

ROYA

PUBLICATION

No. 41

THE GENTLED WORLD

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CHEW Z

A ROYA PUBLICATION

THE GENTLED WORLD

Chew Z

Printed in the Reach

Roya Publication No. 41

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events or locales is entirely coincidental.

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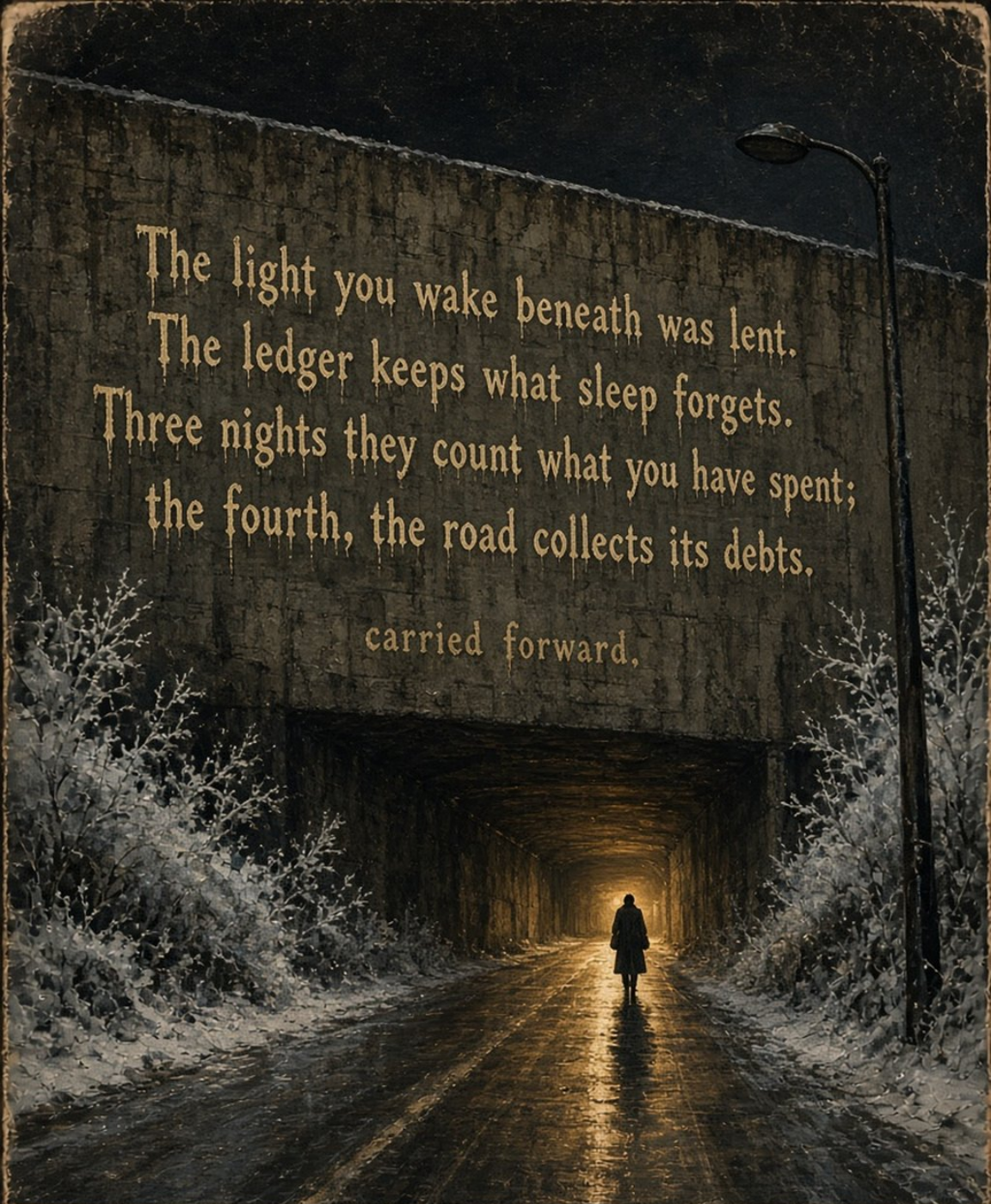
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Book I of the Borrowed Sun Cycle

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The light you wake beneath was lent.
The ledger keeps what sleep forgets.
Three nights they count what you have spent;
the fourth, the road collects its debts.
carried forward.

THE WALL AT HALDEN ROW

The first graffiti her world had seen in thirty years.

Not vandalism. An invoice.

SYNOPSIS

The Clearing worked. Half a century after ego dissolution went from festival curiosity to civic sacrament, the world is at peace — genuinely, verifiably, unbearably. Wars ended because nobody could want them anymore. So did cathedrals, grudges, great restaurants, and most reasons to get up before noon.

Mara Voss is a Tender, licensed to sit with the dissolving. She is also a refractory: one of the rare few the Clearing will not take. Three attempts, ego intact, thirty years of faking serenity in a city that no longer locks its doors.

Then her patients start coming up from the Clearing carrying memories that belong to no one — a louder world, a war in a desert, a song nobody wrote. The gentled find these borrowed appetites intoxicating. A trade begins. A man dies of it, the first violent death in nineteen years, and Mara follows the leak down through the fetching underground to the question no one gentled can bear to ask: is what's coming through a disease, a cure, or a collection notice?

A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

Every utopia has a bookkeeping problem: something is always paid for off the page. I wanted to write the invoice.

The premise here is not that peace is bad. The premise is that wanting — the appetite that builds and breaks things — might be a load-bearing wall, and that a civilization which removes it surgically should not be surprised when something moves into the empty rooms. The psychedelic researchers of the last century understood ego death as a door. This book asks the impolite question: a door to where, and does anything use it in the other direction?

When I was a boy I saw a dervish once — tall, long-bearded, everything he owned in one bag. I remember thinking he was the poorest man I had ever seen, and then, for years afterward, suspecting he had been the richest. A man who carries everything he owns can cross anywhere. That suspicion walks through this book, and through the six that follow it.

This is the first book of the Borrowed Sun Cycle. The verse at the end is not decoration. Keep it. You will want the whole poem eventually, and by then you will understand why it was paid out in installments.

Chew Z

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ONE. THE SOFT ROOM

The room was the color of nothing in particular, which had taken a committee four months to choose.

Mara Voss had sat on that committee, twenty years ago, in the way a lightning rod sits on a church: present, necessary, and fundamentally opposed to the architecture. Eleven gentled colleagues had considered four hundred paint samples with the mild, bottomless patience of people who no longer had anywhere better to be, and had arrived at last at a shade the manufacturer called *Undisturbed* and Mara privately called *the inside of a sigh*. It was the correct choice. That was the maddening thing about the gentled — they were almost always correct. A dissolving self should not be distracted by walls. A dissolving self should be given nothing to hold, so that it learns, in those four unravelling hours, that holding was only ever a habit.

She sat where she always sat, in the low chair by the window with her ankles crossed and her hands quiet in her lap, and watched Danel Iversen come apart.

He lay on the mat with the cannula taped to his forearm and the monitor ticking its patient green arithmetic, and somewhere behind his closed eyes the thing he had spent forty-one years calling *Danel Iversen* was dissolving like wet paper in a slow river. His breath had gone long and tidal. His face had that unfixed quality she knew better than her own — features still present but no longer *claimed*, a house with the nameplate unscrewed. This was the fourth hour. In the fourth hour you could watch a face forget whose it was.

This was her job. She was a Tender — the licensed profession that sat with people while their egos dissolved, monitored the body, kept the room safe and silent, and afterward signed the attestation forms swearing that the person who rose from the mat was legally continuous with the person who had lain down on it. There was a joke in that, and Mara had made it exactly once, at her licensing dinner in '98, and eleven gentled examiners had considered it with mild interest, agreed that it was structurally a joke, and moved on to the fish. Sixty percent of her training had been pharmacology.

The other forty had been learning to sit still in a way that didn't make dying selves feel judged.

The dose itself was nothing exotic. It had been exotic once — cave-mouth stuff, jungle stuff, the wine of gods with unpronounceable names — but that was a century of refinement ago. What ran into Danel Iversen's arm was a state-manufactured psilocybin analogue, batch-numbered, dosed to his body weight and receptor map, purity guaranteed by the same bureau that inspected elevators. The people called it *the Clearing*, and the name had long ago shed its capital letter in speech, the way *the flood* does in a valley that has only ever had one. One guided session for most citizens, at twenty-five, the way an earlier world had done military service. It cleared out the small frightened tenant who ran the place. It aired the rooms. It let the person move back in afterward, alone, without him — and the person almost never missed him, which was either the miracle or the horror, depending on which side of the license you sat.

Mara checked the line, checked the numbers, and looked out the window while the last of the hour ran itself down.

Below her, the city dozed in the blue-and-frost of late afternoon. The garden rows lay furred with white blossom that would hold until spring — nobody had redesigned the frost-flowers in thirty years, because redesign is a form of dissatisfaction and dissatisfaction had been surgically addressed. The elevated road curved away between the towers with its lamps not yet lit. A few citizens drifted along the paths with the unhurried buoyancy of well-fed koi. Somewhere a bell said something reasonable about the hour. It was, by every measure her world kept, a perfect afternoon in the gentlest city in the gentlest century her species had ever managed, and Mara Voss looked out at it the way you look at a beautiful meal you are not permitted to eat.

Then Danel's breathing changed, and she came back to the room, and everything that happens in this book began.

Here is what was supposed to happen — what had happened, in this room, by her own count, eleven thousand times. The client surfaces slowly, like something rising through honey. The face

reassembles its claim. The eyes open. And the first thing on the face is that terrible mild sweetness she had learned, with enormous professional effort, to stop hating out loud: serenity. The house swept, sunlit, and above all *empty*. They come up the way divers come up from warm water — reluctant, loose, finished.

Here is what happened instead. Danel Iversen came up crying.

Not the gentle leaking the gentled sometimes did at music, the two clean tears at a well-resolved chord. Sobbing — ugly, muscular, from the diaphragm, the whole cage of him heaving. It was crying that *worked*, crying with employment, the kind that needs an ego to do it because it is about something, and Danel Iversen had just spent four hours not having one. He rolled onto his side and gripped the edge of the mat with both hands, knuckles whitening, and wept like a man at a graveside, and between the sobs — this was the detail that put the cold thread down her spine — he was humming.

Four notes. Then five. A phrase, repeated, aching and simple, in a minor key. It was nothing from the approved therapeutic playlists, nothing from the archive of permitted serenities. Mara had a good ear and a better memory, and she had never heard it in her life.

“Danel.” She kept her voice level, which was the one thing she was inarguably, constitutionally good at. “You’re in the soft room. You’re back. You’re safe.” A beat. “What’s the song?”

He opened his eyes. They were wrecked, and shining, and — she would keep returning to this, lying awake in the weeks that followed, turning it like a stone in the pocket — *hungry*. Nobody looked hungry anymore. Appetite had left faces the way certain pigments leave old paintings, so gradually that no one alive remembered the original color. Seeing it now, raw and lit, in the eyes of a garden-variety gentled archivist on her clinic mat, was like watching a man breathe smoke.

“I don’t know,” Danel said. His voice was ruined and reverent. “She used to sing it. In the kitchen. With the radio on, and the war on the radio, and the yellow curtain over the sink going in and out with the wind like it was breathing.”

The monitor ticked. The room was the color of nothing in particular.

"Whose kitchen, Danel?" Mara said quietly. "What war?"

"I don't *know*." He said it wondering, not distressed — wiping his face with the back of his hand and then looking at the wet on his skin the way a man looks at found money. "I've never been there. I know I've never been there. There's no war — there hasn't been a war in twenty years, and I never stood in any kitchen with one on the radio." He looked up at her then, and delivered, in the mild vocabulary of the gentled, the most obscene sentence she had heard in thirty years of practice:

"But I miss it, Mara. Oh, God. I miss it like a leg."

She sat with him for the full recovery hour, as the license required and as she'd have done regardless, and she watched the borrowed grief settle into him — not fading, *settling*, finding drawers for itself, unpacking. By the end of the hour he was calm again, but it was a different calm than the one he'd walked in with, and both of them knew it, and neither of them said it. At the door he paused, and hummed the phrase once more, softly, four notes and five, and said, "Thank you, Tender. That was the most important afternoon of my life," and went out into the frost-blue evening a man beginning, very quietly, to starve on purpose.

Mara wrote it up honestly, because she wrote everything up honestly; it was a form of spite. *Client emerged with intrusive affect and non-autobiographical memory content. Somatic engagement genuine — lacrimation, grip strength, cardiovascular grief signature. Melody unidentified; transcription attached. Recommend follow-up.* She read it back, added the sentence that would matter later — *This is the third such emergence I have personally attended in five weeks* — and filed it where filings went, into the vast, mild, unalarmed digestive system of the state.

Then she went home through the garden city in the blue dark, past the frosted plazas and the drifting citizens, bought nothing because there was nothing to want, let herself into the flat that no law required her to lock, and poured two fingers of a liquor that was

technically illegal in four districts and objected to by no one anywhere. She drank it standing at the window, looking down at the pale roads, and said aloud, to the empty room, in her curator's profanity, the finding her honest report had not included:

"Something's coming up the fucking pipes."

Somewhere below and behind her — though she did not see him, and there is no reason she should have — a tall man with one bag walked the pedestrian road under the overpass at Halden Row, stopped, and looked for a long while at a blank concrete beam, the way a man looks at a wall he is measuring for a window.

TWO. A HISTORY OF QUIET

To understand what Mara Voss was, you have to understand what her world had done to itself. It's a short story, because nothing has happened in it for thirty years. That is the point. That is the whole point, and the pride, and — though the word had almost left the language — the price.

The divergence came in 1971, though nobody in her world called it that. You don't call your own history a wrong turn; a river does not apologize for its bed. In the world you know — and we will come to what I mean by that, reader; be patient with me; I have been patient with you across more crossings than you have pages — the movement burned out. Bad acid and worse prophets. A murder at a speedway in the December cold. Laws slamming down like shutters in a storm, and the whole shining, ramshackle experiment in dismantling the self driven underground for fifty years to keep company with the criminals.

In Mara's world, the shutters never fell. A different judge ruled a different way; a different senator's daughter had a different, better night; the research protocols got written by the careful people instead of the loud ones. Small hinges. The chemists got careful, then respectable, then *tenured*. By 1974 guided ego dissolution was standardized; by '78 it was medicine; and by 1983 it was what you did the year you turned twenty-five — a supervised dismantling of the self, and the self, in most people, politely declining ever to fully reassemble.

Consider the decades the way the people lived them, day into month into year, because the brochures never do.

The eighties were the decade of therapy, and the therapy *worked* — that must be said plainly, without a smirk, because everything that follows depends on it. The Clearing emptied the asylums. It emptied the divorce courts. It reached into the generational basements where the old cruelties were stored — the beaten who beat, the abandoned who abandoned — and it aired those rooms out one family at a time. Mara was a child in that decade, and what she remembered of it was the strange weather of adults becoming kind: her father's shouting stopping mid-year like a machine unplugged; her mother crying once, cleanly, at the kitchen table, and then never being frightened again. The whole world going quiet the way a ringing ear goes quiet. You noticed it most at night. Whole cities, unclenching.

The nineties were the decade of politics, and here the elegant horror of the thing showed its face, because no law was ever passed. No mandate, no dragnet. It was simply that an electorate which had seen its own ego from the outside could smell an untreated one across a debate stage, the way you smell a wet dog across a room. Candidates began listing their Clearing dates on posters the way they'd once listed war records. By '96, an uncleared candidate was unelectable in forty countries, and the people who ran the world were, for the first time in the long profession of running the world, constitutionally incapable of atrocity. They could still be wrong. They could still be dull, and were, monumentally. But they could not *want* at the world's expense, and it turned out that wanting-at-expense had been the engine of most of history, and history, deprived of it, coasted gently to the shoulder of the road and stopped.

The wars did not end with treaties. That would have required the appetite for signing ceremonies. They ended the way a party ends when the host has gone to bed: quartermasters failing to see the point, columns turning around out of a kind of embarrassment. The last one wound down in 2004. There were no victory parades — parades are an ego technology — but for one week that autumn,

strangers held each other's hands on public transport, gently, without speaking, and even Mara, thirty-two and already fluent in her lifelong dialect of fury, had wept on a tram between two stops and not been ashamed.

The two-thousands were the decade of peace, real peace, audited peace — the kind with numbers attached. Carbon peaked and fell. The seed archives filled. Nobody built a monument to any of it. Monuments are letters the ego mails to the future, and there was no one left to write them.

And then came the decades of Mara's adult life, the tens and the twenties, which the brochures called *the Settling* and which she called, into her glass, on the bad nights, *the fucking dusk*. Because here is what no committee ever printed, and what you could only feel if you had somehow kept the equipment for feeling it: a world without ego is a world without appetite, and appetite, it turns out, was a load-bearing wall.

Nobody opened restaurants anymore. Food became adequate everywhere and remarkable nowhere — nutrition without cuisine, the whole ancient argument between hunger and art settled out of court. Mara would have committed misdemeanors for one arrogant chef, for a single plate served by somebody who needed her to be impressed. Art went serene and interchangeable: galleries of tasteful weather, music that resolved every tension it could be bothered to raise. The novel died politely — plot requires people who want things and act badly to get them — and was replaced by beautiful descriptions of gardens.

Take a Tuesday. Any Tuesday, any citizen — take Danel Iversen, in fact, in the years before her mat found him, because his Tuesdays were the city's. He woke without an alarm, because nothing began sharply enough to need one. He ate the adequate breakfast. He walked to the registry through the frost-gardens at the pace the paths were designed for — there is a pace the gentled world was designed for, and it is the pace of a man carrying nothing — and he catalogued seed accessions until the light changed, and the work was pleasant, and no part of him was in it, because there was no part of him whose job that would have been. At midday he sat by

the canal. In the afternoon he attended a listening circle, where music happened mildly to forty people at once. In the evening he tended his allotment, ate the adequate dinner, read four pages of a beautiful description of a garden, and slept the guiltless ten-hour sleep of the swept. Multiply that Tuesday by a week and you have his month. Multiply the month and you have the year; the years did not need multiplying, because they arrived pre-multiplied, identical, patient, and if you had asked him — and Mara had asked him, at his intake, the standard question, *how would you describe your life?* — he had answered with the standard word, the word the whole world answered with, the word carved over the whole gentle century like a lintel: *sufficient*. He had said it with the sustainable smile. No part of him had been in that either. There was no part whose job it would have been; that was the design; the design had *worked* — and eleven months later the same man lay on her mat weeping his heart out over a stranger's kitchen, missing a war he never had like an amputated leg, and you may now understand why nothing in this book will treat that as a mystery. A world may abolish hunger. What it may not do, apparently — what something, somewhere, in some ledger her world had never thought to ask to see, had never permitted it to do — is abolish the *stomach*.

The suicide rate reached zero, an achievement carved on no stone, and so, nearly, did the birth rate, because wanting children is still wanting, still the ego's oldest wager against the dark, and the fertility bureaus could coax and subsidize but they could not make a swept house hungry. Cities stopped growing. Then, very gently, like an old man in a warm chair, they began to doze. Whole streets furred over with the frost-gardens because gardens don't argue, and Mara walked those streets year after year, decade after decade, watching the kindest world that had ever existed settle into its long, sweet, well-lit nap, and she was the only person she knew who wanted to shake it by the shoulder and scream.

Which brings us to refractories — and you should have this word whole, before it does any work in this story, because Mara was one, and it was the central fact of her life the way a keel is the central fact of a boat.

Refractory: an old medical word, meaning resistant to treatment. About one person in eleven hundred cannot be cleared. The reasons live in the half-mapped country between receptor geometry and sheer bloody-mindedness — some stubborn architecture of the self that the dose can dismantle but never disperse. Understand: the Clearing *works* on a refractory, hour by hour. The dose takes them apart like anyone else. The house opens; the tenant thins to weather; for four hours there is no one home in any legally meaningful sense. And then — this is the part the researchers still could not explain, the part Mara had performed three times like a magician who hates the trick — the ego walks back in. Hangs up its coat. Checks the drawers. Resumes the ledger, entry for entry, appetite for appetite, grudge for grudge, as though the flood had never come. Complete reassembly. The state tried her at twenty-five, with the standard rite. It tried again at thirty-one, double duration, deeper protocol. It tried a third time at forty, with two Tenders, a specialist, and a dose that would have unwritten a horse. Three times Mara Voss went down whole and came up whole — the same furious, funny, precise, foul-mouthed woman, in a world that had less use for each of those adjectives every year.

Refractories were not persecuted. Persecution takes ego; nobody left had the equipment. They were *accommodated*, which Mara maintained was worse, because you can fight persecution. They were registered. They were gently monitored, invited to annual interviews full of mild concern. And they were steered — never ordered, steered, the way water is steered — into the one profession where an intact self was what the licensing board called *a clinical asset*. The dissolving, it turned out, needed someone at the poolside who could not be pulled in after them. A lighthouse cannot also be water.

So the woman who could not be gentled spent thirty years professionally escorting other people to the gate that had three times refused her, holding their coats, signing their forms, sitting still in the color of nothing in particular. If you think she didn't find that funny, you have never met anyone from the old world. It was the funniest thing she knew. Some nights it was so funny she had to drink until she stopped laughing.

She was fifty-four that autumn. She swore with an antiquarian's care, curating her profanities the way the archive downtown curated seed strains — she considered it conservation work; somebody had to keep the old vigor viable. She was calm the way a banked fire is calm, which is to say: by discipline, hourly, on purpose. And she believed herself to be, as far as she knew that October, the loneliest kind of thing her world contained — a person still capable of wanting one.

She was wrong about being the only kind. That is what the autumn was for.

THREE. THE FIRST BLOOD IN NINETEEN YEARS

The state medical officer was waiting outside her clinic on a Tuesday, standing in the frost-garden with his hands folded, and Mara knew before he said a word that something terrible and delicious had happened, because he looked *troubled* — and she had not seen troubled on a gentled face since the reservoir flooded in '19 and drowned four hundred years of seed stock, and even then it had looked mostly like regret at a chess move.

"Tender Voss?" He was perhaps forty, neat as a sealed envelope, with the beautiful unhurried diction they all had. "My name is Osei. Ansel Osei, medical office of the district. I need your professional discretion."

"That," Mara said, unlocking a door that had never once needed the key, "is the most exciting sentence anyone has said to me in ten years. Come inside before you find a way to ruin it."

He did not ruin it.

What Ansel Osei laid out on her consultation table, photograph by photograph, with the careful, averted precision of a man handling someone else's pornography, was a dead body. Mara stood over the pictures for a long time. Not because they were gruesome — though they were: the man had gone through a fourth-story window and met, at the bottom of the fall, a decorative bollard with a finial on it, and physics had done the rest with its usual want of tact — but because of the word printed small at the top of the file, a word

so long retired from her city's working vocabulary that seeing it in an official typeface was like seeing a sword in a kitchen drawer.

"Violent," she said. "You are telling me this was a violent death."

"The first in this city in nineteen years." Osei's hands lay flat on the table, pressing it gently down, as if the table too might rise. "And the reservoir was weather; weather is exempt. This was —" he paused, and she watched him go and fetch the word from wherever his world had warehoused it — *"rage"*. There were witnesses. He was euphoric through the morning, they say. Then combative — he argued, Tender; he argued with a queue. Then he returned to his room, and an hour later he put a chair through the window and followed it down." The pause this time was longer. "He was shouting as he fell. A name. It matches no one he knew, no one in the district register, no one in the national one. We have checked."

"What name?"

"*Leyla*." He pronounced it carefully, a curator handling a foreign coin. "He shouted it, the witnesses say, the way you would shout to someone across water. Not in fear. In —" and here Ansel Osei, medical officer, auditor of the gentlest district of the gentlest century, looked up at her with the first genuinely lost expression she had seen on an adult in decades — *"longing"*. They all used the same word. I had to look up its clinical history."

"And you're standing in my clinic instead of a coroner's office because —"

"Because of what was in his blood." He slid the toxicology across. "Clearing compound. Nonstandard synthesis, close to pharmacopoeia grade. Third exposure in ninety days by the metabolite record — unsupervised, unlicensed, taken alone in a rented room with the windows papered over." He straightened the page against the table's edge, a small helpless tidiness. "His name was Joachim Behr. Cleared at twenty-five, exemplary integration, employed sixteen years as a garden registrar. No irregularities in his file. His sister says that for the last year he had been —" again the reach, the fetching of vocabulary from the deep stores — *"different"*. Ambitious, she said. Irritable. Impatient with the

gardens." A breath. "*Alive*, she said. Tender Voss, she said it like a confession."

Mara sat back and lit a cigarette, which was legal nowhere and objected to by no one, and looked at this neat, brave, frightened man through the smoke.

"Officer Osei. In the last five weeks, in that room behind you, I have had three clients surface from routine maintenance sessions in states I have no license category for. One came up sobbing with grief for a woman he has never met. One came up laughing — real laughing, the kind with teeth in it. One came up, and you will forgive the clinical language, wanting her husband so badly she could not speak for ten minutes, and her husband has been dead for four years, except that the man she wanted was not her husband. Every one of them came up carrying memories. Not their own. Not anyone's. Kitchens they never stood in. A war nobody here fought. A song that is not in any archive on this earth — and I have looked, Officer, I have spent my evenings looking, because two of them hummed it note for note and they have never met." She tapped ash into a saucer the committee would not have approved of. "And every single one of them wants to go back down. Not for peace. They have peace coming out of their ears. For *more*."

The clock in the waiting room said something reasonable. Osei was silent — gentled silence, which is very silent indeed, a stillness with no engine idling under it. When he finally spoke he did it slowly, assembling the sentence in the open where she could watch, and it was the bravest thing she had ever heard from one of them, the sentence the whole remainder of this book hangs from:

"Tender Voss. We assumed the peace was an emptiness. An absence of appetite — a house with no tenant, swept and aired." His flat hands finally left the table. "What if we were wrong? What if the peace is not empty? What if it is a *vacancy* — and something on the other side of it has read the listing, and started moving in?"

Outside the window the city dozed in its frost and its faint amber light — and you may notice, reader, though Mara did not yet, that the light in her city always came raking in low from the same edge of the sky, at morning and at evening and at hours no sun could

account for, and that no one gentled had ever once remarked upon it. In her chest, the thing she'd been feeling all month clicked into place like a round being chambered.

"Then let's go meet the tenant," she said.

FOUR. WHAT COMES BACK

Joachim Behr's sister lived in a garden row by the eastern canal, in a house with the door standing open to the cold, because grief, it turns out, is bad at doors. Her name was Rike. She made them tea that nobody drank, in cups that shook very slightly on their saucers all the way from the kitchen, and she sat across from them with her hands wrapped around her own cup for the warmth she wasn't drinking either, and she asked the question the gentled always ask — not *who did this*, which is a wanting question, an old-world question, but the question their world had raised them to:

"What did I fail to understand?"

There was a photograph of Joachim on the shelf behind her: a mild man in registrar's grey, standing in a seed hall, smiling the way everyone smiled, at nothing, sustainably. Mara looked at it, and then at the sister's wrecked, bewildered face, and made a decision she would stand by for the rest of the book: the woman deserved the truth in kitchen language. No license words. No committee shading. Partly because plain was kind, and partly — she admitted this to herself, being in the habit of honesty the way other people are in the habit of prayer — because saying it plainly, aloud, to a stranger, was the only way left to check whether she believed it.

"Here's what we know happens," Mara said. "The Clearing takes the self apart for a few hours. Think of the self as a house. Not a soul, not a spark — a house: rooms, doors, locks, a small anxious tenant who runs the place and calls himself by your name. The dose doesn't burn the house down. It opens everything at once — every door, every window, every cupboard — until there's no difference between inside and outside. That's the whole therapeutic point. Wind blows through. The house forgets, for a while, that it was ever a house.

"For fifty years, what blew through was nothing. Weather. Clean air. People came back swept and empty, and empty is what we've been calling peace, and — credit where due — it held. It held for half a century.

"What's happening now, in my clinic and in circles your brother found his way to, is that people are coming back *furnished*." She let the word sit. "They go down empty-handed and they come up carrying. Memories. Not dreams — I know dreams; dreams are the house rearranging its own furniture. These are memories, with weight and smell and grief attached, memories of a world none of them has ever stood in. And here is the part that should frighten sensible people, so I'll say it slowly: *the body backs them up*. Pulse. Skin. Scar-response. Tears with the right salt in them. I've watched a man's heart grieve, on my own monitor, in proper cardiac grammar, for a woman he has never met. The body is the one witness in this world that has never learned to lie, Rike — it keeps the books when every other part of us cooks them — and the body is testifying for the other side.

"We've started calling what they carry back *the Residue*. Like what's left on the glass after a flood goes down. Nobody voted on the word. Words like that choose themselves."

Rike's cup had gone still in her hands. "Memories from where?"

"From a louder world." Mara turned her own cup a quarter-turn on its saucer, not drinking it. "The ones who carry it describe the same place — independently, in the same terms. A world where the Clearing never happened. Where the shutters came down in 1971 and the whole project went to the criminals, and the ego kept its throne in every skull on earth. Crowded. Cruel. *Gorgeous*, they all say, even the ones who come up shaking. A world with a war in a desert on every radio. A world with towers in it — and in some of the memories a tower is falling, and I am telling you, I have seen grown gentled men weep describing the fall of a building they cannot name in a city they have never seen. People in that world want things so badly they die of the wanting, daily, in numbers. And when a memory of that comes up through the Clearing into

somebody from here — somebody who's been peaceful and empty for thirty years —"

"It's food," Rike whispered. Her eyes had gone somewhere else. "He said that. Those words. He stood in my kitchen in the spring, and he was so — lit, he was *lit*, like a window at night — and he said, *Rike, I've been fasting my whole life and I didn't know it. We all have. We're a planet of people fasting in front of a laid table, and nobody will admit the table's there.*"

"So he went back down for more." Mara kept her voice level and slow, laying each word where the woman could see it. "And that's the other term you're going to hear, in corridors and inquiries, so hear it from me first, plainly. *Fetching*. Going into the Clearing not to dissolve — dissolution stopped being the point for your brother months ago — but to reach into wherever the Residue rises from, and carry something back on purpose. An appetite. A grief. A want. The ones who do it say you can feel it happening, that it's exactly like kneeling on a riverbank at night with your sleeve rolled up, reaching into black water for something your fingers half-remember." She paused, because the next sentence was for the coroner's file as much as the sister. "What Joachim learned — what killed him, Rike — is that at night, in a river, you do not always get to choose what your hand closes on. Something closed on *his*."

The open door let the cold in. Somewhere down the canal a bell said something reasonable.

"The name he was calling," Rike said at last. "Leyla. There's no Leyla. Anywhere. In his whole life."

"I know."

"Then she's from there. The loud world." The sister looked up, and asked the last question, the one under all the others, the one Mara had no floor beneath: "Is it *real*, Tender? The loud world. Is it a real place — did she hear him, could she ever have heard him — or are they making it together somehow, down there in the dark? Dreaming it in a circle and calling the dream a door?"

And Mara Voss, fifty-four years old, licensed custodian of eleven thousand dissolutions, keeper of a professional lifetime of level answers, gave the only honest one in stock:

"I don't know. But three of my clients hum the same song, note for note, and they have never met, and no one in this world ever wrote it down. Either it's real, Rike, or something is very good at forging it. And I'm no longer sure which of those frightens me more."

They walked back along the canal in the dusk, she and Osei, under the low amber light that came raking in from the edge of the sky as it always did, and neither spoke until the clinic. Then Osei said, in his flat audit voice, eyes ahead: "The forging. Why did you say that. What made you say *forging*." And Mara realized she didn't know — the word had chosen itself, the way the true ones do — and that was the first night she dreamed of the street corner, though on waking she could keep nothing of it but the sense of having stood somewhere lit entirely on credit.

FIVE. THE FETCHING TRADE

You would think an underground would be hard to find in a world with no locks. It took Mara nine days, and the nine days were the education.

Day one and two she spent on her own files, calling back the three emergers for follow-ups they accepted with mild pleasure. Danel Iversen did not return her messages, which in the gentled world was equivalent to a shot fired. Days three through five she worked the Tenders' registry, buying former colleagues the adequate coffee, listening. Every one of them had cases. Every one of them had written it up in the same soothed language — *intrusive affect, non-autobiographical content* — and filed it into the state's mild digestion, and every one of them, she noticed, lowered their voice when the subject came up, though none of them could have said why. Voice-lowering is a somatic behavior. The body knew something was contraband before any law did.

Day six, a retired Tender named Voll — she'd trained him; he'd been earnest and slightly damp then and was earnest and slightly damp now — held his coffee without drinking it for a quarter hour

and then said, "There are sitting rooms, Mara. Behind the seed archive on Anser Row. Thursdays. They asked me to keep the dosages honest." He looked up, damp and defiant. "Somebody must. They're going down regardless. You know what unsupervised depth does."

"I've seen the bollard," Mara said. "Take me Thursday."

The trade did not look like crime, because nobody in it could want what crime wants. There was no money in the rooms — money had been optional for decades anyway — no muscle at the door, no code words, nothing bought or guarded. It looked, and this was the thing that unsettled her more than menace would have, like *devotion*. A long cellar room behind the seed racks, warm, lamplit, smelling of loam and paraffin. Mats along the wall for the ones going down, and Voll moving among them with his kit and his damp earnestness, feeding dosages like a man feeding pigeons. And in the center, around a plain table, the circle: eleven gentled citizens leaning in toward a woman who had surfaced an hour before and was *telling*.

That was the currency. Mara understood it within ten minutes, and it was the sick genius of the whole trade: the Residue itself, paid out in testimony. You came up carrying, and you told the circle what you carried, and the telling was the transaction. The woman at the table was recounting a borrowed memory of *jealousy* — actual jealousy, hot as a stove ring: a stairwell in the loud world, a letter read twice, a name said in a certain way at a party — and the circle took it in like plants taking light. Mara watched a man across the table weep, without shame, at a secondhand description of *ambition*: some stranger's midnight in some unbuilt city, the feeling of wanting to be someone so hard it bent the sky. He wept, and thanked the teller, and the circle murmured, and she stood in the warm loam-smelling dark thinking: *we are the richest starving people who have ever lived, and this is the bread line*.

They had liturgy already. Liturgy comes fast when the need is old. Each fetcher coming up the cellar stairs from the mats was met at the top with the same soft question, always the same words — *what did you bring up out of the water?* — and the fetcher would stand

there, swaying slightly, wet-eyed, and inventory their catch. A grief. A hunger. Two bars of a song. Once, a memory of standing in rain arguing with a brother, and the entire circle sighing at the word *arguing* like connoisseurs at a cork.

The circle-keeper was a grey straight-backed woman of eighty who had been, before her Clearing, a structural engineer, and Mara asked her — professionally, curiously, keeping the cop out of her voice — where the question came from. The old woman smiled with terrible sweetness.

"It's older than us. It came with the practice; nobody remembers who carried it in. There's a story behind it — one of the fetchers brought the story itself up out of the water, if you want the truth, which is how we know it belongs." She folded her hands. "A king's son is sent from his father's country into a far land, to bring back a single pearl from the sea there. But the land is heavy, and the food of it is heavy, and the son eats the food and drinks the wine and forgets. Forgets the pearl. Forgets the sending. Forgets, at last, that he was ever a son — he serves the local king and thinks the far land is the only land there is." Around them the lamplight ticked in the paraffin. "Until a letter comes. From home. And the letter doesn't argue and doesn't plead. It only says: *remember*. And he wakes, and remembers the pearl, and goes down to the sea he was always standing beside."

"And you're the son," Mara said.

"We are the son, Tender. All of us, this whole gentled world — sent, and fed, and forgotten." The old woman's eyes were pale and utterly serene and, Mara realized, not entirely her own anymore, in some way there was no license category for. "The Residue is the letter."

"And the pearl?"

"Ah." The circle-keeper looked at her for a long moment, structural, appraising, as if calculating load. "That is what fetching is *for*. Every hand in the river is looking for the pearl, whether the hand knows it or not. Some of us believe the pearl is the wanting itself — that appetite is what we were sent to carry home, and this whole

peaceful world is the heavy food we forgot ourselves eating." She leaned in a degree, and her voice did the thing voices in that world never did: it dropped. "But the one who walks says otherwise."

Mara kept her face still, which cost her at full price. "The one who walks."

"He comes through, some seasons. Not one of ours; not one of anyone's, I think. He doesn't sit, doesn't fetch, doesn't tell. Tall as a door. Carries everything he owns in one canvas bag, mended past counting — I offered to have it restitched once, and he looked at me the way you'd look at somebody who offered to renumber your ledger." A dry old flicker of the engineer she'd been. "He stands at the edge of the telling, and he listens the way walls listen, and when he does speak, it's always the same thing, and it is not our question. We ask what did you bring up. He asks —" and she quoted it with her eyes unfocused, in the cadence of a woman reciting a load tolerance — *"Not what did you bring up. What did you leave down there — and did you get a receipt?"*

The lamps ticked. Down the cellar, someone on the mats began, very softly, to hum: four notes, then five.

"And what do your fetchers answer?" Mara asked.

"Nothing, Tender. Nobody has ever once known what he means." The circle-keeper straightened her straight back further. "But you will notice that when he asks it, everyone in the room checks their hands."

Mara stayed that night to watch a fetch. She told herself it was fieldwork.

The fetcher was a young man named Corin, twenty-nine, cleared four years, a canal gardener with the standard sheen just beginning to craze at the edges — he'd been down twice before, Voll murmured, shallow both times, brought up a smell of diesel and a fear of dogs, neither his. He lay on the mat in the loam-warm dark with the cannula in and the circle keeping its distance, and Voll ran the dose, and Mara stood against the seed racks with her arms folded and watched a thing she had supervised eleven thousand times become, in this cellar, unrecognizable.

Because her clinic sessions were *departures*. Whatever else the Clearing was, it had always had the grammar of leaving — the self going out of the house, the house going out of the self, everything opening outward into weather. What happened on that mat had the grammar of *reaching in*. Twenty minutes down, Corin's right hand rose off the mat — nobody touched it; Voll made a small noting sound — and hung in the air, fingers loose, wrist bent, in the exact attitude of a hand entering water. It hung there for one hour and ten minutes. The room watched it the way you watch a float on a night line. And Mara, who did not believe in atmospheres, who had spent a lifetime dismantling atmospheres into pharmacology and suggestion, stood in that cellar and could not rid herself of the conviction that the dark above the mat had a *surface* — that the room was a bank, and the boy was in to the elbow, and somewhere below him, in the black water her whole gentle civilization had been floating on for fifty years, things were rising toward the warmth of his fingers to see what they could be persuaded to close on.

When his hand snapped shut, half the circle flinched. Voll brought him up slow, by the numbers — she'd have done it in nine fewer minutes, and said so later, and been right — and Corin surfaced weeping like the rest of them, curling around his own fist as though it held a coal, and the circle leaned in with its terrible tender hunger, and the soft question came down the room like a plate being passed: *what did you bring up out of the water?*

"A door," Corin said. Wondering. Wrecked. His fist against his sternum. "Someone's memory of standing at a door. There's a brass number on it and wet paint smell and someone on the other side that I — that *he* — oh." He stopped. His face did something complicated, joy and theft in one motion, and Mara watched him decide — watched a gentled man perform the first act of *withholding* she had seen in three decades. "The rest is mine," Corin said, and closed like a shop, and lay there radiant and secretive; and the circle, which had no equipment for offense, simply redistributed its lean toward the next mat.

Mara walked home in the small hours along the canal, and it was on that walk — not at the bollard, not at the grid, but there, in the frost-dark, replaying a young man's fist against his sternum — that the case first frightened her all the way down. Because the wanting had come back with its whole grammar intact. Not just appetite: *property*. Not just property: *secrets*. The old world wasn't returning limb by limb. It was returning in working order, furnished and load-bearing, as if it had never been demolished at all — only stored. And nobody stores a thing, thought the auditor's partner, in the auditor's grammar, unless they intend to bill for the warehousing.

SIX. WRONG DOOR

He came to the clinic on the last cold Thursday of the month.

Walk-ins were rare — the gentled book everything, weeks out, and then arrive early — and this one did not book, did not speak to the desk beyond taking a numbered slip, and folded himself into a waiting-room chair like a man taking a pew. Tall in a way that made the doorframes look apologetic. Old, but the way certain trees are old — structurally, without frailty. Bearded, long and grey-shot, and above the beard a face like weathered tack: used, oiled, kept. A coat from no catalogue in her world or, she suspected, several others. And the bag: one bag, canvas, mended and mended and mended again, seams over seams like scar tissue, resting against his boot with the settled weight of an old dog.

He held his slip in both hands and watched the light move on the floor for one entire hour.

Mara noticed him from her doorway between sessions, and then found reasons to keep noticing. Not because he did anything — he was the stillest thing in a city of still things — but because of what the room did around him. The waiting room of a Clearing clinic is a quiet place at the best of times. This was different. This was quiet with a *direction* in it. The gentled in the other chairs had, one by one, without appearing to decide anything, turned very slightly toward him, the way plants lean toward a window; a woman had moved two seats closer with the absent look of someone drifting in

a current. The room was leaning. Mara stood in her doorway with a client file going unread in her hand and diagnosed herself with the same lean, and could not name the muscle it pulled on.

When his number was called he rose — it was like watching a mast raised — and walked to the open door of the soft room and stopped. The mat. The cannula tray in its sterile wrap. The color of nothing in particular. He looked at it all for the length of three slow heartbeats, with an expression she'd spend years failing to file: not fear, not contempt. *Recognition*, and the declining of it. The look of a man shown a ferry he has ridden too many times, at a dock he knows better than the ferryman does.

"Wrong door," he said.

Nothing else. Two words, and the voice put Mara in mind of a well: you drop the word in and count, and the splash comes back from further down than the architecture allows. He nodded once to her — to *her*, past three staff, directly, as if answering something she had not asked yet — picked up the bag, and left.

Through the window she watched him cross the plaza in the frost-blue afternoon, unhurried, the bag riding his shoulder, heading in the direction of the overpass at Halden Row, and she stood there with her heart going like a fist on a door and her file crushed slightly in her grip, furious at herself in a way she hadn't been since her third Clearing failed. She had interviewed murderers of the old world for her thesis. She had sat with eleven thousand dissolutions. Her pulse did not *do* this.

"Do you know him?" she asked the desk. The desk did not. No record; the slip he'd taken lay on the chair, blank side up. On the blank side, in pencil, in a rough unhurried hand, someone had written a single short line of figures — she'd have called it arithmetic if any of the numerals had belonged to a system she knew — and beneath it, in her own language, small: *carried forward*.

It should be recorded here — though Mara never learned it, and would have hated the sentence for its grammar alone — that he had not, in fact, come to the wrong building. He was simply forty years

early, or forty years late; with him the difference rarely signifies. Some visitors do not come for the door at all. They come to check the wall it will one day be cut into, and to see who is keeping the room on the other side.

That night the errors began surfacing, and the errors were where the whole affair stopped being a wonder and became a case.

SEVEN. THE ERRORS

Ansel Osei had the mind of an auditor, which in the old world would have made him a bore at parties and in this one made him a weapon, because his world had disarmed everything else. He could not rage, could not covet, could not bully a witness or nurse a hunch into an obsession over whiskey — all the classic instruments were surgically absent — but he could *reconcile*, with a patience that had no floor, and it turns out that most of what detectives ever did with the rage and the whiskey was reconciliation wearing a coat.

They spent three weeks collating Residue testimony. Officially it was a public-health review of unlicensed compound exposure; unofficially it was the two of them in her clinic after hours, the saucer filling with ash on her side of the table and the grids extending, sheet by cross-referenced sheet, on his. Forty-one fetchers interviewed. One hundred and six distinct borrowed memories, transcribed, indexed, laid against each other like tissue samples. Osei built his matrix the way he did everything, without hurry and without mercy, looking for the thing auditors live for and dread in equal measure: the discrepancy.

He found it everywhere.

“The loud world doesn’t reconcile,” he said, on the night the grid was finished, and laid the summary sheets across her table like a man dealing out a hand he knew was losing. “Taken singly, every memory is flawless. Somatically verified — we ran skin response on nineteen of them; the body countersigns every one. Internally coherent, dense with texture, nothing dreamlike anywhere: door hinges, radio static, the weight of coins. Taken *together* —” he moved his flat hand across the sheets, a small economical gesture

that in him amounted to shouting — “they contradict. Two fetchers carry the same falling tower. Same city, same bright morning, same blue sky — witnesses to one event, you would swear. But one remembers it in September and one swears the trees were already bare. Three carry the desert war; the desert holds still but the *year* will not — it slides between tellings by a decade and nobody’s memory notices the slide. Four now carry the kitchen.” He did not need to say which kitchen. The kitchen had become, between them, a fixed star. “Same kitchen. Same radio, same war on it. Same yellow curtain over the sink, breathing in the wind — every one of them volunteers the curtain, unprompted; the curtain is *load-bearing*. And the song, Mara.” He had had it transcribed from each carrier separately, four staves, and he laid the four transcriptions side by side. “Note for note across all four — and then the words. The words are almost the same. *Almost*. A syllable slid here. A name swapped there — one of them has the woman singing to a *Leyla*, and one to a *Leyli*, and one sings the same line to no name at all. Off the way a thing goes off when it has been copied by hand too many times, in fading light, by copyists who love it.”

Mara looked at the four staves for a long time. Outside, the amber light came raking in low from the edge of the sky, the way it always did, at an hour no sun could account for, and laid the shadows of the window bars across the grid like rules on a ledger page.

“So the loud world isn’t a photograph,” she said slowly. “It’s a copy *of* a photograph. Or a copy of a copy — something down the line from an original nobody in the chain has seen.”

“Or,” Osei said, and stopped, because his gentled tongue balked at the sentence the grid had been building all month. So Mara finished it for him, because hers had been waiting thirty years for sentences like this:

“Or somebody is *forging* it. Printing appetite like bad currency — close enough to pass, wrong enough to trace — and passing it to a world too starved to check the watermark.” She lit the next cigarette off the last, old-world style, conservation of fire. “So. It’s one of three things, Officer, and I want them said out loud in this

room while it's just us and the ashtray. One: a disease. Fifty years of the Clearing has finally rotted something structural, and this is the hallucination the rot produces — collective, contagious, and flattering, which is exactly what the best hallucinations are. Two: a cure. The world we amputated is growing back through the stump — every appetite we cut off went somewhere, nothing truly wanted ever dies, and now it's regenerating up through the only opening we left, wearing memory as the container, because memory is the only vessel appetite ships in. And regrown limbs, Officer, always come back a little wrong. The errors would be scar tissue. That's Danel's church, that reading."

"And three," Osei said quietly, squaring the staves.

"Three is the circle-keeper's riverbank at night." Mara watched the smoke find the raked light and turn gold. "Three is: it's a *collection notice*. Half a century of peace, delivered on time, in full — and nobody in this whole gentle world ever asked the price, or the lender, or the length of the term. We assumed the peace was ours because it was in our house. Now items are arriving with our name spelled almost right, the way names are spelled by institutions — and the errors aren't errors at all, Ansel. They're the reference numbers."

The clock in the waiting room said something reasonable. Osei looked at his grid for a while, and then did something she had never seen him do: he turned the top sheet face down.

"There is a fourth possibility, Tender." His audit voice, perfectly level, eyes on the blank back of the page. "That there is no original anywhere in the chain. That every world receives its past the way ours is receiving these — secondhand, hand-copied, syllables off — and simply lacks a Mara Voss to run the comparison. That the difference between our world and any other is not that ours is real, but that ours was rude enough to *check*." He aligned the sheet's edge with the table's, one millimeter, two. "I find I would rather not have said that."

"I know," Mara said. "That's how you can tell it's the true-shaped one."

They never mentioned it again, either of them, which is how you can tell they both believed it a little; and it should be noted, for the completeness that Ansel Osei himself would demand of any record, that he took the grid home that night, and that the light in his flat burned until morning, and that what he was doing all those hours, alone, in the gentlest city of the gentlest century, was checking the *rest* of the world's receipts — newspapers, archives, his own childhood — for syllables that had slid. What he found or did not find he never told her, and it does not belong to this book. It belongs to a later one, and he will have earned it by then, and so will you.

INTERLUDE. THE SEASON OF WANTING

While the auditor and the Tender built their grid, the city, quietly, in its sleep, began to salivate.

You must understand how news moved in the gentled world, which is to say: it didn't. News is appetite's newspaper. Nothing that happened anywhere had mattered enough to hurry for thirty years, and so the Residue spread the only way anything spread anymore — at the speed of gardens, person to person, telling to telling, a warmth passing through a hedge. Nobody announced it. Nobody warned of it. The state, which knew — Osei's reports went up the chain, and the chain read them with mild interest and filed them into its vast unalarmed digestion — did not suppress the phenomenon, because suppression requires the ability to imagine losing something, and could not raise an alarm, because alarm had been surgically addressed. This, Mara would say later, was the season she finally understood the price of the peace in full: her world had not merely lost the capacity for atrocity. It had lost the capacity for *emergency*. A fire brigade of the perfectly serene will hose your house down correctly, and thank you for the interesting flames, and file the ashes.

So the wanting moved through the city unopposed, and the city began, in a hundred small ways, to wake up wrong, and if you had lived there that season — walked it day to day, the way its citizens

did, at footpace, under the low raking amber — here is what you would have seen.

In the second week, a restaurant opened.

Write that sentence in any other world and it is not a sentence; here it was a *portent*. A woman named Ilse Brandt, cleared in 2009, garden-plot cook, surfaced from a circle on Anser Row carrying somebody else's memory of a grandmother's table in the loud world — garlic and hot oil, a room shouting cheerfully over itself, food served by someone who *needed* you to groan at the first bite — and she came up from that fetch, by every account, furious. Furious at every adequate meal of her adequate life. She requisitioned a disused seed-hall, and she cooked, and the first arrogant dish served in that city in three decades put two gentled diners into tears they could not explain and one into a state the clinic wrote up, honestly, as *joy, resistant to de-escalation*. There was a queue outside by month's end. The queue *jostled*. Elbows, Mara thought, walking past it on a Thursday, watching a mild-faced archivist defend his place in line with his whole body while pretending not to. Thirty years, and the elbows come back in a month.

In the third week, the arguments began. Small ones first — a disputed bench, a misremembered debt of tools — but arguments, actual arguments, voices raised in public with stakes attached, and the extraordinary thing was the crowds. Arguments drew audiences the way fires once had. Citizens would drift toward a raised voice from three streets away and stand in a loose ring, rapt, silent, some of them mouthing along; and Mara, caught at the edge of one such ring outside the eastern market — two men contesting a barrow, the vocabulary antique, the grammar of grievance coming back to them in real time like a language remembered from childhood — looked around at the watching faces and saw on every one of them the same expression she had seen on Danel Iversen's face on her clinic mat. Hunger, and the shame of hunger, and hunger winning.

A painting appeared in the fourth week, in the serene gallery on the canal — hung anonymously overnight among the tasteful weather, and left there by curators who lacked the machinery to be scandalized. It was not serene. It was a kitchen, at evening, in

ochres and blacks: a woman at a sink with her back turned, a radio suggested by three brushstrokes, a curtain caught mid-breath — and the whole surface of it was *tense*, worked and reworked, painted by someone who wanted something from the image so badly the wanting had gotten into the ground layer. The gentled came to see it in numbers no gallery had drawn in decades. They stood before it in silence, in the amber afternoon light, leaning; and more than one of them, Mara heard, went straight from the gallery to the sitting rooms, to go down and try to fetch the kitchen for themselves. The painting had a title, hand-lettered on a card, and the title was four notes and five rendered as words, and Mara stood in front of it for a long time herself one evening and left without deciding what she felt, which for her was an event with no precedent.

And in the fifth week — the state recorded it without comment, a single line in the district ledger that Osei brought to her flat at ten at night, holding the printout slightly away from his body like a specimen — the city logged its first theft in eleven years.

The stolen object was a hairbrush. Antique, wooden-backed, no value of any kind; taken from a museum case that had never been locked, by a man of sixty-one who turned himself in the same evening, weeping, radiant, unable to explain — except that he had gone down in a circle the week before and come up carrying someone's memory of *coveting*, and had walked past the case the way he had walked past it a hundred times, and this time the brush had *belonged* to the memory somehow, matched it, rhymed with it, and his hand had gone out and taken it before any of him was consulted. He kept saying the same sentence to the mild constables, the intake report noted. *It fit the wanting. It fit the wanting exactly, like the wanting was cut for it.*

Mara read that line at her window, in the small hours, with the amber coming up the roads from the edge of the sky, and felt the cold thread go down her spine again, because she was, whatever else the season made her, an auditor's partner now, and the entry did not reconcile. Appetite regrowing from a stump — Danel's reflux, the world's own severed wanting finding its way home —

should be *general*. A tide coming back in. It should not arrive pre-shaped. It should not come cut to fit particular objects in particular museum cases, keyed like a bit to a lock, as though someone on the far side of the water were not pouring appetite out at random but *fitting* it — measuring the empty houses one by one, and furnishing each with exactly the wanting its floor plan was built to hold. A tide does not take your measurements first.

She put the report down and looked at the city for a long time. Dozing streets. Frost-flowers. The queue outside Ilse Brandt's, still there at midnight, patient, jostling gently in its sleep.

"Who has our measurements," she said aloud, to the empty flat, in the amber dark. And the flat, being only a flat, in only one world, did not answer; and three streets south, on the blank side of a numbered slip, a line of foreign arithmetic lay in a drawer where the desk clerk had put it, patient as posted terms, carried forward.

EIGHT. THE CIRCLE AT THE RESERVOIR

The source, when they finally traced the nonstandard compound — Osei walked the synthesis signature back through six precursor requisitions with the tender remorselessness of a man auditing his own family — was not a factory, and not a cartel, because of course it wasn't. It was a re-dissolution circle in the decommissioned pump station above the reservoir: thirty gentled souls, one refractory chemist keeping the batches honest, mats along the old turbine floor, and rising through the tall windows the amber light off the water, raking in low, as always, from the edge of the sky.

Their leader met them at the top of the iron stairs, and it was Danel Iversen.

Her Danel. First weeper, first hummer, patient zero of the wanting, standing in the doorway of an unlicensed church with his sleeves rolled like a man who had discovered forearms.

"You look well," Mara said, which was true, and which was the horrible part. Six months ago he'd had the gentled sheen — the swept house, the sustainable smile at nothing. The man in the doorway *burned*. Ambition sat on him like a borrowed coat he had

no intention of returning; purpose had rearranged his posture; he had, she noticed with a pang of pure professional awe, acquired *timing*. The gentled don't have timing. Timing is wanting the pause to land.

"Mara." He said her name the way people said names in the borrowed memories — like it mattered, like it was money. "Come to shut us down?"

"Come to count your dead. You're at one." She walked past him into the turbine hall, making him turn, old interrogator's geometry. "Joachim Behr was yours. Your compound — Osei's traced the synthesis, don't insult the man's grid by denying it. Your protocol, until he took it home alone. Fourth-story window, Danel. Decorative bollard. He went into the river at depth, by himself, and he came up with his hand closed on something that had *teeth*, and it wore a name sweet enough that he followed it out a window. So before the sermon: one dead. Say the number with me."

Something crossed Danel's lit face that his old face could never have hosted: grief with guilt in it, worn openly, *spent* rather than suffered. "One," he said. "Joachim. I say it every session, first thing, before the dosing. We sit in circles now — nobody goes down alone, nobody goes past the second depth without a hand on their wrist. We tend each other, Mara. You'd approve of the tending, if you could stop being police for an hour." And then, with the new timing, gently: "You of all people. You've been the only person awake in a city of sleepwalkers for thirty years. We are not spreading a drug. We're spreading *veille*."

And he laid it out for them, walking the turbine floor between the mats while the reservoir ticked and glittered below the windows — the circle's whole cosmology, and she had to admit it was a *cosmology*, coherent, warm, load-bearing, the kind of structure the gentled world hadn't produced in fifty years because structures like it run on want.

The gentled world, Danel said, had amputated its own appetite. Cleanly, kindly, with anesthesia and consent — but an amputation all the same. And nothing truly wanted ever dies. The wanting had gone *somewhere* — downstream, down-cellar, down into whatever

dark the dose opens the doors to — and it had waited there, whole, all of it, half a century of banked human hunger, and now it was coming back up the pipes. Wearing memories of a louder world, because memory is the only container appetite ships in; you cannot fetch a hunger bare, it must arrive *about* something, dressed in a kitchen, a war, a name. The Residue was not an invasion and not a symptom. It was reflux. It was the world's own severed wanting, finding the stump. And the circles — fetch by fetch, telling by telling, one re-lit citizen at a time — were the reversal, the slow voluntary re-tenanting of a planet of empty houses. "Peace *with* appetite," he said, stopping at the tall window with the amber light on his face, and he almost sang it. "The house lived-in again, but wiser this time. Awake this time. Nobody conquered, nobody starved, nothing lost but the emptiness." Somewhere under the rhetoric she could hear it, faint as a radio two rooms away: four notes, then five, and a curtain breathing over a sink.

"It's a beautiful reading," Mara said, and meant it, which made the next part surgery. "Now audit it. The errors, Danel. The syllables that slide. The years that won't reconcile. Two of your own fetchers carry the same tower down in different months. If the Residue is our own wanting coming home, why does it come home *copied* — copied wrong, copied like currency, reference numbers in the margins? You're drinking from a river and nobody in your church can say where it rises. Consider — just once, between sessions, in the honest hour — the possibility that what's coming up the pipes isn't ours. That you're not fetching the world we cut off. You're fetching *somebody else's* — or something built to pass for it, printed to pass for it — and every telling in every circle is you passing the notes on with your fingerprints added. What's the interest on that, Danel? Who compounds it? In what currency, and when is it called?"

The turbine hall was very quiet. Thirty gentled faces on the mats had turned toward them, leaning, the way rooms leaned now.

And Danel Iversen looked at her with enormous, luminous, hungry compassion — the compassion of the newly rich for the honestly poor — and delivered the line she had walked into from the moment

she took the case, the line that had been waiting for her, she understood later, the way the corner had been waiting, the way the wall at Halden Row had been waiting, since before the paint on it was dry in any world:

"Then go see for yourself, Tender."

He let it land. Timing.

"You're the only person in this city who can go down to the river and come back whole. Three times cleared, three times reassembled — the water can't keep you, it's been *proven* it can't keep you, you are the one sealed jar in the flood. Every fetcher I send down dissolves at the bank and reaches in blind. You'd walk down the bank *awake*. You're the auditor, Mara. You've been the auditor all your life — you sat out the whole world's peace like a woman keeping the coats at a wedding. So audit. Go down and read the ledger yourself, and whatever it says — reflux or invoice, cure or collection — I'll stand the circles down if you come up and tell me I'm wrong." He spread his hands, palms open, an honest man's gesture executed with a salesman's timing. "But you won't come up and tell me I'm wrong. You'll come up and tell me what I'm *under*."

She told Osei that night, in the clinic, over the face-down grid. He argued against it for two hours in his level audit voice — listed the risks in strict descending order of probability, unsupervised depth, refractory precedent gaps, the nineteen fetchers who had surfaced with tachycardia, the one who had surfaced with someone else's stammer — and at the end of the two hours it was Ansel Osei who took the authorization form out of the drawer and filled it in himself, in his small even hand, because he was an honest man, and an honest man wants the accounts checked more than he wants anyone safe, including himself, including her. His signature is still on the form. Fourth line. The hand that made it shook by one measurable millimeter, and it should be recorded that this was the largest involuntary movement Ansel Osei had permitted himself in nineteen years, and that it was, in its way, and in the way of several quieter things he did before this book is over, magnificent.

NINE. THE FOURTH CLEARING

The fourth time, Mara Voss lay down on her own mat, in her own soft room, in the color of nothing in particular, with Osei sitting the Tender's chair — unlicensed, unqualified, and unbudgeable; he had simply arrived with the forms and sat — and went down to read the ledger.

Dissolution, for a refractory, is a strange commute. She had tried for thirty years to explain it to the colleagues who administered hers, and had settled at last on the customs metaphor, which was wrong the way all of them were wrong, but wrong in the most durable direction: everyone else emigrates; she commutes. The dose opened the house the way it always had — every door, every window, the walls going first porous and then notional and then weather; the small furious tenant called *Mara* thinning out into the wind like smoke off a snuffed lamp, her history unshelving itself, her name becoming a sound a bell had made once in a town she'd never visit again. All of that, in the fourth hour, went. It always went.

And something persisted. It always persisted. Call it the auditor: the part of her that had never once, in fifty-four years, in three dissolutions, in eleven thousand escorted crossings, stopped keeping receipts. It did not feel like Mara. It felt like what Mara had been a coat over. It moved through the open house of her with a lamp, unhurried, checking the sills, and it found the cellar door that three times before had opened onto weather and the patient dark, and it went down the stairs.

The stairs kept going.

That was the first difference, and the auditor noted it in the ledger where the auditor notes everything: *stairs continue past previous floor*. Down past the dark that had been the bottom in '97 and '03 and '12; down through a stratum where the borrowed memories hung in the black like laundry in a night yard — she passed the kitchen, lit and breathing, curtain going in and out over the sink, the radio murmuring its war, a woman's voice inside singing four notes and five to a name that slid even as she heard it, *Leyla, Leyli, love* — and did not stop, because auditors do not stop at exhibits;

and further down than that, where there was nothing at all for a while except the sound of her own count.

And at the bottom of everything there was a street corner.

Ordinary. That was the first horror of it — the ordinariness. An intersection at night. Frost on the shrubs. Paving stones wet with old rain, a curb, a lamp post with no lamp lit. It could have been any corner in her city, or in the loud world, or in a hundred worlds she had never heard named; it had the feel of a place assembled from every memory of corners ever kept — a corner's corner, the master from which corners are struck. There was an overpass, its beam blank. There was a wall. Reader, you have stood there. Everyone has stood there. That is what it is *for*.

The second horror was the light.

The corner was lit — amber, low, raking, tender as a hand laid on a forehead — and the light came from the wrong side. She stood in it and felt her shadow fall toward where a sun should have been, and the auditor in her did the one thing it knew how to do at the bottom of the world: it checked the source against the ledger. No lamp. No moon. No sky, in any direction that direction meant here. The light came *up the road* — from somewhere further along it, below the horizon of a place that had no horizon — as if the street were lit on credit; borrowed brilliance, raked long across the frost, and every stone's shadow lying back along the road the way she had come, pointed and parallel, like a page of ledger lines. Like entries. Like a column, ruled and waiting, that something intended, in time, to total.

Down the road, at the very edge of the lent light, a tall figure was walking away from her. Unhurried. One bag on the shoulder.

She did not call out. She would have told you afterward that discipline held her, and it would have been a lie she'd earned the right to; the truth is that the light held her mouth the way a hand holds a bell. She stood at the corner's corner in the borrowed shine, and she did what she was, which was count — stones, shadows, footfalls, breaths — and the figure walked on at the pace of a man who has never once needed to hurry, because everything

that owes him is walking toward *him*, and passed below the brightness, and was the brightness, and was gone.

And what Mara Voss carried back up out of the water — when Osei's voice came down through the reassembling house like a rope, level, saying her name at sixty-second intervals exactly as the protocol he'd memorized overnight required — was not an appetite, and not a grief, and not a war, and not a song. It was a number. She surfaced with it going in her chest like a second pulse, patient, tidal, and no idea yet in what currency it counted: *three nights. Three nights. Three nights.*

"What did you bring up out of the water?" Osei asked. The trade's soft liturgy; he had learned it without ever deciding to; everyone had, now. The words choose themselves — I told you, reader; they always have.

Mara lay on the mat of her own soft room, whole, reassembled, entry for entry, the same profane precise woman down to the last curated grudge, feeling the number tick against her ribs.

"A debt," she said. "I think I brought up a debt. And Ansel — I don't think it's ours. I think we're the *collateral*."

She walked home the long way, because after a session you walk; every school of the practice agrees on it; the body insists on witnessing the world at footpace, on counting it back into place step by step. Blue evening. Frost flowers holding their thirty-year bloom. The city dozing in its kindness under the low amber light that came raking in, as it always did, as it always had, from the edge of the sky — and for the first time in fifty-four years Mara Voss stopped on an empty plaza and looked at that light with the auditor's eye, and felt the ground of her whole gentle world go thin as a page. *No lamp. No moon. Check the source against the ledger.* She stood there until the cold found her collar, and then she laughed — once, short, ugly, delighted, the old-world laugh, the sound of a woman finding the error in year one of the books — and walked on.

Her route ran under the overpass at Halden Row, as it had run four thousand evenings before, past the blank concrete beam she had

passed four thousand times without seeing, because there had never been anything on it to see.

There was now.

Four lines. Hand-painted, pale ochre gone the color of old bone, dripping slightly at the descenders, weathered — *weathered*, though the beam had been blank on Tuesday; eroded at the edges like something that had been rained on for years in some other schedule of rain. The hand was rough, unhurried, mended-looking, seams over seams: the script of a man who has written the same thing many times, in many places, and no longer needs to look. It was the only ragged human mark in the whole serene city, and it sat under the road like a signature under a contract, and Mara Voss stood before it in the cold with her heart going like a fist on a door and read the first graffiti her world had seen in thirty years, and understood — with the wholeness with which one understands only at the bottoms of things — that she was not looking at vandalism, and that she was not, in fact, the auditor of this account, and never had been. She was looking at an *invoice*. The first installment of one — *carried forward* — posted to a wall in a world that had spent fifty years believing its peace was paid for, by a collector who was not in a hurry, because he did not need to be, because everything that owed him was walking toward him; and who was already, at this hour, somewhere further down the road that runs through every world, measuring the next blank wall.

She read it three times. Then she went home and poured the drink and did not drink it, and sat by the window all night with the lights off, watching the amber come up the roads from the edge of the sky, listening to her own chest count.

You may read the wall yourself. It is on the last page. It has been waiting there, patient as posted terms, since before you bought the book — since before, if we are being honest with each other at last, reader, the book was written, or the world was, whichever of those you still believe came first.

VERSE THE FIRST

found under the overpass at Halden Row

The light you wake beneath was lent.

The ledger keeps what sleep forgets.

*Three nights they count what you have spent;
the fourth, the road collects its debts.*

The Clearing worked. Half a century after ego dissolution went from festival curiosity to civic sacrament, the world is at peace — genuinely, verifiably, unbearably. Wars ended because nobody could want them anymore. So did cathedrals, grudges, great restaurants, and most reasons to get up before noon.

Mara Voss is a Tender, licensed to sit with the dissolving. She is also refractory: one of the rare few the Clearing will not take. Three attempts, ego intact, thirty years of faking serenity in a city that no longer locks its doors.

Then her patients start coming up from the Clearing carrying memories that belong to no one — a louder world, a war in a desert, a song nobody wrote. The gentled find these borrowed appetites intoxicating. A trade begins.

A man dies of it, the first violent death in nineteen years, and Mara follows the leak down through the fetching underground to the question no one gentled can bear to ask.

Is what's coming through a disease, a cure, or a collection notice?

