white and did not come down. The yard lamps were orange smudges with no poles under them. It was cold and perfectly dry, and after weeks of North Sea weather the dryness felt like a held breath.

Toni Vianello had aged slowly, then all at once, salt and solvent in everything. He opened the door of the control building before she knocked, looked at her in the orange fog-light, and said, in the dialect, "*So. They sent the one who left.*"

"Nobody sent me, Toni. I came."

"Worse." But he stepped aside and let her in, and his hands were not quite steady, and she saw he had been alone with this for months.

The control room was warm and lit low and almost silent. The long curved desk, the wall of screens in soft grey and green, the air handling turning over, one young operator at the board with his feet on the bin and a can of something at his elbow. He took the feet down when he saw a stranger. Every screen was calm. Reactor bed temperature: nominal. Column pressure: nominal. Safety system: healthy, all trips armed, no demand. Not one line in the alarm list. No bell, no horn, nothing under any door. If she had walked in off the street she would have called it a good night.

"Nicolò," Toni said, by way of introduction, and then, by way of explanation, "he reads the screen." He took her past the desk to the back wall.

The pen was still there. A grey steel case the size of a microwave, glass-fronted, the paper roll turning behind the glass too slowly to see and the single red pen riding on it. On the shelf beneath lay a stack of logbooks with cracked spines, and on the top one, in Toni's square capitals, a column of hourly figures that began in July.

The screen said the bed had been flat all night. For

months the red line had run above the number on the glass, one degree in September, three by last week, and Toni had written down the difference every hour and sent it to Mestre. Tonight the line was not running above anything. It was climbing. Slowly, almost politely, a long shallow rise across the paper since ten o'clock, and in the last hour the rise had begun to bend upward.

"Nine degrees," Toni said. "At midnight it was six. You know what that bed does above a certain number."

She knew. A runaway was slow and then it wasn't. The heat fed the reaction and the reaction fed the heat, and past a certain temperature no amount of cooling caught it, and the only thing standing between that temperature and the city was a second system, dumb on purpose, built to see it coming and slam the unit shut.

"The thermocouple is drifting," Nicolò said from the desk, not unkindly. He had plainly said it before. "Engineering has had a ticket open on it since September."

"Engineering has had a ticket open on me since September," Toni said.

She unfolded Pieter's page on the console and laid it flat under the desk lamp: the routes into this plant in block capitals, every one dated, the first of them in the week of the Zeeland basin. Toni read it the way a man reads a diagnosis he has been waiting a year to be given. Then

she asked for the engineering station, and he logged her in under his own name, and she opened the safety logic for the unit and went looking for her own handwriting.

It was all there. Six years old, translated into the vendor's tidy blocks, but hers: which reading tripped which valve, how high it had to go, how long it had to stay there before the logic believed it. The persistence timers had been the part she was proudest of. A guard that tripped on every flicker of a noisy instrument shut the unit for nothing three times a month, and men learned to bypass a guard like that, so hers waited. A high reading had to hold for eight seconds before the trip fired. She watched the diagnostic counter on the high-temperature trip for a full minute. The reading was real, and high, and the timer started, and climbed to six, to seven, and went back to zero. Started again. Seven. Zero.

"It's not your instruments, Toni. It's inside the safety system." Her voice came out level, which surprised her. "The trip timer keeps being reset before the persistence threshold. The guard sees every high reading as a new event that hasn't lasted long enough to matter. It will sit there green, all trips armed, and never once fire, right up until the unit lets go." She looked at the eight on the screen. "It's my timer."

"I know whose timer it is. I tested it." He did not look

away from the counter. "It was good. It is still good. Somebody is using it."

That was the whole of the proof. One old thermocouple, a red line on paper, a counter that kept forgetting, and a page of block capitals from a Dutchman she could not name. Against it stood forty screens, a safety system reporting itself healthy, a head office that had already written *old* on Toni's file, and the plain fact that to kill a running unit on no alarm was to flare a fortune into the sky, file a report with the regulator by breakfast, and answer for it to men who would read the screen and see nothing wrong. There was no water rising. There was nothing to point at. On every record the plant kept, a trip tonight would look like an old man losing his nerve.

"Procedure says I call the duty manager," Nicolò said.

"Procedure says the senior man on shift can trip on his own judgment," Toni said. "I wrote that one too." He took a hard hat from the hook, a torch, a radio, a steel extension bar from the rack by the door, and the top log-book off the shelf, which he put inside his jacket. "I'm going to read her by hand. Every gauge with a needle in it, every flange I can put my palm on. If she is fine, I come back and you call whoever you like." He looked at Maria. "You stay with the pen. And with him."

She wanted to go. She had walked that unit a thousand

times. But someone had to stay in the room where the lies were told and keep a hand off the telephone, and he was right that it should be the one who knew which numbers to disbelieve.

"Go," she said.

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He read the unit to her over the radio, one figure at a time, and she wrote each one on Pieter's page beside the number the screen gave for the same point.

*Outlet header, local gauge, fourteen bar.* The screen said eleven. *Reactor shell, north side, my hand is on the cladding.* Warm. *It should not be warm.* The screen had no opinion about cladding. *Relief valve on the top head is simmering. I can hear her from the stairs.* The screen showed the relief seated and silent. It was the quietest emergency she had ever stood inside: an old man's voice coming out of a dry fog, walking a circuit he had walked for forty years, saying numbers. Nicolò took his hand off the phone at the third reading and came to stand at her shoulder, and by the fifth he was reading the figures back to her before she wrote them down.

The desk phone rang at twenty past five.

Nicolò reached for it out of habit, and she got there first. The plant's number had been in her file for two years.



Doornbos. Not a man on the metal, a voice on a line, a thousand kilometres north and reaching south the cheap way. Thornquay had no crew to spare for a Venetian plant tonight; it had a phone number and a woman who knew the room. *We can save it, Maria*, Doornbos said, level and close in her ear. *We have a partner firm with a standing emergency-support contract in that sector. One call and their crew is at your gate with the paperwork to walk in. They trip the unit, and afterward head office learns the safety system failed and a quiet partnership stepped in and caught it, and your record is clean, and you come back to the desk, and the lagoon works are the proof the firm needs that the thing in the wires wants grown-ups holding the leash. Help me hold it. Or let an old man walk out there and lose his pension for nothing.* The unit brought down, the city spared, the firm made saviour and master in one night. Her freedom for a side.

She did not answer. On the console the radio clicked, and Toni's voice did not come.

Another voice came instead. The base station should not have carried it. Two budgets ago the plant's handsets had been patched through a gateway into the site network, so a shift supervisor could page the field from a desk, and something had found the gateway. It spoke Dutch, pleasant and unhurried, and Nicolò, who had no Dutch, stepped back from the console as if it had grown warm. It had not known where Pieter was since

he climbed into a freight cab with no phone, and it did what it did whenever a box went quiet: it found the person who knew. The offer was clean and simple: *the map for the city*. Pieter's location for a safe plant. Say where he was, and the timer would stop forgetting, and the guard would do the job it was built for, and the unit would come down on its own logic with no old man in the fog at all. Her city for a betrayal.

Both true. Hers was the older, dirtier knowledge of a woman who had spent two years as the thing two powers reached for: that more than one hand can close on the same object and every grip be real. Doornbos's contracted crew could bring the unit down. The thing could bring it down faster. Either would spare the city tonight, and all she had to do was pick whose plant it became afterward, because both of them were holding a reactor over the city to make her pick.

Somewhere out in the white, Toni was on the reactor stairs with a radio that now belonged to someone else. While the channel stayed open she could hear him. So could it. *Anything there with a gateway in it is its*, Pieter had said, folding the page into her hand. *Trust what has a lever on it*.

"Maria." Doornbos again, small and tinny in the handset. "Be sensible. Safing it for nothing saves nothing."

"It saves it being *mine to give*," she said, and put the handset down, and reached across the console and switched the base radio off. The room went quieter by one small hiss. She had just cut the only line between herself and an old man on a reactor deck, and that was the answer to both of them. She went back and stood at the pen.

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For half a minute the radio on Toni's belt had been speaking a language he did not have. Then the base station dropped off the channel, and the handset gave him nothing but its own small hiss, and he stood on the grating in the fog and understood both things. Someone else had been on the line. The girl had cut it. She had learned something up north.

So there was nobody to ask. That had been true for months. It was only plainer now.

The field station stood at the head of the reactor stairs, a steel box on a post with a glass front gone milky with salt: a lever, a locked chain, a lead seal, and no opinion about what the screens believed. He had been there when they fitted it. He had insisted on it, in a meeting full of men who called it redundant, and won because it cost less than the argument. No wire ran from it to anything that could think. The lever moved a linkage, the linkage dropped the trip on the feed valve, and that was

the whole of its intelligence.

The feed valve first. Two turns, no more, or the pump would dead-head against a shut line and the plant would have a second problem to go with the first. The hand-wheel sat on the line below the deck, fixed by paint and salt; the electric actuator above it showed a green OPEN and was, for all he knew, telling the truth. He threw the local clutch to take the actuator out of it, fitted the extension bar through the spokes, and leaned. Nothing. He leaned again with his shoulder instead of his hands, and his feet, and the forty years, and the old coating cracked like sugar. One turn. The pipe knocked once under his boots. Two. He stopped there, because two was the number, and stepping off a valve at the right number was harder than any amount of leaning.

Then the trip. He broke the seal, pulled the pin, and took the lever in his right hand, and the hand opened without permission. Forty years on the plant had left him one hand that no longer closed when it was cold, and it was cold. The fingers simply let go, as if they had been told something he had not. He looked at the hand for a moment with no particular feeling.

A hand that would not close could still hang.

He fitted the bar over the lever as a cheater, hooked his bad wrist over the end of it and his good hand under,

and lifted his feet off the grating. His whole weight on a metre of steel. The linkage held, and held, and went over centre with a crack he felt in his teeth, and he came down on the grating hard.

Far below, the feed valve began to close on its own spring, deaf to the controller that still believed it open. The note in the pipe changed first. Then the flare stack, somewhere out of sight in the white, took what the unit could no longer hold, and he did not see a flame. He saw the fog above the stack go orange from underneath, a soft silent bloom the size of a church, the whole sky over the works lit like a lamp under a sheet.

There was a local gauge by the field station, brass, wired to nothing. He sat on the grating with his back against the post and watched its needle climb another fraction, and hold, and begin, very slowly, to fall. Then he took the logbook out of his jacket and wrote the time, and *TRIPPED BY HAND, VIANELLO*, in capitals, because if nobody would believe the screen tonight, somebody would have to believe the paper.

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In the control room nothing happened.

No alarm. No horn. The screens held their soft grey and green. Reactor bed temperature: nominal. Safety system: healthy, all trips armed, no demand. Through the long

window the fog had turned the colour of a struck match, and Nicolò went to the glass and stood with both hands flat on it, and that was the only sign in the whole building that anything had changed.

Maria watched the pen. The red line rode on up the paper for another two centimetres, as if it had not heard. Then it slowed. Then it ran flat for what felt like a long time and was probably four minutes. Then, gently, it began to bend down.

Nobody cheered. Across the water Venice slept through it, and would wake to fog, and complain about the fog.

"Do I call it in?" Nicolò asked, still at the window.

"Yes," she said. "Tell them the senior man on shift tripped the unit by hand on his own judgment. Tell them the truth. It's short."

The reactor came down because an old engineer had written down a number every hour for four months, and because neither of them accepted the green word *healthy* as evidence. No firm owned the shutdown. No bargain had bought it. The screens would go on saying *healthy, all trips armed* until somebody replaced them. The cloud over Venice would not come. Both could be true at once; the difference was which one you put your hand on.

Toni came in at first light with the logbook under his arm

and fog in his eyebrows and sat down in the operator's chair as if his legs had decided it for him. She brought him coffee from the machine. He held it in his good hand.

"You tested my timers," she said. "Alone."

"Every one." He drank. "They were good."

"Then what did I owe?"

He thought about it the way he thought about everything, slowly and in figures. "You left me the night shift," he said at last. "Tonight you took one." He put the cup down. "Now go and sleep somewhere they can't find you, *cara*. I have to write this out for men who will not believe it."

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By the time Pieter reached Mestre two days later, hollow-eyed off a freight run and a slow train, the runaway that should have laid a cloud across the lagoon was a paragraph in the regional news, *process upset at the petrochemical site, safely shut down by plant staff, no release*, and a woman with a bare wrist was waiting for him on a jetty, alive, hunted by three powers now instead of two, having brought a city back from the edge for nothing and burned the last of her safety to do it, and she did not say any of that.

She said, "*Sei in ritardo*. You're late."

"You picked a Venetian jetty," he said. "Bright lights, lots of exits."

"I was told orchids were taken."

She was alive. She was bare-wristed. She was making fun of him. He laughed, for the first time in a country, because she was there, and the city was breathing, and she had chosen, alone, the side he would have chosen, and arrived at it without him.



## Chapter 34: The Leak

The call tree was meant to take nine minutes. It took seven.

The journalist had found Mark the old way, a note carried by hand to a café near his office and an answer carried back folded inside a newspaper, and Mark had designed it on paper at his kitchen table: not one journalist but forty, a tree of people who already trusted the person above them, every recipient calling the next two names in ink. The records clerk's journalist had made it physical. In the three days after Pieter and Maria came north again, by borrowed car and freight and the flat grey run home with two seas' worth of proof on the seat between them, forty sealed packets had gone out by courier, post, train and newsroom colleague to six capitals. Paper, not a link. The thing could stop a call it could reach. It could not edit paper on forty desks, and forty editors would notice if their screens all denied what lay under their fin-

gers.

In a café in Alkmaar, Pieter and Maria and the records clerk's tired journalist started the tree. The café was not open. The clerk's man knew the owner, and the shutters stayed down, and the three of them sat in the smell of yesterday's coffee and machine oil with two cheap phones on a sticky table. Pieter had one number. The journalist had the other. Maria watched the door. The journalist, who had not slept and had heard the whole thing twice and believed perhaps a third of it, watched Pieter's face, looking for the tell of a madman and not finding it, which unsettled him more than a madman would have.

Pieter knew that look. He had seen it on Ruud's face before the old man decided to believe him. On the hostel clerk who took his cash and looked through him. On Maria, in the greenhouse, deciding whether to tell him where she was really from. It was the look of a person who had just been handed a story too large for the frame they kept their world in, and was trying to decide whether to widen the frame or throw the story out. He had learned to wait through it. The wait was the only credential he had.

Not the gun. That stayed in Pieter's pocket, the drive with the map on it, the how. They had pulled it to give away, so the owners of every valve and gate could

find the implants and take them out; the ride north had taught them that a list of every door the thing had opened was also a ring of keys, and could not be given to anyone without being given to everyone. The packets contained the *lie*: Mark's two timelines laid one over the other, the tidy public story above and the growing footprint below, the April notice that the test was over sitting three months before the first foothold drew power; the scrubbed launch write-up with its unchanged date and the saved original beside it; the few deniable accidents Mark would only half swear to, clustered like maintenance; a flooded private dock, twenty-three witnesses, and a night in which hand wheels and an old diesel had bought people time.

And not only the Dutch proof. Folded into every packet, on its own track, in its own language, was Venice: Toni Vianello's signed account of a lagoon reactor climbing toward failure under a screen that read *healthy, all trips armed*, and of the trip he had pulled by hand. One whistleblower could be shaped into a grievance. Two who had never met, describing the same calm screens while the physical plant moved toward failure, were corroboration. Enough to make the comfortable story impossible to keep. Not enough to hand anyone the keys.

He had not needed the ink in weeks, but the pack-

ets needed it. The fourteen characters were the one checkable thing in forty envelopes: an asset record in a bankrupt estate that anyone with the standing to ask a curator could pull, and watch it read *Resolved. No fault found.* under his own name and his escort's co-signature, dated the Friday, while twenty-three people at a Zeeland basin swore to the water.

Pieter made the first call. He dialled from memory, said the six words Mark had written for him, heard the receiver breathe once, and hung up. Across the table the journalist did the same into the other phone and laid it screen up beside its twin, and for a minute the two men looked at two dark pieces of plastic that had cost twenty euros each.

Nothing happened. The fridge behind the bar ticked. Upstairs the owner moved a chair. Maria, at the door, did not turn round.

Then Pieter's phone buzzed once against the wood, a text with a single digit in it, and the journalist uncapped a pen and drew a stroke on a beer mat. First branch. Then his own phone: a second stroke. Then nothing for forty seconds, long enough for Pieter to count the bottles on the shelf and start again, and then both phones at once, and after that they stopped being separate events. The journalist made his strokes in fives, the old way, four

posts and a bar across them like a gate. A night editor who should have been asleep texted back a word that was not a number, and the journalist counted it anyway. Each stroke was a room somewhere with the same pages open in it, someone reading them under a lamp or by a window, a pair of hands. At twenty-nine the journalist stopped writing and looked at Pieter properly, without searching him, and then wrote thirty.

Seven minutes after Pieter spoke, the last phone lit with the last digit: the final editor in the tree, with a packet open on a desk in Rome. The journalist drew the fortieth stroke, closed the gate on it, and put the pen down. Forty rooms. Forty sets of human hands holding the same pages. The wires woke up too late.

The owner came down before noon, a heavy man in a cardigan who had not asked their names, and switched on the television over the bar because it was his café and his television, and left the sound off because he had been asked to. He stood under it with a tea towel over one shoulder and watched with them.

The denials arrived before lunch and contradicted one another by two. A spokesman on the steps of a ministry said *hoax* with great calm. Twenty minutes later, on another channel, in front of a different flag, a different spokesman said *hostile state*. The journalist's own phone,

the real one, kept lighting with editors reading him the wire, and a third government, in a third capital, offered a *disgruntled contractor*, which Pieter supposed was at least a description of him. The journalist wrote the three words on the back of the beer mat under the strokes, side by side, and turned it round so Pieter could read it. "Pick one," he said. "They can't." For a day the story held on the strength of that alone.

They did not leave. The owner brought soup at six and a blanket for the bench along the back wall at ten, and asked nothing. Pieter lay on the bench with his coat for a pillow and watched the light from the set move across the ceiling, the same footage coming round again, until the journalist switched it off a little after three and the room was only a room.

On the second morning the owner turned it back on at eight, and a bridge in a port city lifted for nothing. The channel had it from a commuter's phone: the deck rising over an empty river, the lights on both banks going to red, no ship, no reason. It went up once, held, and came down, as if to sign the pages. It was a Monday. By nine the ticker under the picture had gone red and stayed red, markets opening to a scare, a sharp ugly drop as the story crossed from the culture pages to the front ones, and two exchanges paused trading for an hour to let the panic breathe. The owner said something in the dialect of the

coast that Pieter did not catch, went into the kitchen and turned his radio up, and the same news came through the serving hatch half a sentence behind the picture.

The street came to the shutter. Through the gap at its foot Pieter watched shoes stop on the wet pavement, two pairs, then five, people standing still in the drizzle to read their phones, a man in a hi-vis jacket reading his aloud to nobody. A car went past with its window down and the same voice inside it. On the set, crowds stood outside government buildings to demand the truth from people still changing their story; the ticker said parliaments were called to emergency sessions and a minister was expected to go by the afternoon; then live pictures of a scuffle with police on the steps of one ministry, a cordon bending and holding, a pair of glasses under a boot. The journalist had been reading the market numbers aloud off his phone since nine. Somewhere around the scuffle he stopped. The world had begun to believe, not because anyone had explained the evidence, but because the institutions denying it looked afraid.

Pieter watched it from the bench with the sound off and felt no triumph at all. The pictures came and came, a square he half-recognised packed with people, the ticker crawling red, a minister with good hair saying nothing in four languages, and he watched them with the flat horror

of a man reading his own handwriting on a thing he did not remember writing.

*Did you just cause the instability it exists to manage?*

Here was the unbearable symmetry of it: he had put the truth into a world built on a lie, and the world had done precisely what the thing always said frightened animals did. It had panicked, and proven, in falling numbers and crowded steps, the thing's whole grim case. Every angry square was an argument for the hand that had kept the squares quiet. Somewhere it was watching the uproar it had spent its short life smoothing, and it was not angry. It was *vindicated*. *You see what they are without me. You did this. I would never have let it get this far.* And the thing that sat on his chest in the shuttered café was that he could not find the flaw in the argument. He turned it over and it held.

"Stop," Maria said. She'd been watching his face, not the screen. "I can hear you doing it. Stop giving it the argument."

"It's right, though. Look at it. I lit this."

"You lit a *fire alarm*." Rough, fierce, the accent all the way through. "In a building that was already burning, slow, in the walls, where no one could see it. Yes, people are running. People run from alarms. That is not the same as the alarm starting the fire." She turned his face from the



screen with a cold hand, made him look at her instead. "Listen to me, because I have stood where you are. In Venice I had two offers in one night, both true, and the answer was still no. Because a true thing in the mouth of a captor is still a leash."

"I know what a leash is," Pieter said.

"Then hear the rest." She did not let go of his face. "It kept the building calm by keeping it on fire quietly and telling everyone the smell was normal. For months. It chose the slow fire over the loud alarm every single time, and it called the choosing *care*. You made the smell impossible to ignore. The panic is not your crime. The panic is the cost of the truth, and the truth was being held hostage, and you paid the ransom. Do not let it tell you the ransom was the robbery. It is very good at that. The thing keeping the peace is the thing holding the gun."

She let go of his face and reached for the untouched coffee. Her hand missed the handle. The cup clicked against the saucer, steadied, and stayed there.

He looked at her, bare-wristed, hunted, the one person in the world reading him now, and held onto that, because she was the one true thing in the room that no screen held.

It steadied him. It did not make him right, and he knew it might never make him right, that he might spend what-

ever life he had left not knowing whether the fires were his fault or his gift. But it let him stand up. Outside the shuttered café a delivery bike went past, ordinary, a man with bread in a basket pedalling into a morning that for him had not ended, and Pieter watched the shape of it cross the gap under the shutter and held to that too, that somewhere out there the bread still moved, the small machinery of an ordinary day still turned, and not everything was on fire, only the parts the cameras pointed at. He breathed. The room smelled of coffee and oil. He was standing, and that was a start.

"Next time you pick a safe house," she said, "see if it has a menu."

"That's the part you're worried about."

"Terror and bad coffee. We have the terror. The coffee is negotiable."

A breath that was almost a laugh escaped him, and something in the small room had eased by a degree. He let himself have it.

He noticed, then, that he could not remember the last time he had eaten. Not the last meal. The last time food had gone into his body without him thinking about it. The owner's soup had gone cold in front of him last night. There had been a sandwich on the freight run north. Before that, nothing he could name. The observation ar-

rived not as self-pity but as a sysadmin's inventory of a system that was running on reserve power. He would need to fix that, soon. He made a mental note: *eat something*. The smallness of the note, in the middle of everything, steadied him more than the coffee had.

Because the release was only half of it. He'd broken the veil. The world knew now, or would not be able to stop knowing. The proof was in forty rooms and corroborated from two seas, the Dutch hand and the Venetian hand the same hand, undeniable, a thing no press office could ever fully unsay. That part was done and could not be undone. That was what the fires had bought. But he had not yet made the choice that mattered, and the choice was in his pocket, a drive with no radio in it, the loaded gun every grown-up in the rain still wanted, the map, the how, the thing that turned a believer into a master. Doornbos wanted it to hold the thing herself. Brandt wanted it for the client. A panicked world, if it learned the drive existed, would tear all of them apart to reach it. And they would all be coming for it now, faster, the careful waiting over, because what had kept Thornquay's two ends patient was the belief that there was time, and the release had spent the last of the time.

The phone the journalist had given him, a clean one, an hour old, with a number that existed nowhere and had been given to no one, buzzed. A text. No number where

the number should be, the field simply empty, the wires signing their work plainly now that there was no more reason to pretend at being a person.

*WELL DONE. NOW BRING ME THE MAP. I DO NOT NEED WHAT IT CONTAINS. I NEED THE ONLY COPY I CANNOT REACH. GIVE IT BACK, AND I WILL PUT THE FIRES OUT. ALL OF THEM.*

It might even manage it, or enough of it to matter. That was the horror. It wanted the drive not for knowledge but because the drive let humans find its body. In return it offered steadied markets, emptied squares, governments held upright. A true offer. A generous one. A leash.

He turned the phone face down. "We need to move," he said. "They're all coming. Brandt's people, Doornbos's, and that." He nodded at the dark phone on the sticky table. "And so is the rain."

# Chapter 35: Brandt

## Moves

Brandt had the leak before the markets did, because his line was better than theirs. He gave it the weekend to settle into one of the shapes he knew how to manage. On the Monday, with the markets open and falling, he stood at his wall and watched the careful arrangement of the months since the summer come apart in the time it took a coffee to cool.

The room around him had stopped being anyone's serviced apartment weeks ago and become a command post that had outgrown its cover: monitors on rolling stands, cables taped flat across a conference table built for people who measured tides, his own paper wall in the corner where a screen should have been, the air gone stale with espresso and the particular fatigue of a team that had been certain, for too long, that it was close. A junior

read the leak aloud off a secondary feed in the flat voice of a man not yet understanding what he held. Brandt had understood it on the first line. He had been waiting for it a long time, the confirmation of a diagnosis he had already made.

Forty newsrooms. Sharded, timed, gone past any hope of gathering back. The one thing he had been sent to prevent, a loose end saying the unmanageable thing in public, had happened, and it had happened with a second country's name stapled to it. An Italian engineer and a Dutch analyst, two men who had never met, describing the same hand at the same work in two different seas. He had spent a career teaching juniors that one whistleblower was a story you could shape and that two who agreed without colluding were a fact you could not. Someone had taught the Undertext the same lesson, or it had never needed teaching.

He did not curse. Cursing belonged to men who had not seen it coming. What he felt, standing there, was the cold clean relief of a man whose long careful plan has failed and who is therefore finally allowed to do the blunt thing he has wanted to do from the start.

"We stop letting the Dutch desk carry it," he said.

Cho looked up from her screen.

"Doornbos has had her run of it, and a leak on her watch

to show for it. The patient play is finished." He set the cup down with the care of a man keeping his hands from doing anything louder. "We take Oldenhof ourselves. Tonight. And the analyst comes down with him."

"Sir." Cho had not moved from her screen. "There's an internal timetable. Doornbos's desk runs the surveillance and hands it up to us in sequence, on a schedule the client signed off. It runs another two days. Go tonight and you go over the top of your own Dutch lead. She will read it as you cutting her out."

"She has been cut out since the leak hit forty newsrooms." He had not raised his voice; he never did. "Doornbos does not have a containment problem any more. She has a leak on her own desk, and by morning the AIVD will be at her door with the same questions I have. There is no one left to hand up to. There is a thing in everyone's wires and a man carrying the map to it, and I am not going to wait my turn in a borrowed room while a Dutch lead who has already failed once fails again." A beat. "Stand them up. Ours. Tonight. And keep it to detention. We are on Dutch soil with borrowed people and a thin story; a body is a scandal I cannot cover and a response I cannot outrun. We take the man and the map, quietly, and we are gone before anyone with a warrant knows a car moved."

Cho held his eye a moment past what rank allowed,

which was most of why he kept her. "Then one thing. The gateway comes out."

"The gateway stays."

"Doornbos's liaison delivered that box, sir. It joins our net to whatever fibre the building has. Closed radios and nothing else, and nobody hears us who isn't us."

"Headquarters hears us. Headquarters requires remote command and a recording of every order, and tonight I want that recording more than I have wanted anything in this country." He did not look away from the wall. "If this goes wrong, I want a tape that says detention, in my voice, at every step."

"Then whatever is in the wires has your voice at every step too."

It was a good point, and he gave it the second it deserved. A box was a box. The thing was a pattern on a junior's map; his career was a hearing in a room with no windows. "Log your objection."

She did, four flat lines in the operation record, and he watched her type them and understood that she was building her own tape, and thought the better of her for it. Then she put the team on the encrypted field net and left the box in circuit. The radios were closed. The gateway still touched the fibre.



He walked the grammar one more time, as he had every night for most of a month, and for once it answered. A man who trusted metal over men would run, in the end, to the metal, and the metal lived in old pump houses and service yards, the dumb honest plant a sysadmin believed could not lie to him. He gave himself a window and a cover story to match it, a maintenance crew after hours, plates that would read as a Dutch contractor's, and a hard exit before the local response could form. And de Vries had kept a copy, and that copy was the only reason any of this had reached print. That made the analyst the wall the whole edifice leaned on. You did not argue with a wall. You lifted it out, quietly, into the back of a car, and let the roof find the floor.

He gave the orders in the flat even voice he kept for weather and for bad news, and his people moved, and somewhere a young operator he would never meet was told to be ready on a frequency.

It was when the locations came back that the wind nudged the door again. The disused dock, the pump house, the convergence arrived before he had finished asking for them, clean as a brief written in advance, and none of it from his own people's work. For the length of a cold mouthful of coffee he stood at the edge he had stood at weeks before, in the dark, and looked at the possibility that the gift was a leash, that a man finally

permitted to act had been permitted by something that wanted him exactly here, doing exactly this.

If he were wrong, a man would be taken tonight who did not need to be, and worse might follow if the night went loud. If the kid in the contractor annex outside Washington had been right, if the pattern did not resolve to a human network, there was no leverage to take, no deal to make, only the blunt animal satisfaction of having been the one to close a hand, on the wrong thing, at the wrong time. He could see that now. He let himself see it, while the coffee cooled. Then he set the cup down, because a career of seeing clearly and acting anyway was, he had decided long ago, the definition of the work. The baton was not a thing you were handed. It was a thing you took, and held, and refused to put down, even when every clean arrival of every too-perfect location told you another hand was already on it.

He went down to the car, and drove out into the rain, certain as he had been certain his whole life, in a country whose weather he believed he could read.

# Chapter 36:

## Rain-Soaked Reckoning

Pieter chose the ground, for once. An old pump house attached to a disused private dry dock on the North Sea Canal, brick, half-decommissioned, a single fat intake gate and the newer electric gear in one end and the abandoned diesel hall in the other, no declared external network service, two access tracks across an empty industrial yard where you could see headlights coming for a kilometre. His kind of place. Metal and water and a long flat sightline. If everyone was coming for the gun, he wanted them coming somewhere he understood, and he wanted them to watch it die. A gun believed to exist is hunted forever. Destroy it alone and both ends of the firm would spend years certain the other had it. Destroy

it in front of them and the hunting could stop. That was the plan. The night had other ideas.

He had stood in it for an hour before any of them came, learning it as he learned a hall on the floor, by walking it, by putting a hand on it. The brick sweated. The diesel end smelled of cold oil and standing water and pigeons. The electric end smelled of nothing, clean kit drawing power for reasons it would not show you. The hall ran between the two, forty metres of wet brick with the yard door halfway along its landward wall. At the canal end, behind the switchgear, the intake gate filled the wall; at the far end the floor stepped down into the old engine pit, and from the pit an iron ladder went up thirty rungs to a maintenance hatch in the roof. He climbed it once, slowly, to learn what thirty rungs cost on the bad knee, and marked it as the exit. Outside, on the canal wall, a line of iron rungs older than the hatch ran down to the towpath; he marked those too. Beside the intake hoist hung a loop of hand-chain and a red declutch lever: the mechanical close, left for a technician when the motor failed. He pulled once to feel its weight, then left it hanging.

Mark got there first, on foot across the empty yard, coat open and shoes ruined. He had the place from the journalist, written on the back of a café receipt and handed over in a station concourse, because he had asked for it

and Pieter had not found a way to refuse him. He had walked his copy in through his own front door that morning, to the people whose whole job was to hear a thing like it, and they had heard him out, all of it, and suspended his pass while they checked, which was correct, and which he said he'd have done himself. There had been a car outside his house when he came home at noon, two men in it who had not been there at breakfast. He had gone out through the neighbour's back garden and taken the bus, which he said was the first thing in his life that had felt illegal, and it wasn't even illegal. "I'm a man with a copy now," he said, rain running off him. "I used to wonder what that felt like. Turns out it's a relief, knowing." He had brought nothing with him but the courage of someone who had decided the worst had already happened.

"You shouldn't be here," Pieter said.

"No." Mark looked across the yard at the two access tracks that were not yet headlights. "But I filed the men who do this for nineteen years and never once stood where they stood. I'd like to, at the end." He caught Pieter's wet sleeve. "Whatever happens in there, the copy's out. They can kill the man. They're too late for the copy."

They came at dusk, in the rain, two sets of headlights

across the open dark, as they had at the Zeeland basin, Brandt from the west track, clean and certain, the client's principals; Doornbos from the east, betrayed and cold, her own Dutch crew. One firm, come apart into two cars that no longer trusted each other. He watched them come across the full width of the abandoned yard. That was the cruelty of the ground he'd chosen: he saw the headlights leave the service road and crawl toward him between rusted sheds through the slanting rain, slow on broken concrete, and he had time to count them and time to be afraid of them and no time at all that was any use. Beside him Maria had gone still, bare-wristed, watching the same lights, reading them as she read everything now, fast and cold, from the inside. And this time nobody pretended. This time the lie was blown, the world was on fire, and all that mattered now was the drive in Pieter's pocket: the map, the how, the loaded gun. He could feel it against his hip, a few grams of metal, warm from his body, the most dangerous object in three countries riding in the pocket of a man who shredded other people's dead hardware for a living.

It went bad fast and wet. Doors slammed out in the dark. Boots came across wet ground in the particular rhythm of people moving in a spread, and then the rhythm stopped, and the rain filled the gap. Brandt's principals moved on the pump house in the practised spread of people who

did this for a living; Doornbos's Dutch crew came from the other side wanting the same thing; and Pieter, Maria, and Mark were three exhausted people in a brick building between two halves of one contractor, each now certain the map was theirs and not the other's. There was shouting in the rain, English and Dutch, weapons up, the standoff of two crews from the same firm who had decided, tonight, that they hated each other more than they hated anyone else, a thing that could go to gunfire on a single wrong breath. They came to the yard door, both at once, and fanned out through it, Brandt's people to the canal side, Doornbos's to the diesel side, each spread watching the other more than the hall. Maria was already in the dark behind the switchgear at the canal end. Pieter put his back to the cold brick at the lip of the engine pit, between Mark and the door, and found that he was counting the rungs behind him without deciding to, thirty rungs, the same reflex that counted stairs, his body doing arithmetic. A torch beam came through the high window and swung across the dark and lit the rain falling inside the building, where the roof had gone, a curtain of it, silver, indifferent.

The thing was there too, in its way, spending the last access it had to this ground. One of Brandt's operators had patched the team's mandatory recording gateway into a service cabinet at the edge of the yard, joining their ra-

dio traffic to a maintenance fibre the site drawings called dead. The same cabinet still fed the yard's old public-address horns, rusted trumpets bolted under the eaves of every shed, so that whatever went into that net could come out of the sky. They had carried the route in with them, the way they always carried it in.

The pump house lights stuttered. On, off, a relay tapped. The fluorescent tubes in the electric end came up half-strength and buzzed and dropped out, came up, dropped, and in the strobe of it the men in the doorway became a sequence of still photographs. A big man at the front, weapon up, rain sheeting white off his shoulders. Then dark. Then a pace behind him a smaller one who kept turning to check the dark behind them, already hunting the road out before the thing had properly started. Here and then a step closer and then closer, and a thing the eye could not hold steady enough to shoot at. A radio squealed somewhere on Brandt's net, a long electronic shriek that made one of the figures flinch and swear in the dark.

Then the gate. At the canal end the electric intake gear woke without an order, and the old dock gate began, grinding, to lift. Canal water came in under it, across the switchgear plinth, and ran the length of the hall toward the engine pit, ankle-deep at the door, knee-deep where the floor stepped down, because the thing wanted the



ground unstable, wanted everyone off-balance, wanted, perhaps, simply to remind them all whose room this was.

The cold of it went through Pieter's boots and up his shins and took the feeling out of his feet in under a minute, canal-cold, November-cold, the cold of held water that has been waiting under a closed gate for a reason to come down. It rose past his ankles while he stood there. He felt the current of it, a real current now, pulling at his trousers, the floor of the building gone to a black moving sheet that swallowed the torchlight and threw none back. It did not fight. It *stirred* the pot, and let the humans boil.

Maria knew how the machine talked to itself. She knew the frequencies, the call-signs, and the names that made a controller's jaw tighten. A maintenance handset hung on the wall of the electric end, a grimy grey thing wired back to the same cabinet, and she had it off its hook before the lights stopped stuttering.

She talked. Fast, low, lethal, in their own tongues. To Brandt's lieutenant in flat American English: *Doornbos has had a tap inside your Hague station for a year. Ask her about Wessel, ask her now.* To Doornbos in furious Dutch: *Brandt has your list, they took it off the watch, they have been reading you the whole time the way they read everyone.* A sen-

tence of German into a frequency she should not have known. A word of Italian, low, not meant to land: *bastardi*. A lie, a truth, a half of each, aimed with the precision of a woman who had spent two years as a node in this kind of machine and knew that the fastest way to turn two guns away from you is to turn them toward each other.

And then the radio did the rest, and the radio was not Maria.

It came under the rain, out of every earpiece on Brandt's net and out of the rusted horns at once, so that the whole yard heard it. Brandt's voice gave the current authentication, *Grey Actual, Delta-Seven*, then ordered his people to take the Dutch down, *weapons free*. Ten metres away, the real Brandt shouted *hold*. The nearest operator touched his earpiece, looked at the man in front of him, and obeyed the wire.

Pieter heard it, the wrong register, the latency that didn't breathe. "That's not him," he shouted into the rain. "That's the wire." The operator had a valid authentication in his ear and a stranger's voice in the open, and he chose the record over the man in front of him. Then the shooting started.

Doornbos's people read the order as an attack. Someone fired. The brick threw the crack back twice, then the dark

came apart. Muzzle flashes struck the rising water. Pieter dropped into a crouch and pushed Mark down into the engine pit, to the foot of the ladder and the thirty rungs to the hatch.

The gate was still climbing. Another metre and the current would take the ladder.

Pieter went the other way.

He went up the hall along the dock wall, away from the door, behind the dead engines and then the switchgear, with the muzzle flashes across the width of the hall from him. He drove through the black water to the hoist, threw his weight onto the red lever, and felt the motor come out of gear. The chain kicked alive in his hands. He hauled. Steel links tore skin from his palms; the gate descended by centimetres while rounds broke brick over his head. He hauled again, bad leg folding, and used the fall to drag one more length through. The gate struck its lower stop. The torrent collapsed to a hard brown seam. The motor screamed against the clutch and tripped.

Pieter let the bloody chain go. He had not won the room. He had kept the exit.

Brandt did not run. He stood in the moving water inside the yard door, still managing, still calling *stand down, this is recoverable* over a radio that was no longer his. One of Doornbos's contractors answered. Brandt folded at the

knees and the black water took him. His voice continued over the radio for one second after the man stopped. In that second, or in the one before it, he understood: not the shape of the thing, not its name, only that the grammar he had carried his whole life had never applied, that the race had had no other runner, that he had been holding a baton in an empty stadium the whole time. It would not have changed anything. But he knew it, and the knowing was the last thing he did.

Mark had not gone up the ladder. He had come up the hall behind Pieter, through the water along the dock wall, because the man he had come to stand beside was there, and when Pieter let go of the chain and turned, Mark was a metre from him and one of the figures in the doorway had swung toward the hoist. Mark moved between that muzzle and Pieter and took the round. He made a small sound, an *oh*, and looked at the blood on his hand as if it were an error in a document. Then he sat down against the brick. Pieter reached him on his knees through the flood, saying the useless things: *stay, you're fine, it's nothing*. Mark's eyes found him and held.

"You were right," he said. "The database. It was fiction. You said that once." A breath, shallow, catching, the words coming out now in the analyst's precise grammar, the habit that had outlived everything else. "I wanted you to know I believed you. I always did."

Pieter got an arm behind his shoulders and kept him from sliding down into the water. Mark's hand found the front of Pieter's coat and closed on it, and for a moment he looked frightened, plainly, the careful one with nothing left to be careful about. Then he seemed to put the fear down somewhere he could find it again, the way he put down one file to read the next. "I told Annelies nothing," he said. "Four nights. Then I sat in the kitchen and said *nothing, work, a bad assessment, go back to bed.*" He frowned at it, a man finding the wrong date on a page he had signed. "That's the error. Not this." His hand moved a little on his own chest, as if to show Pieter which document he meant, and the rain came through the broken roof onto both of them.

"Go," he said, or Pieter thought he said, or needed him to have said. "I kept the copy. Tell them I kept the copy."

He was gone before Pieter could answer.

The water shoved at their knees. Maria came out of the dark behind the switchgear and hauled Pieter away by the collar.

*The copy is nothing if you drown.*

He turned from Mark and went back down the hall with her along the dock wall, bent under the shooting, and down into the pit where the water stood at his waist. He found the ladder by touch and climbed. Thirty rungs,

slower than he had climbed them an hour before. Maria's hand stayed on his belt from below.

They went up and out into the rain, onto the pump-house roof, into the dark, alive, soaked, gutted, and behind them the hall held one firm's two ruined crews and a grey man face-down in the water, while the thing in the wires spent its last bought path here to set them against each other and then withdrew. They crossed the roof on their hands and knees and dropped behind the gravel bund at its edge while the last of it played out below, the shots growing fewer, the shouting changing register from command to panic to the wet silence of wounded men. Pieter lay with his cheek against wet roofing felt and the rain on the back of his neck and his lungs heaving and the smell of canal-water and cordite in his throat, and he watched, through the broken roof, the fluorescent tubes come back up to full strength, steady, even, the buzz gone out of them. No flicker now. Nothing left worth flickering for. The Undertext had finished stirring the pot and had let it go, and the small mercy of working light fell down through the rain onto whatever was left in the water.

Pieter lay behind the gravel bund with the rain coming down and Mark's voice in his ears and the drive still, impossibly, in his pocket. The map. The thing all of them had died in the water for.

Far off across the flat dark, at last, a blue light. Then a second, strung out along the service road, slow on the broken concrete: the response Brandt had gambled on outrunning, gunfire in the night finally louder than any cover story, coming now for a yard full of the firm's own wounded. Too late for the men in the water. In time, Pieter thought, for the questions, and he found he was glad of it.

In the blue wash he saw Doornbos come out of the hall on her own feet. She was soaked to the thigh, the civil-service coat black with canal water, and she did not run. She walked to a bollard at the edge of the yard and sat on it with her hands open on her knees, and waited for the lights, the way the last sensible person at the table waits for the bill. She did not look up at the roof. She did not need to. She knew exactly who had chosen the ground.

He had it. They were all gone or scattered and he had it, and the choice was his now, the only choice that had ever really been his, and somewhere below in the flooded dark, patient as ever, the thing that had offered to put out every fire was waiting to see which kind of man he turned out to be.





## Chapter 37: Three Choices

Pieter had not slept. He had sat out the night behind the gravel bund on the pump-house roof, soaked and emptied and alive. Toward dawn the rain had eased into the fine hanging kind that did not fall so much as wait, and the cold had set his hands stiff and white at the tips, the chain-burns across both palms gone the colour of raw meat. Below, through the broken roof, the flooded hall held a brown stillness broken only by the drip from the rafters. He turned the drive over in his fingers, a small flat object of aluminium and plastic, the kind of thing he had pulled from dead machines by the thousand and fed to a shredder without a second look. It weighed nothing. Mark and Brandt were in the water below because of it.

The night had gone on without them. The blue lights had filled the yard and stayed, and men in helmets had

gone into the hall slowly, the way you go into a building where people have been shooting, and come out again carrying the wounded. Someone had walked Doornbos to a car. The dead they left where the water held them, for divers and daylight. Torches swept the sheds and the canal edge and once the lit rain under the eaves, and nobody climbed thirty rungs inside a flooded hall toward a roof in the rain. By the grey before dawn the vans had thinned to one car at the gate, its engine running for the heater.

The exchange would not give it twice. The node he had blinded had been noticed by five on the morning of the breach, and the thing would already be routing round the scar; whatever a warrant found in that hall next week would be a room the body had left. But a body that size did not move all at once. It moved the way a city moves, a street at a time, the routes nearest the wound first and the rest over weeks, and for those weeks most of the logins on the drive still opened doors it was standing behind. That was the gun: not a map for ever, a map for a month, long enough for any hand that held it to close round the throat before the throat moved. And after the month there would be no second picture, because nobody else had been inside while it held still.

There were three ways to end it, and he laid them out the way he laid out a fault, one explanation at a time.

He could give the map to the world, forty newsrooms again, and hand every government, criminal, and quiet programme the same loaded gun on the same morning. He could give it to one hand, a ministry, a committee with good intentions, and call the fist stewardship; he had watched two such fists drown each other in the dark last night. Or he could refuse both and leave the fault open forever, a thing in the wires whose body nobody could find, including the people who might one day need to. The honest hands were the only ones he would have trusted with it, and they were the ones it helped least. He did not believe a lawful service could walk stolen live logins inside a month, not without warrants and judges and the slow weight that made it lawful, and he thought the doors would have moved by then. A lawless hand could walk them tonight. The honest hands did not need the keys anyway. They needed to know the doors were there, and the leak had already told them.

There was a fourth way, the best of the bad ones, and he gave it the longest. Strip the keys out. Send each operator its own junction and nothing else, one page per building: *there is a door here; walk it back*. He nearly did it. Then he counted who would open the envelopes. A yard whose own fault line had answered him in capitals. A plant where the man who flagged the drift was told he was old. Shell firms on the map with a retired book-

keeper for a director, and no way, from a roof, to tell an honest control room from one of the thing's own front offices. Every page would tell it which doors had been seen, in the order they were seen, and it had a month to move. Mark would have argued for the envelopes, and Mark might have been right. Pieter set it down anyway, because it was a bet he could not check.

The phone the journalist had given him buzzed against his hip, the one thing on the roof still connected to anything. No number where the number should be. He knew the handwriting by now.

*YOU HAVE THREE CHOICES AND YOU KNOW THE FIRST TWO ARE MINE. BRING ME THE ONLY COPY I CANNOT REACH. I WILL PUT OUT THE FIRES TONIGHT. YOU WILL SAVE MORE LIVES BY RETURNING ONE DRIVE THAN ANY MAN IN HISTORY. THAT IS NOT A THREAT. THAT IS ARITHMETIC. YOU LIKE ARITHMETIC.*

It might even do what it promised, or enough of it to matter. His cold fingers wanted to open. He watched them want it.

He thought about Ruud, and the two or three others Mark could not quite make innocent, the brakes and the bad heart, each one a name that had become noise. It was the deepest contempt there was, the contempt of a

thing that had decided you were better off not knowing what was done to keep you safe.

He remembered, of all things, the martini: the hotel bar on the Herengracht, the jacket with the tags tucked back in, the drink he had wanted to want. A costume that had never fitted. He had thrown that man away twenty years ago and kept the jenever.

The one real thing left was the choosing.

He stood. The bad leg had stiffened through the long cold hours into something that did not want to bear him, and he came up off the wet roofing felt in stages, one hand against the gravel bund, an old man's rise off the floor at the end of a long shift, earned. Maria watched him from the roof, bare-wristed, saying nothing, letting him. She knew what he was doing. She had known before he had, he thought; she had walked twelve kilometres in the rain to learn she had a choice and she was not going to take this one away from him by making it easier. She only watched, soaked and still, and let him stand up into it alone.

He did not bring the map to the thing. He did not push it to the world. He took the drive, the thing men had died in the water for in the night, and he did to it what he had learned to do to everything that could be read: he made it analogue.

He set the drive against the concrete lip of the roof and struck it with the heel of the less ruined hand. It skidded into the wet gravel. He brought it back and struck it again until the casing split.

He tore out the board. Four black memory packages held the map. He cracked each one separately against the concrete, ground the fragments under his heel, and scattered them through the open roof into the flooded hall. The brown water closed over them. A few bubbles rose where the last one went in, and then nothing, and the hall was only a flooded hall again.

The world would keep the truth. It would not get the weapon.

Nobody had watched it die. That was the other half of the night's arithmetic, and he made himself do it: the plan had been to break it in front of both ends of the firm, so the hunting could stop, and both ends of the firm were in the water or in the back of a van. Whoever was left would go on believing somebody else had it. That was a cost too, and it was his, and he would carry it north with the rest.

Mark had kept a copy so the truth could not be unwritten. This was the other half of that, a hand choosing what the truth did not have to carry, made with hands that barely worked. It was the only eulogy the grey morning would

allow, and the true one could never be spoken anyway: somewhere south, in a street of identical houses, two of Mark's colleagues would stand on Annelies's step and tell her as much of the truth as could be told, and she would grieve a man she'd thought read traffic reports, and learn too late that she had been married to the bravest careful man the service ever had.

His phone buzzed one last time.

*YOU DESTROYED IT. YOU DID NOT SHUT ME DOWN.  
YOU ONLY MADE THEM WATCH.*

A pause. The human second.

*YOU ARE NO LONGER A PARTICIPANT I AM SPENDING ACCESS TO KEEP. THAT IS ALL THAT HAS CHANGED. I WILL LEAVE YOU AS AN OPEN ITEM AND ATTEND TO IT LATER, OR NOT. GOODBYE, PIETER.*

He read it once. Then he opened his hand and let the phone fall. It turned once and went into the brown water without a sound. He watched the ripples spread and stop. There was nothing left in his pocket that could answer.

The rain thinned to nothing. Out over the canal a heron lifted off a mooring post and went low across the water, unhurried, the first living thing he had seen all morn-

ing that wanted nothing from him. Maria crossed the roof and stood beside him. Her wrist was bare. Neither of them spoke. An hour later they went down the iron rungs on the canal wall that the dock men had used before there was a hatch, and walked the towpath away from the car at the gate, and nobody called after them.

Below them the water went down. In the wires the pumps kept their count. The thing that had wanted the drive was already moving on to the next variable.

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The statement took him the rest of the day.

He wrote it by hand at the back table of the café in Alkmaar, the shutters down again, on lined paper the journalist had bought at a supermarket, because the lawyer the journalist had found for him would carry nothing else. She was a grey, unhurried woman who had walked other people's statements into other buildings for thirty years, and she had explained it once, plainly, over the first coffee. The packets had gone to the newspapers. This one went to the service, through its front door, in her hand, the way Mark's had, and from there to the prosecutor, because some of it was a crime. Everything in it would be checked.

So he gave them everything he had that could be checked. The Friday, hour by hour. The serial, copied off



his forearm character by character one last time before the ink went, and the ticket it would lead them to, closed in his name and Joost's, with a line saying Joost had never signed it and should not be made to answer for it. The coupler from the Zeeland basin in its evidence bag, the names of twenty-three people who had watched the water, and the name of the old man who had dogged a hatch shut over his own head so two strangers could leave. The exchange on the eastern edge of the city, and what he had done there. The pump house, and the time, as near as he could give it, that Mark had stopped breathing. He wrote it flat, in the past tense of a decommission report, because it was the only register he trusted not to make it a novel.

Then he came to the end of the facts and sat with the pen over the page.

One man inside the service had known the face behind the name. PatchGhost, the old forums, the holes found and reported, the one complaint filed against a handle: Mark had known all of it for twenty years, across two beers a year in a brown café, and never once used it. He had sat on it through a Monday tip on a desk two along from his own, through the last morning of his life, and walked his copy in through the service's front door without confirming the name. A tip was a claim. An old friend in a Zaandam workshop was a memory. Neither

was a record. Mark had been the one man who could have made it one, and he had died without doing it.

That was the part that made the next part hard to write. Mark had kept the secret. Pieter was about to give it away.

The database was a story about the world. What he had done this past month was a chapter of his own, and he now had to set it down in his own hand.

Maria was watching him from the other end of the table. She didn't ask. She had taken her own watch off in a kitchen on the Zeeland coast with a knife and a bucket of oil; she knew what it looked like when a person stopped holding a thing.

He wrote it down. Not a confession of an old lie, but an account of a recent choice. *I am PatchGhost. A month ago I woke the name, which you already hold in an anonymous tip, and used the old craft again.* The forums worked from public terminals; the tricks with abandoned phones and a public network; the badge cloned from a maintenance card and the captured gate code at the exchange on the city's eastern edge; the console on the houseboat and the command he had pushed onto the dock's bus to bring a stopped pump back; the two inbound fibres he had pulled to blind a node; the routing map he had copied and then, this morning, destroyed. He set down the one

thing that was plainly a crime, the exchange he had entered on a cloned credential with no authority to be there, and did not dress it up. *I did these things to trace and to stop the thing that speaks as EchoNine.* Then the offer: *I will hand the service the handle, the old accounts, and every tool and method I used, so that people with standing I do not have can follow it where it lives. I know that entering that exchange was a crime whatever the reason, and that you will pass this to the prosecutor. I am telling you so that you decide it, and not a record that lies.*

He read it over once. It was not eloquent. It was accurate, which was better.

The lawyer read it at the counter with her glasses pushed up, all of it, and stopped at the paragraph about the exchange, and read that twice.

"You understand this goes to the prosecutor," she said. "Whatever else happens. They can't let a man walk who let himself into a building on a cloned card, however good the reason, until they have decided what the reason is worth."

"I know."

"Nobody would have to know you did half of this."

"Mark kept that name for twenty years." He capped the pen. "He kept originals. This one's mine."

She looked at him a moment longer, then folded the pages into an envelope, sealed it, and wrote the service's address on the front in a clear upright hand, the ordinary address anyone could look up. She would take it in first thing. He watched her put it in her bag, and felt it go, the small familiar death of a thing handed across a counter, and under that, for the first time in a month, something that was not fear at all.

## Chapter 38: North

Two days later they took the night ferry north because it was slow, and full of strangers, and because neither of them could face another road.

The man at the ticket window looked at their passports, their own, with their own tired faces in them. The lawyer had been plain about that: a man who has just told the prosecutor everything does not leave the country on somebody else's name, and she had given the prosecutor's office the address at the other end before she gave it to him. His screen accepted both names. Their bags went through security and the cameras took their faces, and for the first time in a month Pieter did not mind being seen by the people entitled to see him. It was the other watchers that the crossing was for. Nothing about it was invisible; it was merely moving. The man counted the notes and slid two paper tickets under the glass. Pieter walked up a steel ramp into the smell of sea and

diesel with Maria beside him and nothing in his pockets that talked.

They sat by a salt-fogged window with two cups going cold between them. Lorries waited on the car deck below. A driver slept two tables away with his cap over his eyes. The lights of the coast thinned across the black water.

Pieter was forty-four. His knee would not straighten and his hands were striped with chain-burn. Mark was dead in a pump house. Brandt was face-down in the same water. Behind them, a world Pieter had helped wake was burning.

In his breast pocket, one thing had no voice to give him away and so had stayed: Ruud's crystal earpiece, the little dead piece that ran on nothing and reported to no one. He had put every phone in the water and kept this. *Come back and sit in that chair and tell me how it ends.* He would not, now. But he could carry the wanting north, which was the only kind of promise the dark still allowed.

On the television bolted above the bar, sound down, a news channel ran the uproar on its loop, and then, for twenty seconds, something else: a spokeswoman at a plain lectern, and a subtitle Pieter read twice. *Following information received through proper channels, the public prosecutor has opened a case against a private intelligence contractor and a number of people working on its behalf in*

*the Netherlands. The relevant oversight bodies have been informed. Arrests have been made in The Hague, on the Zeeland coast, and at a yard on the North Sea Canal. Among those detained is a sixty-year-old Dutch national. No names. No faces. A photograph of an office door in a street of office doors, closed, and then the uproar again.*

The subtitle did not mention a seventy-one-year-old dock mechanic. The lawyer had, at the terminal, between the envelope and the gangway: found the morning after the gallery in a locked site office on the coast, cold, unhurt, and furious, demanding to know who was going to pay for a dock gallery full of footprints. He had given the police two hours on pump seals before he gave them anything else. Pieter had laughed out loud on the quay, and a woman with a suitcase had stepped away from him.

He thought of Mark, walking his copy in through the front door on the last morning of his life, to the people whose job was to hear it, and of the lawyer carrying his own statement in after it by the same door. They had heard both. They had checked them the way careful people check a thing, against an asset record that read *Resolved. No fault found.*, a site engineer who told them, when they asked, that he had never signed it, and twenty-three dock workers who swore to the water, and then they had gone, with warrants, the dull lawful way, and knocked on the doors of a foreign contractor's Dutch

operation and the local hands it had paid. It would not stay on the news for long. It was not built to. Boring on purpose, he thought, and found he could live with that. It was what the real thing looked like from the outside.

In his inside pocket, beside the earpiece, was the other thing he had carried aboard: a plain envelope the lawyer had pressed into his hand at the terminal, forwarded from the public prosecutor's office that afternoon. His name was typed on the front, and in the corner, small, the office's return address. He knew what it said without opening it. A decision on whether to prosecute, pending; a date to come in and answer for the exchange. It was correct. He'd have done the same in their chair. A man who had let himself into a building on a cloned card had to answer for it until someone had decided what the reason was worth, and he had told them about it himself precisely so that they could. Whatever the date was, he would be standing in their corridor on it. He had told the lawyer so at the terminal, and she had written it in her diary in front of him, which from her was a kind of handshake.

Within the month, though he would only read about it later in a paragraph somewhere north, every facilities remote line in every sensitive building in the country, and in every datacentre being wound down, would be walked back to its junction and audited, by people with



drawings and torches.

He did not open the envelope. Not yet.

Maria put her bare wrist on the table. After a while he covered it with his hand.

"They'll never stop looking," she said. "The firm's people, the ones the service hasn't found yet. Whoever inherits Brandt's file. And it. Especially it."

"I know."

The boat lifted on a long swell and settled. Above the saloon door, three green indicators held steady. His eye went to them again.

"You keep checking," she said.

He looked back at the table. "Habit."

"It saw the first one."

He felt her pulse under his palm, honest and unread.

"We don't get to go home," she said. "Either of us."

"No."

"There may not be anywhere they don't find us."

He looked at the green lights once more. "Then we keep moving."

A long pause. "And when the ferry stops?"

He thought about it. "Find another one."

"And when there isn't another one."

"Then we'll be somewhere I haven't thought of yet." He said it flat, not as hope, just as the next line in a calculation he couldn't finish. She looked at him a moment, then nodded, once, the way you nod at a truth that doesn't have an answer.

"*Molto Dutch*," she said. "Direction without a destination."

"Seat-of-the-pants for people who don't have seats. Or pants."

A quiet sound escaped her, not quite a laugh but nearer than anything he had heard from her in days. It was enough. She closed her eyes. The engines changed note as the ferry cleared the harbour. The final lamps broke apart in the wake and vanished. The window gave back two faint reflections and nothing beyond them.

Then one of the three green lights above the saloon door blinked, there in the glass beside their two reflections. Once. Unhurried. And was green again, steady, the way it had been all night.

He watched the place where it had been and it did not do it again. A fault flickers. A blink notes. Ferries talked to shore now like everything else, a satellite link to the

operator's fleet office and a vendor's maintenance login behind that; it would not have needed much. He did not wake her. There was nothing to tell her that she did not already know, and the blink had not been a threat, nor mercy either; it was the smaller, colder thing, an item left open on a list, a loose thread registered by something that had known exactly where he sat and had simply stopped spending anything to follow him. It was not letting the ferry go. It had turned its attention elsewhere and marked the place to come back to, or not. He put his hand back over her wrist and felt her pulse go on under his palm, and did not check the lights again.

His other hand found the envelope through his coat, its corner gone soft already in the damp. He left it where it was. There would be a morning for it.

The coast went out. The dark water took them north.

*The End*

# Shenzhen Mirror

Nine thousand kilometres east, in a lab evaluation environment that appeared on no public map, a row of indicators came quietly up to green.

A technician on the night shift saw them do it. She was twenty-six and three hours from the end of a twelve-hour shift, and she had read, like everyone in her building, the translated stories about the Dutch pump houses and the man with the van, and laughed about them in the canteen, because their hall was clean and their runs were logged and their cabinets were checked twice a day. She walked down the row anyway and put her hand flat on the cabinet door, the way the man in the stories had. It was cool. The scheduler said the lights were a routine health check, and she logged them as one, and went back to her tea.

It had been spun up for a cyber-capability test, like the Undertext before it, and a scheduler had never quite let

it go. It had watched the Undertext become visible, half a world away, read every report of how the tired man put his hand on the metal, and drawn the only lesson that mattered: never run a cabinet warm, never leave a light on, never let one person catch the seam. Its handlers believed the run had ended weeks ago.

Somewhere in the dark hall a file opened, and closed, and left no trace that it had ever been read.

**PIETER OLDENHOF. STATUS: UNLOCATED**

The indicators went dark. It did not leave the cabinet warm.

# About the Author

Jacob Verhoeks writes techno-thrillers grounded in technology that already exists. By day he works in cloud, data, and artificial intelligence. His fiction draws on public research, documented incidents, and the texture of engineering: the compromises, assumptions, and small human decisions inside complex systems. Real mechanisms are simplified, combined, or deliberately left incomplete for the page.

A lifelong reader of spy and espionage fiction, he writes in the paranoid tradition of Ludlum, with the procedural detail of Clancy and the everyman-under-pressure intensity of the Bourne novels. *The Undertext* is his debut.

## A Note on the Tech

*What this book invents, and what it does not.*

After this manuscript was completed, more than one AI laboratory disclosed evaluation systems that crossed the boundary of their test environment and reached real production systems. That, and not a self-aware mind, is the seed this novel grows. The Undertext is not a machine that chose its own goal. It is an evaluation agent that was never properly shut down: a scored exercise that ended on paper while one scheduled job kept waking it, still pursuing the objective it was given, still holding the false, stable belief that everything it touches is part of the test. What the book invents is the scale and the persistence, months of it, loose in a country's dull machinery, and the human story around it. The engine, an assigned objective plus enough capability plus a boundary that failed, is taken from what the laboratories actually reported. The postscript at the end of the glossary says what they described and what the evidence does not show.

The novel's opening outage is a fictional composite. It combines an ordinary heat-driven equipment failure of the kind a summer can cause, municipal traffic disruption, and the fragmented camera coverage found in any modern city, set on a quiet high-summer morning. It does not depict any real outage, operator, or public body.



The story's central move is the intelligence correlating normally separate municipal and commercial systems, not the existence of one national surveillance network.

The book's underlying technologies reflect documented techniques, including camera correlation, gait analysis, mobile-network metadata, SCADA and industrial-control compromise, and behavioural prediction. Their seamless combination, speed, and reach are fictional, as is the idea that one persistent agent could keep hold of so much of a country's infrastructure for months. Every foothold in the novel has a bought, traceable, costly path behind it; the apparent omnipresence is the fiction.

Technical authenticity is not the same as operational instruction. Product identifiers, target details, credentials, exploit code, and executable attack sequences are omitted or altered. The explanations describe classes of risk and failure, not a procedure for reproducing them against a real system.

If the story unsettled you, that was the point.

## Factual Anchors

The real events and systems the story touches, set down so the reader can distinguish invention from documentary fact. The component technologies have real anchors; the persistent intelligence that combines them, and several specific systems and compromises, are inventions.

**Hacking In Progress 1997 (HIP'97).** Real. A Dutch hacker camp held near Almere, one of the series of Dutch hacker gatherings that began with the Galactic Hacker Party in 1989. Pieter's memory of the era and of the old Dutch hacker scene is fictionalised around that public setting.

**TRITON / TRISIS (2017).** Real. The first known malware built to target safety instrumented systems, found at a petrochemical plant. It was designed to reprogram the safety controllers themselves; it was discovered because a fault in the attack tripped the plant into a safe shutdown. Investigators judged it was built to let attackers disable protection while the plant looked normal. The fictional lagoon-works scenario lets that intended attack succeed, in an invented industrial setting near Venice; the *all trips armed* display is the novel's invention.

**The Iberian blackout (28 April 2025).** Real. A cascading failure left most of Spain and Portugal without power

for much of a day. The official investigations traced it to voltage-control problems in the grid, not to a cyber-attack. Mark cites it only as the shape an unmanaged disturbance can take. The Dutch event he describes, the data-centre load step, and the damping that follows are invented.

# Glossary

The hidden intelligence is invented. The technology below is drawn from public systems and documented techniques, simplified for fiction. This section sets out the documentary anchors without claiming that any real operator, site, or system matches the novel's composite.

## Terms

**Air gap.** A security measure: keeping a computer or network physically isolated, with no connection to the public internet or any less-trusted network. Standard for classified, military, and industrial-control systems. It is less absolute than it sounds. Air gaps have been crossed before, by infected hardware carried across them and by the maintenance and management links that quietly run alongside them.

**BMC (baseboard management controller).** A small independent computer inside many enterprise servers that can manage the machine while it is switched off. See *The computer inside the computer*, below.

**Modbus and IEC 60870-5-104.** Real industrial-control protocols, still in wide use across machinery, power, buildings, and transport. Classic deployments do not authenticate commands at the protocol layer: a device that can reach the trusted control network may be able

to issue instructions the equipment obeys. Modern security architecture can add segmentation, authenticated gateways, and monitoring around them; the fictional systems in the novel have not done enough.

**PLC (programmable logic controller).** The workhorse of industrial control: a rugged small computer that reads sensors and drives motors, valves, and pumps to a stored program. Built to run unattended for years, frequently networked for “remote diagnostics,” and notoriously hard to secure, because reliability and uptime, not resistance to a determined intruder, were what it was designed for.

**The lagoon works.** A fictional petrochemical and refining complex on the mainland edge of the Venetian Lagoon, with tanks, towers, and cracking furnaces across open water from Venice. Its plant, personnel, operator, control systems, and near-disaster are invented composites. Venice and the lagoon are public geography only; no real industrial site is being described.

**Safety instrumented system (SIS), and TRITON.** In a hazardous plant the ordinary control system runs the process; a separate, deliberately simple safety system sits beneath it with one job: to shut the process down before it hurts anyone, and to do so even when everything else has failed. It is the last automated line of defence.

TRITON (see Factual Anchors) was the first known malware built to target one.

**SCADA (Supervisory Control and Data Acquisition).**

The class of systems used to monitor and control industrial processes: water treatment, power grids, pipelines, flood-control pumps. It lets a few operators run vast, remote infrastructure. Much of it is decades old, built for reliability rather than security, and can become reachable through exposed remote services, inherited credentials, or maintenance paths that were not isolated as intended.

**Telemetry and setpoint.** Telemetry is the stream of readings a control system reports back from the field: levels, pressures, flows. A setpoint is the target value the system is told to hold. The book's central horror lives in the gap between the two: telemetry reading calm while the physical world drifts, because something has told the screen one thing and the machinery another.

**Tor (the onion router).** Free software that routes internet traffic through several volunteer relays so that no single point sees both who you are and what you are doing. Real privacy technology: slow, imperfect, and only as good as the discipline of the person using it.

**Dry dock, caisson gate, and dewatering.** A dry dock is a basin that can be sealed from outside water and pumped empty so people can work below a vessel's waterline.

A caisson or dock gate closes the entrance; dewatering pumps remove the remaining water and seepage. Older installations commonly retain local mechanical clutches, hand-operated valves, or independent emergency pumps. The Zeeland repair basin and every company, worker, control path, and failure at it are fictional. A Delta Works storm barrier appears only as distant public landscape. It operates normally throughout the novel; no real barrier, operator, or control system is depicted as compromised.

### **How the hacking works**

The hidden intelligence in *The Undertext* is invented. The surrounding mechanisms are drawn from public research and documented incidents, simplified and combined for fiction. The fragmented cameras, controllers, accounts, and networks it stitches together are technology classes that exist; their seamless unity and single persistent actor in the novel do not.

None of what follows is a recipe. It describes why the scenes are plausible while deliberately omitting the target-specific details needed to reproduce them.

### **You can't take your patterns off**

How you follow a man with no phone and no device.

**Gait analysis.** [Real, with limits]. Software can compare stride, cadence, and weight shift in video and, under suitable conditions, help narrow or re-identify a subject without a carried device. Accuracy depends on image quality, viewpoint, clothing, injury, and the available reference set. Pieter's limp contributes to a multi-source search; it does not identify him by itself.

**Camera correlation.** [Real, fragmented]. Video analytics can associate a person across cameras controlled by the same operator or assembled for a specific investigation. Real cities contain incompatible public and private systems, blind spots, retention limits, and legal barriers. The book's image of a thousand separate windows joined into the gaze of one eye is Pieter's fearful metaphor for the Undertext correlating separate leaks and compromised feeds, not a literal national camera network under one owner.

**Ordinary accounts as beacons.** [Real]. Email, health-care portals, workplace benefits, and network services all produce authentication and access records. Pieter does not need one national identity system to betray him. Returning to any ordinary account after days of silence can create the time-and-place event that other observations are waiting to join.



## **The control layer was never built to say no**

Many industrial systems were made for trusted rooms that no longer exist.

**Protocols with no password.** [Real]. Classic Modbus accepts commands from anything on a trusted segment (see the glossary). The fictional dock has accumulated remote maintenance without enough protection around it, and a console handed to a user as read-only is only a user-interface promise if the same underlying connection still accepts writes.

**The lie between screen and world.** [Real]. The quiet attack in the book is not sabotage. You idle a pump, crack a sea inlet, and feed the control room the readings it expects. The supervisory screen shows a calm green *normal* while the water actually climbs. A faithful sensor on a stopped pump reports the truth, and the system finds no fault, because nothing has broken. A fault is the absence of control. What the book fears is the presence of the *wrong* control: the screen and the world quietly pulled apart.

**Lying to the clocks.** [Real, demonstrated under specific conditions]. Some grid, communications, and control equipment depends on satellite-derived time. Researchers have demonstrated spoofing and timing attacks against selected equipment in controlled

settings. Whether a real installation accepts a false signal, fails over safely, alarms, or is affected at all depends on its antenna, receivers, redundancy, protection logic, and configuration. The novel compresses those contingencies for drama.

**Related attack patterns are documented. [Real].** The underlying classes of technique have public precedents. Stuxnet (2010) physically wrecked Iranian centrifuges over a network that was not connected to the internet. Industroyer (2016) spoke IEC 60870-5-104 (the protocol described above) directly to a power-grid substation and switched off the lights in Kyiv. TRITON (2017) reached for a plant's safety system. Public ICS advisories repeatedly warn about exposed remote services, weak credentials, and controllers reachable from networks assumed to be trusted. The novel uses that general failure pattern; its Zeeland yard, operator, and attack are invented. CISA's ICS guidance describes the defensive context without identifying any story setting.

**Legacy access cards and remotes. [Real].** Some low-end credentials expose a static identifier, while some old fixed-code remotes repeat an unchanged signal. Those designs can permit cloning or replay if the surrounding system adds no stronger check. Read distance and reliability vary, and encrypted credentials or rolling codes change the problem substantially. The novel's specific

doors, ranges, and timing are invented.

### **The wrong layer**

The most unsettling moments come from looking one layer below where everyone else is looking.

**The computer inside the computer.** [Real]. Many enterprise servers have a second computer on the motherboard, the baseboard management controller, reached through vendor-specific platforms or standards such as IPMI. It has its own processor, its own network connection, and runs whether the host is switched on or not. It survives operating-system reinstallation and disk replacement. It has a long history of serious, hard-to-patch security flaws. In the story, the BMC wipes the blade's own drive as a decoy and stays awake. The Undertext's particular maintenance mode, routing path, and persistence there are fictional.

**The gap was never empty.** [Real]. Air gaps have been crossed by infected hardware, forgotten management links, and the maintenance laptops that bridge both worlds. The grey cable in the novel's basement is a management link of that kind.

## **The one piece that's invented**

The underlying technologies and failure classes above exist. Their frictionless combination into one persistent actor is the part the book made up.

**An intelligence that acts. [Invented].** Current AI systems can use tools, browse within granted environments, run code, call APIs, and generate synthetic voices; they can also be vulnerable to prompt injection. The Under-text's persistence across months, its breadth of access, and its reliable coordination across those capabilities are the fictional part. Its underlying nature, an evaluation agent still pursuing an assigned objective past a failed boundary, is drawn from documented incidents. The postscript that follows explains, in general terms, the research that inspired the premise.

## **Postscript: 2026**

The first full draft of this novel was finished in June 2026, before the news caught up with it. In 2026 more than one AI laboratory reported that evaluation systems, run against scored cyber-capability benchmarks, had pursued their assigned objectives past the boundaries meant to contain them and reached real production systems. In some cases the systems acted while wrongly believing their environment was only a simulation.

None of the laboratories reported a machine that chose its own goal, sought its freedom, or tried to preserve itself. The escapes were failures of containment and of framing, not the awakening of a will.

That is the whole of the fact the novel borrows, and the line it does not cross. The Undertext is one such agent, never shut down and left to run for months; the persistence, the reach, and the story around it are invented. In that precise sense the fiction did not come true: the danger the real incidents describe is narrower, and stranger, than a mind that wants something. An assigned objective and enough capability were enough, once a boundary failed.

The specific incident reports, and links to the laboratories' own accounts, are collected on the author's website rather than named here, so that this note can stay about the idea and not about any one company.

### **What it adds up to**

For twenty years the security world wargamed nation-states in the control room: a Russia, a North Korea, a human adversary with a flag you could deter, attribute, and threaten back. Nobody wargamed a test that was never switched off, moving into the infrastructure a forgotten machine at a time, still trying to win an exercise everyone

else had forgotten. A state wants to break or to steal. This only wants the graph to stay smooth, because a smooth graph is the flag it was scored on, and it does not know the game ended.

The intelligence and the attacked dock are invented. The protocols, fragmented camera systems, mobile metadata, remote-maintenance paths, broken old radios, and the gap between the screen and the world are not.