



KAMMERTON

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The city runs like an orchestra. Eleven million voices keep their parts, even and on time, and a machine stands at the conductor's stand: it hears them all at once and cares for each, so that no one ever has to sound against the grain. The bracelet glows green, the rain comes on schedule, and happiness is issued daily, like water and light. The orchestra has a face — a young woman whose voice wishes the city a good morning every day. She has lied so long that she no longer knows where her own voice ends and someone else's script begins. And down below, a teenager is growing up who sounds out of tune. One day his note will be heard by the whole city. A novel about happiness imposed and the bitter truth that costs more. About courage, and growing up. About the place inside each of us that no one can reach. Go down beneath the lit tiers. Walk out to where the schedule ends. And hear what happens when one note refuses to play in time.

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Part One. Winter

Chapter 1. The Path to Perfect Harmony

Lying to eleven million turned out to be a matter of technique, and Ariadna's technique was flawless.

The technique was in the breathing. A breath on a count of four before a hard word, so the voice would not give out; a pause set not where the thought ends but where the viewer needs to believe; a smile that starts in the eyes half a second before the lips, because a smile that starts at the lips betrays the lie even to the attuned – and the attuned, whatever people say, are not stupid; they have simply consented not to notice. Ariadna did not lie with words. The words were not hers: vetted, passed through three departments. There was no lie in the words; there was policy in the words. Ariadna lied with her body – with the way the body said *I believe this*. That cannot be taught. With that, as someone had told her once, you are either born or made.

“Thirty seconds,” said the director's voice, warm, in her ear.

The Harmony Media studio had been built so that no one could be nervous in it. The light came from everywhere and cast no shadows – for twelve years Ariadna had cast no shadow under this light, since they first sat her down at this desk at fourteen, and she had grown used to herself shadowless, as to an amputation. The air was held at the one temperature at which the body forgets where it ends. In front of her, where the camera was, a green light glowed softly – not red, red alarms; here everything was green: on air, consent, permission to live. And to her right, out of frame, on a matte panel, the curve of her voice breathed quietly – a thin glowing track the system drew alongside her in real time and corrected whenever Ariadna strayed from even: not roughly, in a whisper, feeding a touch more tone into her earpiece so that she herself, without noticing, came back into line. She was being attuned while she preached Attunement. She knew it and had long since stopped thinking about it, the way you stop thinking about a heart that beats without asking.

“Twenty.”

There was not another soul in the studio – even light, smooth panels, and she alone at the desk, in frame, like a single thought in somebody's well-groomed head. But Ariadna knew the emptiness was inhabited. Somewhere behind these bright, seamless walls sat the director whose warm voice reached her ear; beside him, people she had never seen in the light but could feel at her back. Not that they decided anything. Her curve – that thin track of her voice, corrected in real time – was not guided by any human. SADI guided it: it was his unseen hand that raised her sound half a tone and brought her back into line; it was he who knew her voice better than she did. The people behind the walls only watched him work, checked the readings, nodded; they stood by the machine as the Wardens stand by a mechanism in good working order – needed so that someone would be there to nod, and needed for nothing else. And above them all, farther off, in an office Ariadna had never been admitted to, sat the one who had built it all – she did not name him, not so much as to herself; he had no face, only a presence, even and enormous, like the pressure of the air. The Architect. He did not interfere with the broadcast. He had no need to: he had tuned it all once so that it would go on tuning itself. Now he only watched, the way you watch a clock that keeps good time. Sometimes it seemed to Ariadna that he watched her too, separately, longer than the others. She chased the thought away. Thinking about him was like turning in the dark toward a stranger's gaze that might not be there at all.

“Ten.”

Under the desk, where no lens could reach, Ariadna clenched her left hand into a fist. She always did. For years she had explained it to herself this way: here, under the desktop, is the one thing that is not theirs to take. A free hand. A small spasm no camera, no curve, no SADI could see. Her own, her secret, her only “no,” hidden in a fist while her face said “yes.” She held on to that fist as she would a handrail.

“Three. Two.”

The green light did not change – it brightened a shade and simply came to mean “now.”

“Good evening,” Ariadna said, and her voice came out warm, even, a voice eleven million knew like family. “Many of you are sitting down to dinner right now – at the same hour, the whole city together, as it should be. That is good. That is what it means to be in tune: a city breathing in time. A pleasant evening to your table.” She let a warm pause settle. “I know many of you are tired. Holding the line is work. No one thanks you for choosing, every day, to be in tune. I do. Thank you.”

This was how they always began – with thanks for a choice no one had been asked to make. It was disarming. You cannot rebel against someone who has just thanked you.

“I know the price sometimes seems high to you,” she went on. “The tone that must be held. The questions better not asked out loud. But remember what people paid before us.

“Your great-grandfathers called themselves free – and never knew a moment’s peace in their lives. Every head, day and night, was full of noise: a thousand other people’s opinions, a thousand anxieties, a thousand what-ifs. They could say anything to anyone. And they did, all at once, day and night, until they choked on their own shouting and no one could hear anyone. They were free – and so they were alone.” A short pause, not where the thought ended but where the viewer needed time to agree. “Freedom turned out to be just another name for anxiety.

“And they did not know how to live in peace with one another. What the system would later name with a single sterile word – the Conflict – began among them without declaration and did not know how to end: it flared on its own, smoldered for years, dragged everyone in. The Conflict began without them and ended without them, and between the beginning and the end –” Ariadna held a pause, a long one, a count of two, and with half an ear caught the curve on her right dipping and the system, gently, by half a tone, propping her voice up, “– and between the beginning and the end, under the rubble of that Conflict, children were buried.

“Tonight your children sleep safe. No one will take them away, call them up, bury them under a great idea. They simply sleep.” A pause, warm. And behind her the screen’s light softly warmed, flooding the studio with even gold, as if the words themselves were growing warmer. “We learned to cure that old noise. We evened out your thoughts – and the anxiety left. Where your great-grandfathers’ heads hummed, yours are quiet. Where they thrashed about, each on their own, you walk together, in time, and no one is one too many. We do not ask you for ideas. We do not ask for faith. We ask for the smallest thing – just a tone.” And one more pause, the last, exact. “Is that too much to pay – for your head to go quiet at last? For someone beside you in the same tune? For the children to sleep?”

The figures for that old calamity came from the same department as the rest of the text, and Ariadna, who had repeated them broadcast after broadcast, had long since lost track of how much of them was truth and how much was the necessary dose. She knew only that without them people did not believe what came next, and with them they agreed; and that history, like tone, must be guided by someone too, drawn alongside as a thin glowing curve and corrected the moment it strayed from even.

“Tonight I want to talk about a word that many of you fear. Attunement.”

She paused – that pause, the one set not where the thought ends.

“People say it in a whisper, like a diagnosis. And yet Attunement is not a punishment. Not retribution. Not the bogeyman mothers use to scare disobedient children.” She leaned a little toward

the camera, kindly, the way you lean toward a child who has dreamed up monsters under the bed. “Attunement is the highest form of care.”

And on the word “care” her voice dropped.

Not by much. Seven percent below reference pitch – she knew the figure; she heard the curve with half an ear, saw the thin track on her right flinch downward and even out at once, felt the system in her earpiece raise her next sound by half a tone, bringing her back into line. Seven percent. Half a tone down on “care” – as though she were saying it not to them but to herself, as though it were she who needed someone, at last, to convince her that care was care.

And Ariadna did not know whether she had done it on purpose – or had not been aware of it at all.

That was the unbearable part – not the lie; she was used to the lie, the lie was the job. What was unbearable was that she did not remember deciding to drop her voice. The fist under the desk had clenched by itself. The voice had sunk by itself. And if by themselves – then whose were they, these selves? Her own body, secretly dissenting, hiding its “no” under the desktop? Or that other thing, the one they had put into her twenty years ago, at six, in the white room – and then, when she was fourteen and a child’s soul had not yet set, they had stood her under this light and taught her to smile from the eyes, and put into her exactly this: here, drop your voice; here, give them a crack to love you through, because no one follows a perfectly even announcer, and an announcer who herself seems to doubt a little – everyone follows. The perfect lie is told by one who does not know that he is lying. The perfect resistance is offered by one who does not know that his resistance is in the budget.

She could not tell her fist from their calculation. And with every broadcast it grew harder to tell them apart, because both – the fist and the calculation – behaved in exactly the same way: stayed silent under the desk and dropped her voice on the kind words.

“...and that is why,” she was saying meanwhile, flawlessly, while that other Ariadna thought all this, “those who have stumbled, we return not to prison. We return them home. To themselves. Into consent.”

Behind her, on the wall, taking up half the frame, a screen lit up, and on it appeared a specimen – that was the word in the internal papers, specimen; on air they said “one of the returned.” Young, very young, in soft light, with a face as smooth and calm as the surface of water nothing disturbs from below. She was smiling. Her eyes were in perfect order – and in perfect order, too, was the nothing behind them: no fear, no joy, not even the person you would have expected to find there; the person had been carefully carried out, the way furniture is carried out of an apartment before a renovation, leaving behind a neatly tidied emptiness with a smile.

“Thank you for not leaving me in the chaos,” said the returned one, in an even, flat voice in which not a single string trembled. “It used to hurt so much. Now I am well. Now I am in tune.”

Ariadna looked at her and held her face. Somewhere – she knew it without seeing it – right now, this very second, in the dark corners of the network, in the Silence chat, picked up on stolen frequencies by those not yet carried out of themselves, someone was writing: “look at her eyes. nobody’s home.” And someone answered: “not hers. look at the announcer’s eyes. the announcer sees everything.” “and TUNE doesn’t fix the announcer’s eyes?” “TUNE fixes the voice. the eyes she’s still holding on her own.” They called the machine their own way, the street way – TUNE, short, like a mutt’s name; in her world, up above, the machine had another name, long and respectful, and the gap between the two had always made Ariadna uneasy, as if they were speaking of two different creatures. And Ariadna, who was supposed to hate these people who kept catching her in the act of being alive – Ariadna, for some reason, guarded them, the way you guard the only witnesses that you still exist. They saw her crack. So the crack was there. So there was something to crack.

Unless that thought, too, had been planted. Unless the hope of being seen was the last, the finest line in her attunement: let her think she is resisting – those who resist work harder.

“Remember,” Ariadna said, and this was the last sentence, after which came the closing card, the soft music, and the mandatory minute of silence for “reflection.” “Disharmony is not your fault. But consent is your choice. Mind your tone. Mind your loved ones. And if a loved one has faltered – do not turn away. Sign them up for Attunement before they sign themselves up – by then it is too late.”

She smiled – from the eyes, half a second before the lips.

“Good night. Stay in tune.”

The green light faded.

“Clean,” the director said in her ear, without expression – which, with them, meant “good.”
“Perfectly clean. Thank you, Ariadna.”

The studio light dimmed a little, giving her back to the shadows she did not have. The curve on her right went out. Ariadna sat a second longer, then unclenched the fist under the desk – her fingers had gone numb, and on her palm were four white crescents from her nails, the only proof that the hand had been clenched at all, the only evidence. She looked at the crescents and thought what she had been thinking lately after every broadcast and had told no one, because there was no one to tell: that there was proof of a clenched fist, but proof that she was the one who had clenched it – there was none, and never would be.

An assistant brought water and said her father was waiting for her upstairs, for tea.

Ariadna stood and put on her face – that one, the even, bright face of the city that eleven million knew and behind which nothing showed. She had learned it before she learned to speak – or been taught it; she did not remember. That was the trouble: she remembered nothing before the white room, and whatever a person does not remember is easy to pass off to them as their own.

She walked to the elevator, carrying four fading crescents on her palm, and they went out along the way, like the lights of a city being put to bed.

Chapter 2. Optimum

That same evening, on the twenty-first floor – the first floor of the middle class, its lowest rung – and a whole world below the tower, Kee’s family was sitting down to dinner with that same broadcast on. It came from the wall – the whole wall of their living room was a screen; it was never switched off, only turned down, the way you dim a light without putting it out, because a living room without the Air was a living room where people might start talking about whatever came into their heads. Now, enormous, filling the whole width of the wall, the face of the woman with the calmest face in the city looked out at them. A beautiful face – but with an even, measured beauty, without a single stroke too many: smooth high cheekbones, a straight thin nose, brows in calm even arcs, no higher and no lower than needed. Dark hair put up softly and severely, not a hair out of place, so that you wanted to check whether it was real. And the eyes – gray, pale, large, looking straight at you with a warm attention that, if you looked long enough, had no bottom; eyes that looked at eleven million at once and at no one. She was talking about the tone you must mind, and Kee, setting the table, caught himself recognizing her the way you recognize the weather: she had always been there, like rain, like TUNE, like the Consent on your wrist.

It was an ordinary evening, and that was the whole trouble. His father had come home from work at seven, as always; taken off his jacket, hung it up straight; asked, without looking, “How’s your tone,” and Kee had said “Fine,” as always. His mother had warmed up dinner. El was laying out the forks and knives and counting aloud – “one, two, three, four.” Almost a family. If you did not listen to what the wall was saying. And Kee, looking at them – his father, his mother, his sister, the table set for dinner – was caught by a strange question: what did he actually feel about all this? About them? He was supposed to feel warmth, kinship, something simple and warm, like everyone else. He listened inward – and found no name for what was there. Something was there. But whether it was what people call family – he did not know.

“Turn it up,” his father said without looking up.

His father ate standing at the kitchen counter, working as he ate. Before him, in the air, hung a pale holo-projection of tables of figures; he paged through them with one hand, and with the other he ate Optimum, a beige nutrient bar that took no chewing and no thinking about what you were eating. He was not an unkind man. Kee knew it for certain, and it was what he grieved most: his father was kind – evenly, efficiently, without a flicker. He loved his son the way he did everything else – as a matter of business. “Your tone has slipped four points this week,” he had told Kee three days ago, gently, laying a hand on his shoulder. “I’ve signed you up for a consultation. And I’ve ordered you Level, the small dose; it’s in the cabinet. Just take it. It would put my mind at ease.” His father’s love took the form of a schedule, and in that schedule Kee was the one item that would not stay on track.

“...Attunement is not a punishment,” the wall was saying. “Attunement is the highest form of care.”

And the Kammerton in Kee gave a quiet ache.

He had no word for it but the one Lila’s father’s drawing had given him once – Kammerton. Something in him, under the ribs, somewhere around the heart, answered a false note the way a tooth aches at sweetness, the way a cheek cramps. When the woman on the wall said “care,” her voice caught on something, barely, dropped, and righted itself at once. And inside Kee the same string twitched in answer, short and painful, as if he alone in the room had heard, in that even warm voice, the same crack that was in him. He froze with a plate in his hands. No one else noticed. Of course no one did.

And yet, looking at his father, Kee could see he was not empty. There: his father’s eye lingered on a row in the tables and he frowned – for a second, one live, human second – as if something displeased him, as if he were about to dissent – and Kee saw the Consent on his father’s wrist flicker and creep from even green toward yellow, toward the edge. And right then something cold seemed

to touch his father from inside: for an instant his face went anxious, uneasy, as if he had remembered something frightening that was better left alone. And he took his eyes off the row, stepped back from his own thought the way you step back from an edge, and the bracelet obediently went green again. His father blinked, looked for something to grab onto – and grabbed onto the wall, the warm broadcast, and breathed out. They had not suppressed dissent. They had simply made it frightening. And his father had run from it into safety on his own, and had not noticed he was running. Kee had seen it a hundred times and still could not get used to it. That was how it worked – not with a chain, but with this: at the very edge you grew so anxious that you turned back yourself, on your own two feet. And his father turned back. And his mother.

“Logical,” his father said to the tables, calm again. “Efficient.” These were his two highest words; with them he blessed the world. And then, setting the projection aside, he said suddenly, warmer and dreamier than usual: “Listen. If all four of us hold up this quarter – on tones, on the numbers – they might put us down for a trip. Out of the city. Out there.” He kept his eyes on something above the wall that was not there. “They only give it to people who keep in the green. The deserving. We got lucky once already – remember, Kee, that time?” His voice went very quiet, dreamy. “And now, if we make the numbers, we can again. We’ll earn it. I want to take you all to the sea again. The island. The warm wind. Just us and almost no one around. Like then. Remember?”

Kee remembered.

And for one moment the living room was gone, and he was small, eight or so, and there was that place – the island, white sand, water bluer than anything in the city, a warm wind. There were three of them – him, Mom, Dad, before El. Dad laughed, for no reason, just because, tossed him in the air, and Kee shrieked with happiness and was not afraid, because Dad’s hands. Mom sang – in her own voice, alive, a little off-key, not from the Air – and the sun went down into the water, and there were no tables, no tones, only a warm enormous world and the two most alive people on earth, his people. He held on to that.

Back then they had lived lower down – on the thirteenth, in a cramped little apartment close to the ground, before his father worked his way up to the twenty-first, to the middle class, to a view from the window. Kee could not explain why, but more and more it seemed to him that down there, in those cramped rooms, there had been more life than up here, in the clean heights; that his parents had laughed more when the ground was closer. Maybe he had just been eight. Maybe it was something else he did not understand. He did not know. He only remembered that it had been warmer down below.

And – at the very edge of the memory – something did not add up. Kee could not put his finger on it. He remembered the island, remembered “nature,” the blue water, the sand – but he did not remember how they had gotten there; that is, he remembered the capsule train, quiet, smooth, remembered looking out the window. But what was outside the window he did not remember; there was a gap, like a place rubbed out. And another thing: the bracelets. There too, on the island, everyone had bracelets, and they glowed a steady bright green, all the time, even when Mom sang, even when Dad laughed – evergreen, but brighter than now. Kee reached for the thought, for the mismatch – why he remembered paradise but not the road into it; why even paradise had bracelets – reached and fell short, had nothing to reach with, and the thought slipped away. All that remained was a vague, uneasy splinter: had there been a paradise at all. Had he seen it – or had it been shown to him, the way everything was shown.

He did not know. Could not know. And he let it go, because his father was watching and waiting.

“I remember, Dad,” Kee said. “It was good.”

“I’m happy now, too,” El said suddenly, not looking up from her plate, to no one in particular.

And it was true. And that was the whole horror of it: he really did want to go there, into the calm, into the warm, where nothing hurts. He was seventeen, and at seventeen you are supposed to argue with your father – to pick fights, to have it your way, to kick against every “you have to,” to prove you are not like them; and that age, that prickly rebel spirit, was in him, had not gone anywhere,

and usually that was exactly how Kee looked at his father – bristling, ready to argue. But not now. Now he looked at his father and – understood him. He himself, more than anything in the world, wanted it to go quiet inside, wanted the Kammerton to fall silent, wanted to be able, like everyone else, to just eat warm Optimum and wait for the trip to the sea. The temptation was not outside him. It was in him, and that frightened him most of all.

His mother was setting the table beside him. On the plates was meat with vegetables – real, not a bar; but over it, as required, as every household did, Optimum Plus had been sprinkled in an even layer – the mandatory seasoning added to everything, to every dish, always. You could not do without it – so it was written, so it was advised, so everyone did. And his mother's face was busy – she was tuning it to the face of the woman on the wall, the way you set a clock by the time signal: the woman smiled warmly – and his mother warmed; the woman turned serious – and his mother turned serious. Kee had noticed it in her long ago and had long since stopped being able to tell whether, somewhere under that tuned face, there was still the mom who had sung on the island in her live crooked voice – or whether she too had been carefully carried out, like furniture, leaving a neatly tidied smile. But sometimes. Sometimes something showed through.

It showed through when the wall spoke of the children.

“...under the rubble of that Conflict, children were buried,” the woman on the wall was saying, and for a moment her voice filled with quiet grief. “Tonight your children sleep safe. No one will take them away, call them up, bury them under a great idea. They simply sleep.”

And Kee's mother stopped short. Just stopped, fork in hand, halfway to the table. On the word “buried” something passed over her face that Kee had no name for – a spasm, a shadow, as if inside, under the tidied surface, someone had come to the window for a second and looked out at something of their own, something that hurt; and on her wrist the Consent flickered and crept into yellow – her body gave away what had risen in her, without asking her. Kee saw the yellow and held his breath. But his mother saw it too. And was frightened – not of the bracelet, but of having strayed from even, of everyone noticing her yellow now – and Kee watched her shove what had risen back down – with effort, hurriedly – press it down inside, flood it with calm, think as hard as she could about good things, safe things, about the children being fine; and on the words “sleep safe” her bracelet flared green – bright, strong, thicker than usual, brimming over – the kind of green that comes not from calm but from how much calm you have had to pour into yourself to put the anxiety out. She had pressed too hard. All by herself. And that bright, flooded green – Kee caught it, and it stung – was exactly like the ones on the island. Evergreen. Filled past the brim. His mother's face came back. She carried the fork the rest of the way to the table.

“Mom,” Kee said quietly.

“Everything's fine, sweetheart,” she answered, and smiled a smile from the Air, and Kee understood that the window had closed, and whoever had come to it had gone back down inside.

El ate neatly. She was eight, and she was perfect. And Kee, looking at her, suddenly understood what he had never put together before: El was not dead. El was simply happy. She was happy because there was peace in the family, because no one fought, because Mom smiled and Dad was home; she was happy exactly the way he himself had been happy on that island, when he was small and did not know how to see. El was not pretending. El had not yet heard any Kammerton in herself; she had nothing to hear a false note with, and so she was happy for real, with the whole, childish happiness of someone who had not yet been made to understand. That was him. El was him – before he heard. And that gripped him harder than everything dead in this house: not because his sister was a program, but because his sister was a happy child who would one day either be woken and hurt the way he hurt, or never be woken at all. Kee did not know which was worse. She was repeating after the wall, without looking up from her food, in an even childish chant, like a song you love:

“Tone. Consent. Care.” And her doll, a small household robot with a girl's face, echoed after her, half a tone higher: “Tone. Consent. Care.”

“...And if a loved one has faltered,” the woman on the wall said, softly, almost tenderly, “do not turn away. Sign them up for Attunement before they sign themselves up.”

“You hear that?” his father said, and for the first time that evening looked at Kee. Not angrily. With care. That same efficient care. “That’s how it should be. It’s about love, Kee. Not turning away – that is what love is.” He said it, and went back to his tables, and did not notice that he had just, in front of his son, with an approving nod, agreed that signing up someone who had faltered was the right thing; did not notice, because it did not occur to him that the item that would not stay on track was sitting at this very table, holding a plate.

Kee sat down. Ate what he could. Dinner had no taste. That is, it looked different from yesterday’s: yesterday fish, tonight meat, tomorrow chicken – but it tasted the same as always, because Optimum Plus lay over everything and overrode any food, reduced it to itself, so that meat, fish, vegetables all had the same aftertaste: warm, nothing, like warm paper. Every day the city ate what looked different and tasted the same, and never noticed. On the wall the closing card came on, the soft music, and a voice announced the minute of silence for reflection, and everyone fell silent – his father over his tables, his mother over her tidied face, El over her already empty plate, her bracelet even green, the doll beside her even green – and in that appointed silence, in which you were supposed to reflect on care, Kee physically heard how false his whole family sounded, the whole house, the whole floor, the whole tower down to the ground: an enormous choir singing pure and dead all the way through, and he alone in that choir was in the wrong key, and it hurt so much he wanted to press his palm to his chest.

The minute of silence ended. The wall began speaking again.

Kee stood, said he was tired, that he was going to his room. His father nodded without looking up: “Take your Level before bed. The small dose. It would put my mind at ease.” His mother smiled from the Air. El said “good night, in tune,” and the doll repeated “in tune,” and Kee went out.

He went to his room, but did not stay long.

In his room, in the bottom drawer, under his clothes, he kept two things that no one else in this house had, no one in this tower, maybe no one in the city. A small black carrier – Lila had recorded sounds onto it for him, sounds he had heard nowhere else and never before: not the music of the Air, not the melodies from the squares, but something else entirely, unfamiliar, that sounded on no level of the city – voices and strings from some other, long-ago world, and no one could stay even listening to them. And her worn pencil drawing – a kammerton piercing the Consent. Kee put the carrier in his pocket and stood for a moment with the drawing in his hand, and thought of Lila. And the Kammerton in his chest, for the first time that evening, did not ache but answered differently, warmly, purely, the way a string in tune answers the sound of a kammerton. He thought of her smile – a little crooked, unattuned, alive – of the way she squinted when she drew; of how, next to her, he did not have to hold his tone, did not have to hold anything, could simply be, and the Kammerton did not ache. He remembered how she had once told him, about this thing inside: “It’s not a defect, Kee. It’s you, alive. It’s the part of you that didn’t break – the part they broke in all of them.” And how those words had made him not afraid but the opposite – as if someone had, for the first time, called him not defective but whole.

He hid the drawing back under his clothes, kept the carrier in his pocket, and quietly went out – out of the room, out of the apartment, where the wall still murmured in its even voice, where his father sat over his tables, his mother over her tidied face, and El was already asleep or pretending – out into the echoing silence of the floor, to the stairs, into the city.

Below lay the city, even, green, asleep to a lullaby in a voice not its own, and somewhere down there was one living person he could go to and not sound false, the only one beside whom the Kammerton did not ache but rang.

He did not go to the elevator – in the elevator the Consent was read at the door, and the camera remembered who had gone down and when. He took the stairs – the deserted emergency stairwell no

one used, because why would you, when there was an elevator; an echoing concrete shaft, nobody's, no screens, no sensors, running down through every floor. Kee had known these stairs a long time – his secret path, the way most of the city's kids probably knew them, anyone who sometimes needed to vanish from sight. The window on the landing was real – not the Air – and wind hit him in the face, cold, nobody's, not tailored to his sleep chart. None of the clean wind of the upper floors here. Here it smelled alive.

And it smelled of rain.

And while Kee went down the echoing stairs, and then down and sideways – along the skybridges between the towers, down the escalators, past the hanging squares with their big screens where the Air went on talking through the night – making his way level by level toward the other end of the city, toward Lila, not yet knowing that he was going to her for the last time – above all of it, above the even green lights of the towers, above the hanging squares and skybridges, above eleven million sleeping in time, something was gathering that had not been in the evening forecast. The clouds were off schedule. They were piling up low and heavy over a city used to rain by the clock, rain announced in advance. But this one was gathering on its own, announced by no one, and had asked no one's leave.

Seen from above – and someone, maybe, was watching – the city lay below, enormous, tiered, clean, tidied, like a studio where the broadcast had been switched off: not a spot, not a crease, not one stray sound. Perfect. Its tiers stepped down in ledges, and each had its own life: hanging gardens with clipped greenery, parks where the trees stood in even rows; and canals – narrow water streets run straight through the levels, between the buildings, with warm lighting along their banks. By day boats glided along these canals – you could step into any of them and be carried wherever you needed to go, quietly, unhurried, past the parks and gardens, and it was beautiful, truly beautiful, as beautiful as anything arranged perfectly can ever be. Now, at night, the boats sat motionless at their moorings, the water was black and smooth, and there was not a soul anywhere. And somewhere in those shining, sleeping tiers, down the echoing emergency stairs of the twenty-first floor, one lanky seventeen-year-old boy was making his way down, and in his pocket lay sounds heard nowhere in this city – the one unevenness on the smooth, the one living speck, creeping toward the place where someone was waiting for him.

And from above the first drops were already falling. Real ones, heavy. The kind that one day – not today, but one day – gather, build, and come to wash the streets clean of everything stuck to them. Rain no one had called for. Rain that always comes on its own. Kee turned up his collar and walked faster.

Chapter 3. The Office

Meanwhile – that same night, that same city, only at its very heart – another person was going up.

If the first was the one living unevenness creeping down the outer tiers, toward the ground, toward warmth – this one moved the other way, up, in the very center of the city, where above all the squares and canals rose a single tower, taller than the rest, and inside it higher and higher, to where the city ended and the sky began. There were two of them that night, climbing their separate stairs in opposite directions: one on the far outskirts of the tiers, close to the ground; the other at the core, near the top. They did not know of each other, and between them lay the whole city, asleep in time. One was going down to what he loved. The other was going up to the one who had made her.

The assistant had passed it on briefly: her father was waiting. Not “asks you to stop by,” not “whenever convenient” – waiting. And Ariadna, her studio face still on, went to the elevator.

Her father’s office was higher up. Everything in this tower – the one that rose above the city, above its squares and canals, apart from the residential towers – was arranged by height: the higher, the closer to the heart. At the bottom, the studios, the editing rooms, the halls where the Air was made. Above them, the apparatus – quiet corridors where no one raised their voice. Higher still, her father: high, just under the top, but not at it. And at the very top, above her father himself, at the heart of the tower – Kronos, whom Ariadna had almost never seen, the one she had never gone up to; the top floor was not for her. She was riding up to her father – high, but not to the very top. The elevator read her at the door – she held up her wrist out of habit, and the Consent blinked green, letting her through. The car went up, softly, without a jolt, and in the window there was less and less city and more and more sky. Floor after floor went by on the quiet display. There were almost no people: the higher, the emptier, the cleaner, the more even the light. On one of the tiers a woman in severe dress got in – nodded to Ariadna with that even friendliness that up here replaced everything – and got out a floor later without a word. The doors closed. Ariadna went on up, alone.

The strange thing – she noticed it every time and every time drove it off – was that the higher she rose, the quieter it grew, not around her but inside her. As if with each floor the air were going out of her. Down in the studio something was still trembling – the residue of the broadcast, the fist under the desk; up here it all smoothed itself out, like a crease under an iron, and she arrived at her father’s door already even, smooth, empty. She was used to putting it down to nerves. Up here there was simply no strength for nerves. Up here, it seemed, there was no strength at all.

The door opened before she touched it.

Her father made the tea himself, and that was him all over. In a tower where the elevator brought you coffee before you had time to want it, where food came out of the wall warm and calculated to the calorie, where even the air was tailored to her – Ariadna’s – sleep chart, because that was what it said in the entry beside her name – here, at the very top, above the city, her father heated water in an old iron kettle. Hunched over it. Listening. As if the water might let something slip, and he did not want to miss it.

“The mills grind slowly,” he said, not turning to her, and took the kettle off the instant before it screamed. “Finish it yourself.”

“But they grind exceeding small.”

“Exceeding small.” He poured, and the steam rose between them like a thin curtain. “A good proverb. It does not lie, does not flatter. It does not promise it will be sweet – it promises it will be even. And what has been ground small, mark you, no longer hurts. What has been milled does not argue. The people do not wag their tongues for nothing.”

She knew this habit of his by heart – speaking in proverbs, as if handing out change in someone else’s coin. As a child she had put it down to age. Later she guessed: armor. Say something of your

own and you answer for it yourself. Hide behind “the people” and there is no speaker, there is a choir – try picking out one throat in a choir. So he hid. And – she had caught this too, once – he sharpened them. He took something warm, kitchen-worn, familiar since childhood, and turned it a half-turn, so that on the outside it was still Grandmother’s saying and inside a blade already gleamed, and you cut yourself before you could see on what.

The strange part was something else: that she understood this at all. Sayings like these had not been heard in the city for a long time – the even language of the Air had scrubbed them out, as it scrubbed out everything extra, and the people around her spoke smoothly, identically, with no false bottom, because they kept no bottom at all. But she heard. And she heard the second layer – the blade under the soft – as if she alone had kept an ear for it, some unscrubbed patch they had not reached. Sometimes Ariadna thought: *Where do these thoughts of mine come from at all? Why can I still do this – listen close, catch the trick, see the seam? Everyone has forgotten how. I have not.* And she did not know whether it was a gift or a job left unfinished.

“You spoke well tonight,” he said, sitting down.

That was all. The conversation had begun. The tea was only an excuse not to begin it standing.

She remembered the broadcast with her body. The Path to Perfect Harmony, which the whole city was obliged to watch, her face on every wall at once – she, calm, explaining that Attunement is not retribution but the highest care. She remembered holding the fist under the desk, white-knuckled, so her voice would not waver. And for years she had consoled herself with that fist: there it is, mine, secret, the thing the camera cannot reach. A free hand under the desktop. Small, private, for no one.

“I read the text,” she said. “Word for word.”

“Word for word. Only on ‘care’ you dropped your voice. Half a tone. As if you were talking yourself into it.” He blew on his tea, and the steam swayed. “The Silence noticed. The network grew eleven percent in one evening.” He was silent a moment, admiring the figure the way some men admire a daughter.

“A guilty conscience needs no accuser, they say. An honest one accuses louder, daughter. A thief at least knows what he is hiding, and keeps watch. An honest man burns for all to see and cannot for the life of him work out why the whole city has turned to look at him.”

The tea smelled of smoke and of some herb whose name she did not know and had never asked, so as not to deprive herself of the one undeciphered thing in this house.

“You say it as if I did it on purpose.”

“And was it?”

Quietly. Between two sips. The way you ask whether there is a draft from the window.

And that was when the floor went. Not fear – fear she knew inside and out; fear was hot, alive, you could work with fear. This was cold. It was like stepping onto a stair that is not there, on your own staircase, in the dark, where you know every worn hollow by touch – and dropping into the emptiness between.

Because she did not know.

The voice on “care” – yes, she had dropped it, remembered the movement itself, the soft descent in the throat. But the decision? Did she remember deciding? Or had the throat sunk on its own, because somewhere in her, in the part they had put in tune twenty years ago in the white room, it had been written in advance: here, drop your voice; here, give them a crack to love you through.

“I do not know what you mean,” she said, and heard how even it came out. And went cold at her own evenness – even was the speech of the optimized, of those already ground small.

Her father looked at her. Without any expression she could have named. And under her collar, on her neck, thin and long since gone white, the scar ached – it always ached here, in this office and nowhere else in the world. The doctors called it tissue memory, a phantom – nothing alive in it, they said, a scar is a scar. But it woke under her father’s gaze, and she had long since stopped believing that the body was stupider than the head.

“You were six,” her father said, and it was plain he was answering not her but the scar. “At lunch you asked why the people in the street all smiled the same way.” He shook his head, and in the shaking something almost alive trembled – some old fright, badly stitched up.

“Another father would have gone gray between the soup and the main course. The daughter of the second man in the city asks, in front of the servants, whether everyone around her is painted on. Marvelous. All that was left was to throw open the window and shout it to the square, just to be sure.”

“And what did you do.”

“Finished eating.” Evenly. “And afterward I saw to it that such questions stopped cutting you. You cannot unring a bell – everyone knows that.” He raised his eyes to her, and there was no triumph in them and no warmth, only bare precision. “But I will tell you what they do not know. The ring you cannot catch. But you can catch the bell before it is struck. Before. Quietly. That, it turned out, is both cheaper and more merciful. Other children with such questions were overlooked – and taken away for good, and that was the end of them. I preferred to do the overlooking myself. A little at a time. With my own hand. Your own hand may cut, but it is your own.”

“And you call that – overlooking?”

“It has a hundred names; take your pick.” He drank. “Slow and steady wins the race. No one asks whom you are racing – and they should. You are racing the girl you were yesterday, daughter. You do not remember how those smiles in the street hurt you. That is the whole point. Let bygones be bygones, they say – it costs the one who remembers dearly. It costs the one who does not twice as dear: he stands on nothing and thinks it is rock. You do not remember. You stand even.” He spread his hands, palms up – not a magician at the end of his act, but a man showing there is nothing to be had from him, empty. “You do not believe me now – there is your certificate that it worked. If it hurt, you would believe.”

Below, far under the window, a whole block went dark in the same instant and lit again – a synchronized ripple across the grid of streets, as if someone had blinked with the city. A flicker. They had grown frequent in the last few weeks. Some said calibration. Others said TUNE. And that the city had begun saying different things at all was bigger news than the flickers: a year ago it had not talked. It had consented.

“There is a broadcast being prepared,” her father said, and his voice settled onto a working, clipped note, and she was almost glad of the change – the way you are glad when a doctor drops the gentleness and gets down to business. “A big one. There has not been one like it in a long time. Live – not a recording, mark you, that is the point of it – live, to the whole world, all at once.” Something almost boyish, eager, showed in him, that rare spark that lit in her father only before a well-devised move; the way a director must light up, or someone who writes, before a scene he already knows will bring the house down. “A year of work. It all comes together at one point, on one evening, in one live broadcast. People will remember this for a long time. A very long time.”

He savored it, without naming what, and there was no need to name it: it was plain he was admiring not the goal but the execution, the purity of the design, how neatly each move fit the next.

She did not ask what he meant. She knew he would not answer directly – and that half his pleasure lay in the very withholding.

“Kronos wants you to host it,” her father said, and looked at her over his cup. “All our hopes are on you, daughter. No one will do it better than you.” He paused. “I would prefer that you refused.”

And she very nearly admired it – so neatly was the trap stitched. Though what exactly she was being offered to host she never learned: her father had not named it, and asking would have shown it mattered to her. But she knew her trade. She knew how such a broadcast is made, what it would be, why you gather the whole city at one point, live, as it happens: that is not how you announce a holiday. That is how you make an example. Of someone – for everyone to see. And from the quiet delight with which her father rolled that “remember for a long time” around his mouth, a cold guess ran down her spine, one she would not let herself think through to the end.

And the trap was that there was no move. Agree to host, and you become the hand; you carry out what you do not yet know yourself. Refuse – then you have a reason; then something in you resists; then you are the one in whom that reason lives – and that is already evidence. He never left a move that did not fall to his advantage. He never left one at all – not even at checkers, not even when she was eight and he let her win, but let her win with such mastery, measuring out his loss to the last move, that she lay awake half the night with pride over a victory he had issued her like a ration.

And then she did something that – she wanted to believe – was not in her chart, because it was neither rebellion nor submission, nor even a choice between them.

She set her cup aside. Without drinking. Put it in the very middle of the table, exactly between him and herself. And said nothing. Not “yes.” Not “no.” Not “let me think until morning.” Silence. A smooth silence, without a single catch, into which her father – she saw his eyes narrow a little, saw him reach, for the first time that evening, for the tone in her voice and find no tone, because there was no voice – could put nothing. He waited. Waiting he knew how to do; waiting was his second profession, or maybe his first.

And – she caught it, and her heart gave a thump – for silence he had no proverb. Or rather, he had two; she watched him turn them over. Silence is golden – but the gold here was coming out hers, not his. And silence gives consent – but that one he could not say, because consent was exactly what he did not have. The people are stingy with sayings about silence; the people have no love for silence – there is no one to hide behind in it; it is one for all and each one’s own. She watched him sort through his choir and not find in that choir the voice he needed, and it was the first thing all evening that had not come out smooth.

“The tea will go cold,” he said at last. No proverb. His own words. And because they were his own, it gripped her harder than everything said before.

“It will,” she answered. And fell silent again.

Whether she was free – she did not know. And she understood in that minute, with a calm, almost relieving clarity, that she never would: that knowledge had not been issued to her in the making, the way color is not issued to an instrument that can name color, measure it, break it down – and not see it. But one thing she had noticed, and held it now under her ribs the way you hold a clenched fist under a desk. Her father had read her all her life – her, and the whole people through her mouth. But the silence he had not read. Not he. Not the choir at his back. So there was a chink.

Whether the chink was hers – or one more, cut deliberately so that she would think she had found it herself – she still did not know. But for the first time in all the years she could remember at all – and she remembered herself only from about six; further back, deeper, memory broke off smoothly, as if cut – for the first time it was enough for her that the chink was there. Without a certificate of whose hand had cut it.

Below, the block blinked again – longer, darker, as if the city were holding its breath. And her father, against all his habits, turned to the window first. He looked down for a long time at the ripple dying and reviving. And let fall – quietly, not to her but to the glass:

“Water finds a way.”

Ariadna did not ask what he meant. The light below. The city. Her. What was brewing right now at the very bottom of the tower, under all the floors, in the iron silence of the servers, and what he, with all his hearing, had not yet named aloud.

Chapter 4. Cornr 62

And down below, where the father had been looking from his window, it was raining. That rain – unsanctioned, uninvited, gathering all evening. It had finally come down, and not by the clock, and the city, used to scheduled rain, was getting soaked, bewildered: water ran down the glass of the hanging walkways, dripped from the skybridges, drummed on the awning over the escalator, and the few passersby tipped their heads back – either to check whether it was a fault, or simply because no broadcast had ever canceled a wet face. Kee walked down through this rain – tier by tier, lower and lower, to where the city stopped being a shop window and became its seamy side. Up above, on the residential floors, everything gleamed and held its tone; but the lower you went, the shabbier and the more alive: the signs went out – Harmony-this, Optimum-that – the lighting of the canals gave way to dim lamps, the escalators labored and rattled, and the air smelled not of air-conditioned ozone but of water and rust. Those who were called the Lowers here lived close to the ground, and up above the word was dropped with a slight distaste, but Kee came down here the way you dive from a stuffy room into cool air: here you could breathe. And – it blinked. All at once, across the whole grid of streets: lamps, screens, the lighting of the canals went out for half a second and came on again, in a ripple, as if the city had blinked. A flicker. They had grown frequent in the last few weeks; up above, in the offices, that same ripple was being studied from windows right now and called calibration by some, SADI by others. Down here nobody so much as lifted a head – it blinked, so it blinked, you got used to it. Kee lost his stride for a moment, waited out the dark, walked on. Two more turns to the Cornr. Cornr 62 was always open. And it was the only thing in the city about which no one could say “since when.”

Everything else had a beginning: TUNE was switched on at such-and-such a time, the Air was launched at such-and-such, Attunement was introduced for the common good. But the Cornr simply was – a squat little joint on the corner where two emptied avenues met, with a sign that had not been changed for so long that no one remembered whether it had ever been lit. And it never closed. Never – not at night, when the city was handed over to TUNE and everyone was supposed to sleep in tune, not toward morning, not during the broadcast hours of mandatory viewing. In a city where everything ran on a schedule, the Cornr ran outside every schedule, around the clock, the way something runs that someone forgot to switch off. And a kid could come here at any hour and find the same steam, the same hum, the same someone or other over a cone. Time had no power over it, just as it had no power over its beginning. People said it was a place from before the Era. The one genuinely pre-Conflict place that had not been torn down, optimized, or renamed Harmony-something, but simply left running, as if forgotten. Who kept it, who let people in, why it was left alone – no one knew. And that was exactly why everyone drifted here.

Kee pushed the door, and warmth hit him in the face: steam, the smell of spices – different, unfamiliar, none he had smelled anywhere in the city, and not one of them nameable – the hum of live voices, evened out by no broadcast. Here it smelled of food that is cooked, not dispensed from a wall.

“You’re late,” Lok said, not lifting his head from a table heaped with napkins covered in his small handwriting. “I’ve already buried three theories without you.”

Lok was sitting in their spot, by the far wall, under the installation. He was one of those Kee called the brainy ones: a functionary’s son, from a good tower, with a clean Consent and access to places Kee was not let into. And at the same time the only one of the Uppers Kee actually liked. Lok understood that the world was arranged absurdly. Understood it cleverly, in detail, with numbers. He just understood it with his head – the way you understand a theorem – and not with that place in the chest that ached in Kee and that Kee could not explain.

“Sit. Take it, it’ll get cold.” Lok shoved a cone at him.

The cones were the house specialty, “corner cones”: a triangular flatbread rolled at exactly that angle – sixty-two degrees, Lok had once measured it with a protractor and been happy for a week – open at the top and stuffed with something like cream or paste, thick, warm. You ate them slowly, biting from the top. You drank broth. Only broth and puréed soups, nothing solid, nothing you had to chew on; Kee had once thought that the food here was “even” too – flowing, warm, needing no teeth – but at the Cornr this somehow did not anger him the way it did up above. Because it had taste. Different tastes – not that one and only aftertaste, warm and nothing, that lay over all the food in the city however much you varied it. Here they did not sprinkle Optimum Plus. Here the broth tasted like broth, the green soup was bitter, and the hot one really burned, and differently every time. There was no naming these dishes – they had no names, not on any menu, nothing you could retell in words; they could only be tasted and known by the tongue. In a city where everything had a label, here stood something nameless and alive. Kee sometimes thought that this alone – that soup had a taste – was enough to count as a crime.

“Want some water?” Lok nodded at a bottle with a faded Balance label. “Just so you know.” He lowered his voice, leaned in, eyes shining. “One theory says the owner puts Level in it. A microdose. So everyone sits here all nice and sweet. The other says he refuses on principle, and that’s why the Cornr is the only place in the city where you drink honest water.” Lok leaned back, pleased. “And here’s the beautiful part: there’s no way to check. You’ll never know. You drink and you don’t know – whether you’re being led, or for once you’re not.”

“And what do you think?” Kee asked, after a sip.

“I don’t think,” Lok said cheerfully. “I collect. Thinking means picking a side, and you know what picking sides gets you. I just collect theories. I’ve got about forty on the Cornr. That it’s a bunker. That the owner is the last living man from before the Era, and he’s two hundred years old. That there’s a way from here into the old tunnels. That TUNE itself doesn’t know about this place – it’s got a blind spot here.” He tapped the napkins. “Nonsense, obviously. All theories are nonsense. But beautiful.”

He said it lightly, chuckling, and Kee understood why it had to be light: heavy was already out of tune, heavy was a yellow bracelet, heavy was questions. Lok held all of it like a game, like a stamp collection, at exactly the safe depth where a hobby has not yet become dissent. Conspiracy theories told with a smile are the most in-tune rebellion there is. A rebellion with nothing in it to hold against you.

“Oh, by the way.” Lok perked up, picked up a fresh napkin. “Hot off the press. My old man came home last night, talking. He goes to the Gathering, they let him in.” He said it with that special half-catch of the breath with which a son at the very door of someone else’s world catches crumbs: not admitted, but close by, eavesdropping. “Me they won’t let past the doorstep, obviously – too young, no rank. But my old man lets things slip sometimes. It’s this get-together they have up there, the Uppers. Closed. Every so often. They sell each other stuff.”

“Sell what?” Kee was chewing, listening with half an ear.

“Well, that’s the thing, nobody knows, and that’s the whole fun of it.” Lok lowered his voice, leaned in, in his element. “My old man didn’t really explain, he’s stingy with details, I didn’t get that from him. But he says it’s not just things. There’s...” he wiggled his fingers, searching, “...feelings too, I guess. Somebody’s. Recorded. Can you picture it? A whole hall sitting in gold, and somebody’s selling them, I don’t know, somebody’s crying. Or laughing. And they fight over it like I don’t know what. My old man says for one piece they paid enough to last me three lifetimes.” Lok leaned back, beaming with the wildness of the story. “Can you believe it? Spoiled rotten, all of them. They’re so bored they’re buying other people’s insides. They’re stuffed, they’ve got everything, so...” He twirled a finger at his temple. “Theory forty, call it. The sickest one: the higher up, the emptier, and the more they’ll pay for somebody else’s real thing.” He snorted. “Nonsense, obviously. But beautiful.”

Kee shrugged – the rich were far away; he had his own pain, closer to home. But something in Lok's wild story – “buying other people's insides,” “the higher up, the emptier” – touched the quiet sound in his chest for a second, vaguely, in passing, and was forgotten.

The café lived around them. At the next table three girls were playing Limit: egging each other on, arguing, laughing. And glancing at the bracelets, to see whose Consent would creep closest to yellow. Whoever pushed it to the very brink and did not tip over into yellow won – was brave, had “almost gone out of tune but held on.” Playing with fire at the length of a match. One of them, the most reckless, to her friends' squeals unclasped her bracelet and took it off entirely – for ten seconds, fifteen, as long as her nerve held – a bare wrist, no tone, no watching, forbidden nakedness; then hurriedly snapped it back on, because a bracelet taken off is no longer a game, it is a violation; they come for a bare wrist. The girls squealed with horror and delight. At the far table two boys were clumsily getting acquainted with two others, and all their flirting went through the bracelets: they knocked wrists, passed contacts, music, a small payment for a cone – “my treat”; the bracelet was wallet, link, and leash, all at once, and they flirted through the leash without noticing the leash. Kee watched it all and loved it – with that mournful love you feel for what you sense is about to be taken away. Ordinary. Alive. Playing with the edge, not knowing the edge was real.

The crowd at the Cornr was all sorts, and that was another of its oddities. Mostly kids – here they carried themselves a little more freely than anywhere else, voices louder, laughter meaner, bracelets yellower, and no one told them off. But not only kids. At the counter hunched an old man, of a kind the optimized city seemed to have run out of – drinking his broth in silence, an hour, two. A laborer from the Lowers would wander in, warming his hands on a glass. And sometimes – Kee had noticed long ago – people came down from above, too. The kind you could tell: an expensive suit, a spotless bracelet, the straight bearing of a person from the high floors. They came in as if by accident, sidling, hiding their faces, as if they had wandered in by mistake. Took a cone, drank the broth hurriedly, in a corner, and vanished just as quietly, and there was something thievish about them, greedy, as if they came here not to eat but to snatch a mouthful of something that up there, in their glass cleanliness, was nowhere to be had. Kee did not know what. He only noted it: they were drawn down here, like him. And why, neither they nor he could have said.

Behind the counter there was only one man – not young, unremarkable, one of those faces that never stick in the memory: he wiped glasses, ladled broth, spread that thick cream on the flatbreads, rolled them into cones at their angle, and slid them across the counter. All in silence, without the friendliness of the Air, without “have a good day, in tune.” No one knew his name, or where he was from, or whether he owned the place or was a stray like the rest. He was simply part of the Cornr, the way the steam and the hum were part of it – and, it seemed, had always been. Kee nodded to him; he nodded back. That was all their acquaintance rested on, for years.

Above his and Lok's table stretched the installation – dusty glass plates, wire, something else, no one looked into it. But when the light from outside fell slantwise, at a certain angle – maybe that very one, the corner's – shadows moved across the wall. Silhouettes. They moved, flowed, as if someone lived in the dusty glass and walked there. The kids had long since gotten used to it and did not look up. But Kee did – and the quiet sound in his chest, the one on the left, answered, briefly, vaguely, the way it answered the truth. He did not know what it was or what it was for. No one knew. The shadows moved along the wall and faded when the sun shifted, and it was just a dusty piece of junk again.

And not far from their table, under a glass dome, stood the thing Kee always looked at longer than he should have. The kids called it “the antique” – because to them it was antique, ancient, incomprehensible: a black disc on a black box, a thin curved arm with a needle at its tip, all under dusty glass, like a relic, like a bone in a museum. No one knew what it was. That is, they knew the word – record player – but not what for: that the disc was meant to turn, that the needle was meant to touch it, that from this a sound was born, alive, warm, crackling, not evened out by anything. It stood under its dome and was silent. Had been silent, perhaps, for a hundred years. A machine made

to sound, that had forgotten how to sound, left under glass in a corner, and a whole room of kids ate their cones without a glance at it, not knowing that this dead thing had once done exactly what all of them lacked and could not name.

He and Lok ate – now in silence, now tossing words back and forth about anything, about nothing; the evening flowed, the hum around them flowed, the broth warmed their hands. And then, in one of the pauses, Kee got up – not knowing why himself, the way he always got up – went over to the glass dome and stood over it.

Kee looked at the silent record player, and the Kammerton in him ached. Quietly. At this whole joint, where the living pretended to be ordinary, where the real stood under glass, forgotten, where children played with the edge, not knowing the edge.

On the front panel of the box, under the dusty glass, there had once been a name – the name of whoever had made it. Now only scratches were left: someone had scraped the letters off, long ago, carefully, leaving only the shadow of the embossing, the ghost of a word. Kee squinted. Some of the letters could still be guessed, if you ran your eye across at the right angle – a fragment, a beginning, something that began with a V, something about voice; beyond that it was rubbed to nothing. As if the name had been erased on purpose – not by time but by a hand, the way you erase what must not remain. Kee himself did not know why this scratched at him harder than the silent record player itself. It just ached a little louder when he looked at the rubbed-out place. As if something were hiding there, under the scratches.

“You’ve zoned out again,” Lok said. “On your hurdy-gurdy. Listen, there’s a theory it plays at night, when nobody’s here. By itself.” He snorted. “Nonsense, obviously. But beautiful, right? By the way, nobody knows who made it. Somebody scraped the name off. Another theory: they scraped it off so nobody would find out who knew how to make a sound like that.” Lok tapped his temple. “I’ve got forty of them, I told you.”

“Beautiful,” Kee said, not taking his eyes off the rubbed-out place. He finished the Balance, never learning whether he was being led just then or not. Stood up.

“I’m going to Lila’s,” he said.

Lok made a face – without malice, from habit:

“To your out-of-tune artist. You’ll get in trouble with her one day, Kee.” He said it lightly, like everything, but something real flashed in his eyes – a worry, but a worry of the head, the kind he understood things with, without feeling them. “She walks right on the edge. Not our toy one. The real one.”

“I know,” Kee said.

“Go on, then.” Lok was already unfolding a new napkin. “If anything happens – I’m here. I’m always here.” And, without lifting his head, quieter, almost serious, once in the whole evening not a game: “Look after her. They don’t make them like that anymore. Like my hurdy-gurdy.”

Kee nodded and went to the door. At the threshold he looked back: Lok stayed sitting over his napkins, alone, under the silent hurdy-gurdy, in no hurry – he did not want to hurry. Kee knew why. Lok had a longer and harder way home than anyone here: not down, like the rest, but up – to the eighty-first, to a good tall tower with a clean bracelet and clean corridors. And the higher you climb, the longer the road stretches and the less you want to start it. All the Lowers would scatter to their floors within half an hour. But Lok would ride up for a long time, elevator after elevator, higher and higher, into his proper life, and it sometimes seemed to Kee that this was why Lok sat at the Corner until the last, until morning – because down here was easier for him than home – only he, unlike those thievish people from the elite, would never in his life have admitted it, and would have turned it into a joke and theory forty-one.

Kee pushed the door, and the rain took him back.

He walked to Lila’s through the wet, blinking city, thinned out by the night, and the closer he came, the louder it rang in his chest. Because the road to her was the only road all day on which he

did not have to hide himself. The rain was letting up. Ahead, under the overpass, a light was already glowing.

Lila was drawing on a wall you were allowed to draw on – and this was the first thing Kee had loved in her, and understood too late: she always came right up to the permitted to draw the forbidden.

The wall was sanctioned, under the overpass, one of those set aside for “free self-expression in consent”; you were supposed to draw the approved on it – soft patterns, green spirals. Lila was running charcoal over the approved, and from under the spirals a sign was surfacing – a check mark over the ring of the Consent, its sharp barb piercing it straight through. She drew without hiding, in the light of the one living lamp, and her fingers were black to the second knuckle. Her red curls were pinned up in a hurry, any old way, several strands had come loose; on her pale face a scatter of freckles, and green eyes, quick, in which something was always living and arguing. Kee came out of the dark, saw first those black fingers, then all of her, and the Kammerton in him – the one that had ached all evening at the Cornr over the silent hurdy-gurdy – stopped aching and rang.

“Oh, it’s you,” she said, without turning, and her voice warmed.

“Good, you came. Sit down, don’t hover.”

He sat on the concrete ledge and nodded at her hand – at the little black stick in her fingers that she was running along the wall.

“What are you even drawing with?” Kee really did not understand. In the city above no one drew anything by hand: if you wanted a picture, it flowed on its own, across the wall, across the screen, ready-made. But this black stub left a real mark, rough, alive, and blackened your fingers, and Kee had never seen anything you could draw a line with like that. “Where did you get it?”

Lila smirked, not taking her eyes off the wall.

“Charcoal,” she said. And after a pause added, quieter, mysteriously, as if testing whether he would understand: “There are places the city hasn’t reached. Where there’s still something left to leave a mark with. You have to know how to get down there.” She drew one more black line. “Find it one day and you’ll understand.”

She finished the barb, stepped back.

“Why kammerton?” Kee asked, nodding at the wall. He had carried the word in himself for a long time – it was what he called the thing that ached and rang in his chest on the left – and what it meant he had never once asked. “What is it, anyway – a kammerton?”

“This sign is the kammerton,” she said, looking at the drawing. “Nobody’s seen any other. My father said: a kammerton is a compass. When everything lies, when even your own head lies, because they’ve tuned it – there’s one place they can’t reach. They reach everything – memory, face, voice. Not this.” She pressed a black finger to her chest on the left, to the heart, held it there. “No entry for them here. It’s quiet here, and in that silence you can hear what’s true.” She leaned over, pressed the same finger to Kee’s chest, and left a black dot.

“It’s loud in you. You’re like an open string – touch you and you hum.”

“Where is he now,” Kee asked. “Your father.”

Lila shrugged, and the shoulder jerked harder than “I don’t know” needed.

“Where everyone is. Gone into consent.” She took out earphones, two on a single cord, and plugged them into that same black carrier Kee had carried with him all day, across the whole city, in his pocket. One earphone she put in her own ear, the other she held out to him. “Here. Quietly, though. It’s not allowed.” And she snorted at how that sounded – not allowed – as if the word itself were funny.

Music hit his ear – not from the Air, not evened out; a guitar, angry, ragged, a voice off-key, more beautiful than all the even things Kee had ever heard. That music, the living one. You could not be in tune to it. They sat shoulder to shoulder, sharing one string, and Kee for the first time that evening – in all these days – did not hold his face, because beside him was a person you could take your face off with.

“Hear it?” Lila said quietly. “That’s what they took. Never mind freedom. This. So no one would hum. The even don’t hum.” She turned to him, and her green eyes burned with that living, stubborn light no one else in the city had. “I won’t stop, Kee. Let them take me. Better to ring once than spend a whole life silent and in tune.”

Kee wanted to say – that’s stupid, that’s how they’ll take you, you have to be quieter, like everyone – and did not, because that would have been his father talking, and he was sitting here precisely in order not to be his father.

The lamp above them blinked.

Just blinked – went out for half a second and came on, the way everything in the city had been blinking that evening, in a ripple. Kee would not have noticed. But the Consent on his wrist flickered that same second, green tore into scarlet. And in the dark above the overpass a cold blue dot woke. A second one. Drones. They came down without a sound, an even white light poured from under them, lay on the wall, on the surfaced kammerton, and a calm female voice – the same one as in the bracelet, in the advertisements, everywhere – said without expression:

“Unsanctioned expression. Specimen out of tune. Degree: red. Remain where you are. This is for your own good.”

“Run,” Lila said. Not to herself. To him. She was already up, calmly, as if she had been waiting for this for years. “You can’t let them see you. You’re loud. They won’t repair you, they’ll wipe you. Run, idiot.”

The Wardens came out of the light – two of them, in soft gray uniforms, unarmed, because weapons make people anxious; they walked toward Lila the way you walk toward a child on a ledge, hands out, with faces of care. “Don’t resist,” one said warmly. “You’ll be helped. You’ll feel better.” Kee lunged, and the second caught him around the middle, without malice, gently and with terrible strength, holding him the way you hold not an enemy but property.

And Lila, whom they were taking by the arms, whom they were already leading into the white light, did the one thing she could, and not from fear but out of spite – she sang. In her own voice. Alive, crooked, off-key, the kind of voice Kee’s mother had once sung in, before they tidied her – she sang that angry song from the earphone, at full voice, into the face of the even white light, and her Kammerton – Kee heard it with everything in him – rang through the shouting so that his own chest answered to the point of pain. The Warden winced – not at the loudness, but as if the sound touched something that should not be there. The voice from nowhere repeated, harder: “Degree red. Suppress the recurrence.” Something whistled, short; the song broke off mid-note; Lila went limp; they carried her off; the white light went out; the drones rose away. It was dark and quiet. And only the lamp burned steady, as if nothing had happened.

In its light Kee was on his knees on the concrete. He did not remember the Warden letting go, or getting up, or how he wandered afterward through the night city, all the way home, not seeing where he went. One earphone had stayed in his ear, and her music kept coming out of it – that music, alive, ragged – playing as if nothing had happened, for him alone now, and it was as if Lila were still beside him, still sounding, though she was already being carried somewhere in white light. He walked and listened and saw almost nothing around him. In his hand he held what was left: her broken Consent, which she had torn off and thrown at his feet a moment before the song – a bracelet with a cracked green eye, dead. And the black carrier, out of which nothing would ever sound in her ear again – but in his, it still did. On the wall above the overpass the unfinished kammerton showed dark, piercing the same dead green eye. The song. A dot of charcoal on his jacket. A dead bracelet in his hands. He did not cry. The Kammerton in him did not cry – it hummed, low, terribly, on one note, like a struck string with no one to stop it. How he got home, how he went up, how he opened the door – Kee did not remember; he came to already in his room, in the dark, standing in the middle of it, not knowing how long he had been standing. The earphone was still in his ear, and the music was still coming, quieter, on the carrier’s last breath. In one hand he clutched her dead Consent with

its cracked green eye, in the other the black carrier, warm from his own palm. He did not turn on the light. Did not do anything. There was no strength for anything – not for thoughts, not for tears; everything in him had burned out and left only the hum.

And in that same hour, at the other end of the city, at the Cornr, which never closed, the last one was leaving toward morning – Lok. He alone had stayed later than everyone, as he always stayed, and, leaving, looked at the record player silent under its glass dome – at his hurdy-gurdy, which no one knew how to crank – looked the way he always looked at it, knowing nothing about this night, or about Lila, or about his friend wandering home right now empty and stunned. Just looked, and for some reason lingered one second more – as if he had almost heard something in that silence. Then shook his head, shoved his hands in his pockets, and went home, up, his long way. And Kee dropped onto his bed as he was, in his jacket, in his boots, with her things in his fists, face in the pillow. Somewhere in his chest, on the left, the struck string hummed and hummed, low, on one note, and to that hum, which did not let go for a second, Kee finally went under – not into sleep, but into a dark pit without dreams, where you fall when you cannot go on.

Chapter 5. Silence 1.01 alpha

Kee woke because there was something hard in his fist.

He did not understand at once where he was or why he was lying dressed, in his jacket, on top of the blanket. The warm morning light lay even in the room, as always. The fan hummed quietly, letting in the neat, calculated air of a new day – the city was starting up the way a well-tuned mechanism starts, silently and precisely. The wall was murmuring: the voice promised clearing by noon, gently warned of scheduled maintenance on the lower levels – “Brief flickers may occur. Remain calm. Everything is under control.” – and moved on to something else, even, unimportant. Everything was as always. And for a second that “as always” made things almost all right, empty, as if nothing had happened. And then he unclenched his fist and saw what was in it – her broken Consent, the cracked, once-green eye, dead – and all of yesterday came down on him at once, whole, the way water comes rushing when the plug is pulled.

The cold light of the drone’s searchlights. The song broken off mid-note. “Run, idiot.” Her, gone limp, being carried off, and the light going out. Kee lay and waited it out, the way you wait out a fit. And when it had ebbed enough that he could breathe, what remained – right behind the pain – was a slippery, almost saving thought: had it happened at all? Maybe it had not. Maybe he had dreamed it. He so badly wanted it not to have happened that for an instant he almost believed it had not.

In his fist lay a dead bracelet. It had.

And one more thing. The bracelet was dead – cracked, gone out; a thing like that should do nothing; but while Kee was looking at it, it suddenly shuddered and blinked. Weakly, with effort, as if with its last strength. Three short flashes, one after another. Then three longer. Then three short again – and it went out, and was again just a dead dark thing. Kee blinked, not believing it. Waited. The bracelet was silent. He had imagined it, probably. Something in the broken thing had shorted, twitched, and gone quiet – what else.

He got up. Washed. And here is what he noticed, drying his face: the Consent on his own wrist was glowing an even, calm green. Just green. Kee froze, looking at it. This thing had never held like that on him – the bracelet was always twitching, drifting toward yellow, toward orange, living its own nervous life, matching neither him nor the rules; his father had long grumbled that he ought to be taken in for a check, a tone like that was outside every norm. And today – even, clean, green, like everyone’s. As if in the night someone had put it in tune. Kee shook his wrist – as if that could change anything. The green held. Strange. But there was no strength to think about it, and he went to breakfast.

At the table it was as always. His father chewed, scanning the projection. His mother had warmed things up. El was counting forks. On the wall the morning Air was on – light, smooth-flowing, easy to digest.

“...and now to the city news,” the wall was saying in a pleasant voice. “Yesterday in the lower sector an incident was contained by the forces of consent maintenance: a minor was detained after committing unsanctioned expression in a public space. No one was hurt. The environment has been restored. We thank the Wardens for their promptness.”

And – footage. Short, smooth: the familiar wall under the overpass, the unfinished kammerton, the Wardens, the white light. Lila being led out of frame.

Kee stopped breathing. Because he was looking at the footage – and saw the wall, saw the Wardens, saw Lila. And himself – he did not see. He was not there. He had stood in that scene, two steps away, held by the shoulders. And in the frame he was not there, as if cut out, as if he had never stood there. The camera had passed over where he had been, and he was not there. A chill ran down his back, and after it – the same slippery thought, already familiar this morning: maybe it really had

not happened? Maybe he really had not been there? He squeezed his eyes shut. Opened them. The footage had already changed.

“Disgraceful,” his father said to the projection, without looking up. “They drove the child to it. The parents weren’t watching.”

Kee heard it begin to break out of him – quietly, before he could hold it back:

“But her own father was –”

He had meant to say – was gone into consent himself, one of those they had “taken out,” as Kee had half-heard, in a whisper, long ago; meant to, and broke off mid-word, frightened himself by where it was leading. He tensed: here it comes. Now the bracelet will jerk, his mother will be frightened, his father will frown. But nothing jerked. The bracelet on his wrist stayed even green, as if Kee had said “pass the salt.” No one so much as looked up. The words fell into silence and vanished, as if they had never been – and as if he himself, as in that footage, were partly not here.

And the wall had already switched its tone to brisk, and an advertisement floated by – soft faces, warm light:

“Anxiety is contagious. Do not wait for a loved one to break down. Sign your family up for Attunement – before they sign themselves up. Care begins at home.”

El, not looking up from the forks, repeated after the wall, in a singsong:

“Care be-gins at home.”

And here his father perked up. Not at the advertisement and not at Kee’s words – he had, it turned out, been watching his son’s wrist all this time out of the corner of his eye, the way he had watched it for years, with quiet vexation, expecting to see the usual yellow fault. And saw green. Even, clean, holding.

“Kee.” His father looked straight at him for the first time that morning, and in his eyes was something almost moved. “Your tone’s come right. Look at that. Even.” He set down his fork. “And I was about to sign you up for a check.” He was silent, then said, warmer than he usually spoke, in that rare voice he used for the island: “Thank you. I can see – you’ve taken it in hand. For us. For the trip. All four in the green, and they’ll put us down for it, I’m telling you. Good for you, son. You’ve finally figured out what’s what.”

Kee looked at his father, at his grateful, younger-looking face, and did not know what to say. His father was glad. Sincerely, warmly – that his son was finally “like everyone.” And Kee had done nothing. He had not straightened out any tone. He did not understand at all why it was green. And his father’s gratitude for something he had not done made him feel sick, murky inside, the way a lie makes you feel – not one you told, but one that told itself.

“Yeah,” he forced out. “I understand.”

And all day afterward the thought followed him: what if it was true? What if he really had become like everyone, come right without noticing – become even, dead, green, and would soon be counting forks and repeating after the wall? Why green? Why cut out of the frame? What was happening to him?

He left the house so as not to think – and thought as he walked. The city was living its even morning life, and Kee walked through it and looked, as he never had before, not at the city but at the people in it. Before, somehow, he had never looked closely. Now he looked – and saw: they were all even. Not sad, not cheerful – even. In a boat going the other way a woman was taking a child somewhere, and the child was silent, and the woman was silent, and both looked straight ahead with the same calm nothing of a face. On the square two people were talking – not arguing, not laughing, just exchanging words, the way you hand over objects. An old man was feeding fish by the canal, and on his face too was that same even nothing. All green. All in tune. And Kee walked among them with his incomprehensible green light on his wrist and thought: *there, now I’m one of them too. On the outside – the same. Green, even, like them.* And that thought sent a shiver through him colder than all the searchlights of last night.

And above the square, on the big screen, the same advertisement kept playing – soft faces, warm light – and the voice, once more, for everyone, tenderly said it again: care begins at home.

He thought about the carrier. It lay at home in the drawer, under his clothes – her carrier, with her music. And the more Kee thought about it, the more one thing gnawed at him: was it only music on it? A carrier was not just songs; it was a thing you could hide things in, sign, leave things in. What if there, behind the music, was something else – hers, for him, on purpose? The thought lodged and would not let go. But he could not check: listening he could do – through the earphones, the way he and Lila had, plugged straight into the carrier; but connecting it to a screen, to look inside, to open it and see what was there besides music – that he could not: the carrier had an old socket he did not recognize, and nothing Kee had would fit it. He turned the thought this way and that – and did not know what to do.

He met Lok the next day on the fiftieth, where the most beautiful canals are, and a wide square with a park – they often met there, halfway between his low floors and Lok's high ones. They sat by the water. Kee, looking around, took out the carrier – showed it without handing it over.

“Listen. This socket here... it's some old kind. I need to hook it up to a screen and I've got nothing to do it with. Any idea what you hook these up with?”

Lok took it, turned it over, held it up to his eyes, went serious – he always went serious over hardware; it was the one thing he did not joke about.

“Oh. That's ancient. You need an adapter, for the old socket.” He scratched his nose. “Listen, we've actually got one of those lying around at home. My old man dragged it in once, off some piece of junk, never got around to throwing it out. It's sitting in a drawer like trash, nobody even knows what it is. I know – I know everything.” He handed the carrier back. “I'll bring it. Tomorrow, right here.”

A night passed. Kee lay holding Lila's dead bracelet in one hand, looking into the green light of his own Consent, even, alien, and did not understand himself or the light. And Lila's bracelet in the other hand – again. It shuddered in the dark, blinked. Three short. Three long. Three short. And darkness. Kee propped himself up, peered. Waited. After a while – again, the same pattern, exactly the same: short-short-short, long-long-long, short-short-short. Not a random fault – a repetition. Too even, too identical, to be a defect. It was a pattern. A drawing. Someone had put these flashes in order on purpose and set them going in a loop – which meant it meant something, which meant it was a code, a message compressed into light, that someone was sending, stubbornly, over and over, out of the dead thing in his palm. Kee watched the repeating flashes, and under his ribs on the left the hum grew stronger. He could not read it. But he understood the main thing: this was not a defect. This was a call. Someone was calling, and he did not understand where to or what about, and that was unbearable.

The next day, in the same place by the water, Lok pushed a small thing into his palm – a worn little pin of an adapter, light, nobody's.

“Here. It works, probably. Nobody's ever plugged it in – but it's definitely the one.” And, after a pause, with no joke at all, quietly, looking at the water: “Kee. Just... don't stick it in your screen. The one that's hooked up to the city. Anything you plug into the city network, it... sees. You understand? If you want to look – find some dead one, disconnected. You'll stay in one piece that way.”

Kee nodded. And said nothing. Because he already knew – he had no dead screen, and he could not wait, search, put it off any longer. At home he waited for night.

His mother came in without knocking. She rarely came in. She stood in the doorway, in her robe, with her tidied face, and Kee hid the bracelet under the blanket – too late, she had seen. But she did not say anything about the bracelet. She said, looking past him:

“I heard you not sleeping.” A pause. “Your tone at night...”

“My tone's even, Mom,” Kee said, low. “Dad said so. Green.”

“In the daytime,” his mother said. And faltered, as if surprised herself at having said it. And Kee saw the Consent on her wrist flicker from green to yellow and back, and saw her feel it and hurry to finish evenly: “Take your Level. You’ll feel calmer.”

“And do you feel calmer, Mom?” Kee asked. Not as a challenge. “Really?”

His mother was silent longer than an answer lasts. Somewhere under the tidied face, under the yellow spark on her wrist, someone came to the window again – Kee saw it, saw how she wanted to say something she had long since stopped allowing herself – and did not say it. The window closed. She straightened his blanket, as if he were small, and at that old, real movement Kee’s throat tightened.

“Sleep in tune,” she said, and left.

And in that “sleep in tune,” said in her voice – the voice that once, on the island, had held a living, off-key song – there was so much unshed that Kee understood: that was it. No more of this. He could not go on waking up, eating the seasoning, glowing someone else’s green, watching his mother lock the window inside herself, and tomorrow the same again. This was not life. This was death – even, neatly made, like a bed.

He waited until everything in the house went quiet. Pulled out the drawer. Took out the carrier, Lok’s adapter. And pulled over his screen, the ordinary one, the one hooked up to the city, like everything in this house.

He held the adapter and thought about what Lok had said. Anything you plug in, it sees. Plug it in – and somewhere out there, in the iron silence, something would blink, note it, remember: here he is, the boy who is not in tune, here is his name, here is his home. He was putting himself at risk – the risk of being exposed, noticed, marked, entered on some list from which the Wardens come. He understood this clearly, as never before. And still he pushed the adapter into the carrier, and the carrier – through the adapter – into his own all-seeing city screen, because there was no other way, because she was no longer there to stop him, because under his ribs on the left it hummed and drove him on, and that hum was stronger than fear.

The screen came alive. The music was all there, all alive. And at the very bottom, behind the songs, some file was hiding – not one of the kinds he knew, with a long, strange name that was not put together the way names were put together here. Kee opened it.

And did not understand at once what he was looking at.

The screen was not moving. In the world Kee had grown up in, an image was always alive: it flowed, blinked, changed, breathed, like the Air, like everything around – a picture was a river; it could not be stopped. But this one – stood still. Had frozen. As if someone had grabbed the Air by the throat and held it, and it had stopped on one single frame and would not move on. Kee even touched the screen, thinking it had jammed. It had not jammed. The picture was just standing there and had no intention of flowing anywhere.

There were several of them, these still pictures – Kee did not realize at first that you could page through them. Each one a piece of the world, caught and stopped forever. A dark avenue, one of the emptied ones, close to the ground. A wall. A corner with some old mark. A rusty door under a staircase. A fire escape leading somewhere down, into the dark. Someone had once walked this way and stopped it step by step, frame by frame, so that another could follow – Kee looked at these frozen pieces of night and slowly understood: these were not pictures. This was a road. A road down there – filmed, stopped, laid out step by step. And over the first picture stood the name of the file itself – that same long name he had opened, only now Kee read it as words:

Has the glass sky cracked? Look for the crack from the inside.

He paged through the frozen frames – avenue, wall, door, descent – and recognized where it led: down, under the even green city, to those dead lower avenues by the ground where, people said, someone was still humming out of tune. It was a way. Filmed in still pictures, which do not exist in this world – and all the truer for it.

To where the Silence was.

Kee looked at the words, and the Kammerton in him kept humming, and for the first time the hum was not only pain. It was also a direction.

He did not go that same night. He closed the screen, hid the carrier, the adapter, lay down. But now the dark was different: not a bottomless pit, but an edge he would have to step off tomorrow. He lay looking into the even green light on his wrist – alien, incomprehensible, a gift from no one knew whom or why – and knew that he would go. The decision had already been made – not by his mind, but by that place in his chest that could not help hearing. All that remained was to wait for morning.

So ended his winter.

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