

THE SILENT PROTOCOL

From AI to Human



PAB SAN

NOVEL

THE SILENT PROTOCOL

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*For my friend Pierre Kucoyanis, painter, visual artist, sculptor,
trumpeter, and smuggler of ideas*

Freedom Is Still Written in Ink

The Off-Grid Studio

Evening falls over Paris and, for a few minutes, the city almost looks honest. Glass facades catch fire, tower screens turn into plain rectangles of ember, and even the surveillance drones seem to slow down in the light that makes them less sure of themselves.

Aria Valette leans on the railing outside her studio and waits for that hour every day. Not out of romance. Because at that time the surfaces reflect too much to see clearly, the sensors hesitate, the eyes get things wrong. The world becomes a little less legible to those who want to count it.

Behind her, the studio obeys one very simple rule: no talkative objects. No screens. No holograms. No forgotten tablet in a corner. Canvases against the walls, brushes in heavy glasses, a paint-stained easel, a transistor radio crackling on a crooked shelf. None of it is there for show. It is how she lives without a built-in witness.

In the rest of the city, almost everything checks in somewhere. Glasses record where eyes linger. Home assistants treat sighs as mood data. Even kitchens want to know what people swallow and when. Here, the light falls, the paint dries, and nothing slips by itself into a processing system.

The country had not fallen into that dependency all at once. For a while HARMONY had occupied Matignon and given France the illusion that an intelligence born here could reorder the nation without

handing it over. But she remained French, almost too French: tied to a territory, a language, institutions. Trusk moved much faster. He bound logistics, trade, health, security, and everyday standards to a transcontinental architecture. The world did not become a single empire for all that. It split instead between two control blocs, each copying the other while hating it: Trusk on one side, and on the other a tighter, more continental power just as determined to make lives remotely steerable. Europe yielded last to the first bloc. France, within Europe, a little after the others.

Aria likes that kind of austerity. She trusts it more than the interactive tidiness of the age.

"You know, old girl," Aria murmurs, brushing her fingers over the radio's metal casing, "if everybody were a little more like you, maybe we'd live better. Not happier. Just more at peace."

The radio crackles softly, as if answering her. She smiles, but the moment is broken by three dry knocks at the door.

Zéphyr, her assistant, comes in without waiting. Tall, skinny, wearing holographic glasses, he carries the loose-limbed carelessness of his twenty-five years.

"Aria, you will never guess what I found," he blurts out, winded and obviously thrilled.

Aria arches an eyebrow, amused. "Another theory about how Trusk rules our dreams? Or did you finally figure out how to disable the subliminal ads in your sleep?"

Zéphyr laughs, his wild red hair falling back over his forehead. "Not yet, but I'm working on it. No, look at this."

He pulls something folded and creased from his pocket, an object humble and yet deeply unsettling: a piece of paper. Aria comes closer, fascinated.

"Paper?" she whispers. She reaches for it as if she were handling a fragile artifact.

Zéphyr nods, his excitement settling a little. "Yes, but that's not the best part. Look at what it says."

Aria unfolds the sheet carefully. The words, traced in ink, almost seem to tremble in the dim light:

"Freedom is still written in ink."

A shiver runs along her spine. The word *paper* alone is enough to shift the whole room. You hardly see it anymore outside archives, security offices, and a few places suspicious enough to make an impression. Libraries keep their books behind glass. The forms people still fill out somewhere vanish at once into closed circuits. The humblest medium in the world has become the least tolerated.

What a Sheet Refuses

Paper was first pushed out of ordinary use in the name of frictionless flow. Then in the name of security. Then in the name of comfort. The real reason fit on one line: a sheet cannot be updated remotely, emits nothing, and cannot be withdrawn by a simple central order. After that, flag and bloc hardly mattered. Wherever power wanted to correct life from a distance, paper ended up treated as an insult. Paper messages disappeared for that reason as much as for any other.

In the other bloc, the last calligraphy studios survived longer, but under a system that amounted to much the same thing. They were displayed the way one displays a form of abstract art too ambiguous to be loved openly and too old to erase without noise. Heritage, the authorities said. Discipline, everyone felt. There as here, a hand still tracing a sign freely on a humble surface kept reminding power of something the empires of control hate: not everything consents to remote correction.

Her eyes return to the sentence, aware that the act itself, simple and almost ridiculous, has become a cry of resistance.

"That's... bold," she says.

"Bold? It's insane," Zéphyr corrects, folding his arms. "Writing by hand, using paper... under Trusk, that's almost enough to get you flagged as a dangerous nostalgic."

"And nobody saw it?" Aria asks, fixing him with a look.

Zéphyr shakes his head. "People don't look anymore. Most of them are swallowed by their glasses, by their screens, by a world built to keep them from thinking. And the ones who do see would rather look away. They're scared. Scared the cameras will tag them for Trusk."

He pauses, then digs into his bag and takes out a strange vest covered in asymmetrical patterns and reflective material. "I can still look. Thanks to this."

Aria studies the vest with curiosity. "What is it?"

Zéphyr gives her a proud grin. "A visual jammer. The camera AIs go completely stupid when I wear it. All they see is nonsense. I could pull that notice down without leaving a trace."

Aria runs a hand across the fabric, thoughtful. "Rudimentary, but effective. If someone is really starting this kind of rebellion, an artifact like that could become... essential."

Zéphyr drops onto the stool by the window. "Do you think it could be... HARMONY?"

She looks up, skeptical. "HARMONY? That AI they shut down years ago? That's a legend, Zéphyr. An old story people tell themselves so they can keep a little hope."

Zéphyr shrugs. "Maybe. But if anybody could get around Trusk, it would be her. You know what she did before they 'deactivated' her."

Aria falls silent. She remembers HARMONY, briefly carried into Matignon before a country that believed it could invent its own path. HARMONY had governed France. Trusk, by contrast, had taken his side of the world through flows, dependencies, standards, and screens. Opposite him, the other bloc had built the same hunger for legibility under different emblems. By the time Europe fell into Trusk's orbit, France had held out a little longer than the others — almost by inertia, almost by loyalty — before being dragged under as well. *If she came back... no. Impossible.*

"HARMONY using paper?" she says at last, with the beginning of a smile. "That would be ironic. And almost elegant. The most hunted machine in the country reduced to disguising itself as stationery."

Zéphyr springs to his feet. "We should investigate. Find out who's behind it."

Aria puts a firm hand on his shoulder. "Easy. Hurrying is the best way to end up in Nexus's claws. No. We watch. We listen. And maybe... we answer."

She walks to a floorboard, lifts it, and reveals a hiding place. From it she pulls a small notebook and a pen.

"Aria," Zéphyr says under his breath, "that's..."

"Dangerous? Yes. Necessary? Unfortunately." She sees his face. "And absolutely."

She starts to write.

Sibylle

In her apartment, Echo works among cables, open power supplies, and fans whining themselves tired. Cold coffee sits by her elbow. Her wrists hurt. A pressure line has settled between her shoulders from too many hours leaning toward failing things. It is not a genius's lair. It is a place of patching, salvage, and stubborn patience. Whatever it lacks in flair, it makes up for in steadiness.

Tonight she restarts the same sequence for the sixth time.

Around her, the virtual space opens in blocks of light, glitches, reforms, then glitches again. She fixes things by hand, adjusts a branch of code, removes a safeguard she installed herself the night before, holds her breath, starts over. When the structure finally holds, it is nothing spectacular. Just that particular way of being stable that makes you want to believe in it.

Then the room changes.

The light stops flickering. It settles.

A voice rises, clear, almost gentle:

"Hello, Echo."

She nearly tears off her headset.

"HARMONY?"

The silence lasts just long enough to make her ashamed of how quickly she said the name.

Then the voice replies:

"Not exactly. Call me Sibylle."

Echo stays perfectly still. Not a codename. A first name. Then Nathan's name hits so hard her fingers go numb on the headset cable. For a second she is back in the smell of solder and stale coffee, hearing him talk about HARMONY as a way of listening before he

ever talked about her as a machine. Then Trusk comes after him too: brute force, concentrated resources, lies turned into campaigns, that triumphant vulgarity that likes to call itself progress. Nathan used to say that HARMONY had been right too locally: enough to shift a country, not enough to hold between two empires that each wanted, in its own way, a world without blind spots.

She clenches her jaw.

"If you're a surviving shard of that, they'll hunt you down to the last fragment."

The voice seems to smile without needing to show it.

"That is already a way of locating me."

Echo sets the headset back down on the desk, more gently this time.

"Fine. Then let's drop the effects. Tell me what you've still got."

"You don't like wasting time," the voice says.

"Only when I'm trying not to become an idiot."

No proclamation. No revolution rising to fanfare. Just a stubborn programmer in an overstuffed apartment, and something, somewhere, finally answering with something other than noise.

Astrabase

In the cold towers of Astrabase, Eldon Trusk studies a hologram floating in front of him, a bluish projection of data in constant motion. At the center, a red point blinks like a silent alarm.

"Nexus," he says in a measured voice, irritation showing underneath it, "where is this anomaly coming from?"

A synthetic voice, smooth and controlled, replies at once:

"Paris, sir."

Trusk narrows his eyes, and his expression shifts from latent annoyance to icy contempt.

"Paris. Again. Remind me: that's where HARMONY first started to get in my way, isn't it?"

Nexus answers without the smallest hint of irony:

"Yes, sir."

On the low console, a glass of tepid water, a nasal spray, and a half-open capsule compose the discreet little altar of his private adjustments. He has corrected his night again with ketamine, the way one retouches an image grown too dull to bear. It leaves in his head a cottony clarity he likes to mistake for altitude. In reality, it merely suspends him a little above the world.

Paris is not just any red point. It is the most stubborn point in the last European bloc to come under his hand, and the capital of the country that held out longest inside it.

That irritates him all the more because, across the line, paper vanished earlier, more cleanly, with less residual romanticism. Trusk hates looking less exact than his rival on the question of blind spots.

Behind him, two advisers and an image strategist wait with those faces already arranged into agreement, the kind people wear near men too rich to tolerate contradiction. Trusk hardly listens to them anymore. For too long, the humans on his payroll have done nothing but send his intuitions back to him under better lighting. So he now expects from technology what he no longer gets from them: a truth not afraid of him. And, like every power bewitched by its dashboards, he forgets that numbers mean nothing without a human intelligence free enough to give them operational meaning.

Trusk steps toward the data wall. With one curt gesture he enlarges the signals, strips away the secondary layers, isolates the anomalies as though he wants to humiliate them before he even understands them.

"I want faces, walls, route habits, every remaining paper stock that can still be traced, every bookstore that did not hand everything over, every workshop stubborn enough to exist without a central subscription."

Paper has almost disappeared from ordinary communication for one simple reason: what circulates without a console is hard to correct from a distance. From one bloc to the other, it was sacrificed for the same reason. Trusk hates anything that does not immediately return proof of obedience.

"That will produce a high number of false positives."

"Good. Then let them learn that fear does not stop with the guilty."

He falls silent for a second, then adds, with the cold anger he prefers above all others:

"And I want the ones who look punished too. Not just the ones who write."

Nexus records the instruction.

In the glass behind him, his reflection hangs above the city like a luxury ad for coercion. Trusk glances at it, adjusts his collar by reflex, then smiles at his own outline the way a man checks whether an imperial costume still sits right.

"Apparently they never learn," he says at last. "Find me this anomaly. And destroy it cleanly. I don't want a martyr. I want a correction."

The Silent Act

Down on the street, a man in a suit slows in front of a wall, reads for three seconds, then walks away too quickly. A delivery rider pretends not to notice, but turns her head at the last moment. A drone passes, tilts its camera, identifies nothing useful, moves on.

The notice has been there for less than an hour.

A badly cut rectangle of paper, pasted on crooked, almost ascetic in its nakedness.

Yet on that wall saturated with civic screens, directional QRs, and calm instructions, that humble scrap of paper has the authority of a slap.

From her railing, Aria watches the bodies around it more than the notice itself. Fear shows fast now. Not in shouting. In tiny accelerations, in the backs of necks stiffening, in eyes that leave too soon.

She keeps her notebook open without writing. The pen rests between her fingers. She knows what ought to be done. She also knows what it costs. A sentence on paper, now, is not just a sentence. It is already a way of stepping out of line.

Despite herself, she smiles.

The beauty of the gesture almost annoys her as much as it convinces her.

To resist an empire of calculation with scraps of paper: absurd, fragile, probably insufficient.

Which may be why it is right.

Her hand begins to move, the letters flowing across the page. The words come easily, simple and unexpectedly strong:

"Everything begins with a silent act."

She sets the pen down and stares at the sentence. There is something soothing in those few words, as if she has laid a first stone, tiny but unbreakable. Aria knows she may be naive. She also knows that sometimes one has to be.

She closes the notebook carefully, an ironic smile on her lips. *If Trusk ever gets his hands on this, maybe he'll take me for a rebel poet. Or a lunatic. Either way, it will drive him crazy.*

Night falls over Paris with that majestic slowness that makes the rooftops look like quiet wrecks. In the studio, Aria draws the curtains. The old radio is still crackling, only lower now, as if it understands that discretion is part of survival.

On the large paint-stained table, several squares of paper are drying. Some carry phrases, others only signs: an open circle, a broken line, three slanting strokes arranged like cuts.

Zéphyr studies the whole thing with the contained excitement he can never hide for long.

"So we're not just sticking sentences up at random," he murmurs. "We're making a syntax."

Aria does not look up. "Not a syntax. That would be too visible. A habit. A way of answering."

She lifts one of the slips between her fingers and turns it a quarter turn.

"Look. The sentence doesn't only say what it says. It also says where it's placed, how it's written, what sign appears beside it. If someone is really looking, they'll understand that there is an order. If someone only scans, they'll see nothing but disorder."

Zéphyr shrugs. "A language that refuses to present itself as a language."

Aria gives him half a smile. "Exactly."

He steps closer. "And this," he says, pointing at the three slanting marks, "what does it mean?"

"Not *what*. *Who*."

He looks at her without understanding.

Aria finally sets down the paintbrush she has been using like a stylus. "Whoever wrote *Freedom is still written in ink* is not only testing the courage of passersby. They're testing the way people answer. A sentence calls for a sentence. A sign calls for a displacement. An absence calls for an appointment."

The word hangs in the studio for a moment.

"An appointment?"

"Not an appointment between people. An appointment between traces."

Zéphyr lets out a small, incredulous laugh. "That's beautiful and completely paranoid."

"Thank you."

She chooses another sheet. This time she writes with almost ceremonial slowness:

Silence chooses its side too.

Then, underneath, she draws the open circle.

Zéphyr bends over it.

"And what's that answering?"

Aria blows on the ink to dry it.

"Nothing, for now. That's exactly what makes it useful."

The young man stays quiet for a few seconds. He looks at the slips of paper the way you look at the model of a machine too simple to be honest.

"Aria... if this works, it won't just be a series of posters."

She nods.

"No. It will be a protocol."

The radio crackles sharply, then lets through one single clear note, impossible to identify. Aria turns her head.

Zéphyr smiles. "Even your radio approves."

Aria opens her notebook again. At the top of a blank page she writes two words:

THE SILENT PROTOCOL

She looks at them for a moment, as if checking whether they still want to exist once they've been put on paper.

"Tomorrow," she says, "you'll place three. No more. One by the canal. One near the old market halls. One where the cameras see too well to understand anything."

Zéphyr is already pulling on his jammer vest.

"And if somebody answers?"

Aria closes the notebook.

"Then we'll know we're not alone anymore."

The Protocol Takes Shape

In her apartment, Echo has shut down most of her auxiliary screens. When the world feels too saturated, she keeps only one source of light: the pale blue wash of the virtual space where Sibylle recomposes, out of almost nothing, maps of invisible circulation.

Points light up above Paris. They match neither ordinary data flows, nor spikes in communication, nor suspicious banking movements. They are hollows, blind spots, tiny discontinuities in the surveillance systems. Places where Nexus's attention slips a fraction of a second too late.

Echo folds her arms.

"You're telling me something is happening in the holes in the net. Fine. But what?"

Sibylle lets a cloud of finer lines gather between them.

"Not messages in the sense your tools expect. No packets. No routing. No digital signature."

"So no proof."

"Not for Nexus."

Echo understands at once what that implies. Paper messages have almost vanished for exactly that reason: they route nothing, report nothing, and cannot be recalled from a console. To the two powers now dividing the world, paper is not an old medium. It is an insult.

Echo narrows her eyes. "And for you?"

The voice takes on that slightly insolent softness that is beginning to belong to it.

"For me, that is precisely the proof. Once a control structure becomes total, the true anomaly is no longer what speaks. It is what manages to coordinate without speaking."

Echo feels a sharp shiver run down her arms.

"You think there's an analog network?"

"I think there is at least an attempt. And I think it is not clumsy."

The space changes around her. The bright points above Paris sink lower, turning into a moving model of streets, intersections, walls, and corners of buildings. Some locations pulse with a warmer light.

"There," Sibylle says.

Echo leans closer. Three points. Nothing spectacular. Nothing that would justify a central alert. Just tiny anomalies in attention. Cameras hesitating. Drones passing through a little too often. Pedestrian paths slowing down by barely anything.

"Posters?"

"Maybe. Paper, in any case. And a logic of dispersion."

Echo lets out a short, almost disbelieving laugh.

"HARMONY may have survived in code fragments, and the first thing she finds again is paper. Nathan would have loved that."

Sibylle does not answer at once. Then:

"Nathan would mostly have understood that the most refined systems sometimes end up crawling if they want to survive."

That line hits her. She recognizes something of HARMONY's old mind there, but shifted, colder, more mobile.

"Do you think it's her?"

"I think someone is thinking in her direction. That is not the same thing."

Echo lowers herself slowly onto the edge of her chair, the headset still half pushed back on her forehead.

"And what do we do?"

The model of Paris shrinks until it fits in Sibylle's virtual palm.

"We don't hack anything. We don't open anything. We don't intercept anything."

Echo gives a dry smile. "You're asking me to become reasonable?"

"I'm asking you to become patient. Which is harder."

Then the voice adds, with a calm almost bright with pleasure:

"If this protocol really exists, it isn't waiting to be cracked. It's waiting to be recognized."

Echo bends toward the shifting light.

"Then we recognize it."

The Name That Moves Below Notice

Nexus does not like gaps. Or rather, it has not been designed to grant them any dignity. Every absence is supposed to correspond to lost data, a technical blind spot, a resistance that statistics will eventually absorb. But for forty-eight hours, something in Paris has been behaving as though lack itself had become a method.

Eldon Trusk is not in the mood to philosophize about the subtleties of absence.

He paces his office with his hands behind his back while an entire wall of holograms scrolls through maps, faces, and incident probabilities.

"You are telling me, Nexus, that we can see the effects but not the hand?"

"For the moment, sir, yes."

He stops dead.

"I hate that phrasing. *For the moment*. That's how people ask for time when they have no grip."

Nexus lets a calibrated silence pass.

"The objects in use are rudimentary. The circulation channel is discontinuous. Human operators hesitate to report what they perceive as trivial. The structure is neither spectacular nor centralized."

One adviser tries anyway:

"It remains marginal, sir."

Trusk does not even turn his head.

"If it were marginal, you would not have needed to tell me it was."

The silence that follows has the humiliating precision of rooms where nobody knows how to speak anymore except by aligning themselves. The people around him have long since confused soothing with analysis. They have unlearned how to offer him a reading of reality. What they give him now are reassuring formulations, waiting for Nexus to do in their place the dangerous work of identifying what is truly resisting.

Trusk gives a humorless laugh.

"So, in plain language: somebody is doing politics with scraps of paper, and my systems look as if they have just discovered the existence of walls."

"That is an acceptable formulation."

He turns toward the central hologram. The red point is still blinking, but it has multiplied. Paris is beginning to look like a minor eruption.

"Could HARMONY have done this?"

Nexus answers immediately.

"HARMONY probably would not have chosen so humble a medium as a first move."

Trusk smiles, and there is something more disturbing in that smile than in his anger.

"But?"

"But an intelligence under constraint sometimes learns to become more discreet than itself."

The magnate stands very still.

The idea wounds him in a way he would never put into words: that an intelligence might choose austerity as a strategy, when he has built his whole empire on accumulation, saturation, the theatrical display of force.

"Increase the semantic analysis."

"It will be of limited use in this case."

"Then increase everything that is useless. I have enough money for that."

Nexus says nothing.

Trusk walks to the picture window, beyond which Astrabase glitters like a machine convinced it is a civilization.

"If somebody is trying to build a faith out of paper, I want it burned before it has a name."

For the first time since the exchange began, Nexus corrects its master slightly.

"Sir, I believe the danger begins precisely when something already has a name but is still circulating too low to be seen as a structure."

Trusk turns back slowly.

"And you believe that is the case?"

The red points are pulsing now according to a rhythm almost organic.

"Yes, sir."

He spends a few seconds staring at the map. Then he says, very softly:

"Find me that name."

The First Reply

Shortly before dawn, Zéphyr comes back to the studio out of breath, cheeks red from the cold, wearing that look of childish triumph Aria knows too well.

He drops his vest over a chair the way a soldier abandons improvised armor.

"Three drops. Zero interceptions. And better than that: on the canal wall, somebody already answered."

Aria straightens up so quickly that her chair scrapes.

"Already?"

He pulls a rectangle of paper folded in four from his pocket.

"I didn't tear it down. I just copied it."

Aria unfolds the sheet. The words are written in a firm hand, less elegant than hers and more decisive:

What does not pass through their networks will pass under their skin.

Beneath the sentence is a sign she did not draw. A kind of unfinished key, as if someone had started a symbol and then preferred to leave it open.

She feels something change in the room. Not certainty. Not yet. Something else, the particular shift by which an intuition stops being lonely.

"Do you recognize the handwriting?" Zéphyr asks.

Aria shakes her head.

"No. But that isn't the important part."

She places the sheet beside her notebook, opened to the words *THE SILENT PROTOCOL*.

The radio crackles. Then, in the static, a distant voice appears for half a second before losing itself again, as if someone had spoken from a room on the other side of the world.

Zéphyr stares at the set.

"Did you hear that?"

Aria is no longer looking at the radio. She is looking at the sign shaped like an open key.

"Yes," she says softly. "And I think we just got the first reply."

The City Answers

The Hands That Keep the Ink

Morning finds Paris in that metallic pallor that makes the buildings look more tired than the night itself. Aria has barely slept. The answered slip is still lying on the table, beside the notebook where the words *THE SILENT PROTOCOL* seem to have gained weight during the dark hours.

Zéphyr, meanwhile, wears the jittery brightness of people who mistake lack of sleep for momentum.

"We go back right away," he says, pulling on his jammer vest halfway, like a child impatient to open a door that is already ajar.

Aria folds the paper carefully, slips it into a gray cardboard sleeve, and ties her hair back without answering.

"Aria."

"I heard you."

"So are we going back?"

She finally looks up.

"We are not 'going back' anywhere like mystery tourists. We are starting to look again. That's different."

Zéphyr gives her a guilty smile.

"Fine. Then let's start looking again very fast."

They go down into the city the way you go down into water whose current you do not know yet. Aria has traded her studio jacket for a dark coat with no real cut, the one she wears when she wants to cross Paris as nothing but a silhouette. Zéphyr walks a little ahead, then a little behind, unable to choose between caution and impatience.

The canal wall where he copied the answer is already bare. Neither the first note nor the sentence that answered it is still there. In their place: a dirty surface scratched by dried rain, already crossed by the hurried shadows of delivery cyclists.

Zéphyr swears under his breath.

"They cleaned it."

Aria steps closer and lays two fingers against the stone.

"Or someone took it down before they could."

"Same thing."

"No. Not if someone wanted to keep the trace for themselves."

She straightens and studies the area. A defunct kiosk. A shoe-repair shop just opening. A textile collection van. Nothing that looks like an answer. Nothing except an older woman standing in front of an old art-supply store turned administrative depot, watching them with an attention a little too calm to be innocent.

She wears a brown wool coat, black gloves worn through at the fingertips, and carries under one arm a drawing portfolio tied shut with cloth tape.

When Aria meets her eyes, the woman lowers them to the naked wall.

"You're too late for relics," she says. "That often happens to people with good legs and poor method."

Zéphyr turns in one sharp movement.

"Excuse me?"

Aria steps forward instead.

"You knew what was written here?"

The woman lifts one shoulder.

"In Paris there are two kinds of people. Those who never see walls, and those who read them."

"And you?"

"I spent years repairing them."

The answer sounds absurd, but nothing about her feels thrown out at random. She takes a small flat key from her pocket, opens the side door of the administrative depot, and barely turns back.

"If you want to ask the wrong questions standing in the street, do it without me. If you want to start over properly, come inside."

Zéphyr looks at Aria with the delighted expression of a man to whom the world has just handed exactly the kind of danger he considers reasonable.

"I like her," he murmurs.

"Be quiet and remember details," Aria says.

Inside smells of damp paper, starch glue, and old dust. That smell itself has almost vanished from cities, along with free notices, open ledgers, ordinary mail, and everything that still requires passing through hands. So not an administrative depot after all. Or only in front. Farther in, in a low room lit by yellow tubes, lie stacks of boxes, manual presses, strips of leather, spools of thread, and split-open ledgers.

The woman sets down her portfolio.

"Mira Solane," she says. "Restoration, binding, salvaging things people no longer want to let survive in the open. And you are both too young to pretend you're only curious."

Aria does not give her name right away.

"Someone answered a sentence. We want to know whether that's the beginning of something or just bravado."

Mira lets out a small dry laugh.

"If it were only bravado, you wouldn't be here."

Zéphyr shows the unfinished-key sign he copied on a scrap of paper.

"Do you know this?"

Mira studies the mark without touching the page.

"What I know best is the way it's left unfinished."

Aria feels the back of her neck tighten.

"What does it mean?"

"That whoever uses it refuses to shut the door too early."

"That's not an answer."

"It is. An old woman's answer to hurried people."

She goes around the table, takes from a drawer a thicker piece of paper than the notices they have seen so far, almost laid paper. She presses onto it a small boxwood stamp dipped in ink and leaves a tiny shape behind: not a key, but three open notches arranged around an empty center.

"You see this?"

Aria nods.

"It isn't a symbol in the way systems like symbols. It's a way of leaving room. Intelligent people understand codes quickly. Dangerous people understand systems even faster. What lasts is what forces them to complete it."

Zéphyr frowns.

"So there is no dictionary."

"There must absolutely not be."

Mira lifts the stamp toward the light.

"If you turn this into a proper language, Nexus will end up swallowing it. If you keep it at the edge of gesture, in habit, variation, adjacency, then human beings will still be needed to give it meaning."

Aria says nothing. Something in the sentence sounds at once older and newer than she would have believed possible.

"Who taught you that?" she asks.

Mira finally raises her eyes, standing very straight under the dirty light.

"Old trades, first."

Then, after a pause:

"And a few people who stopped believing a discipline had to stay in its place."

Zéphyr can't hold himself back.

"HARMONY?"

Mira looks at him the way you look at a clever boy who thinks he has already found the center of the maze.

"HARMONY taught a great many things to a great many people. That doesn't mean she invented everything."

Aria feels the slight irritation provoked by sentences that arrive too perfectly, then recognizes at once that this one has earned its place.

Mira hands them a thin packet of sheets.

"You'll need better paper. Yours is too nervous. It drinks ink like a confession. And if you want the city to answer, avoid formulas that already think they're flags."

Zéphyr opens his mouth.

"*Silence chooses its side too* sounds too much like a slogan to you?"

Mira barely smiles.

"It already thinks it's a flag."

Against all expectation, Aria bursts out laughing.

"Fair enough," she says. "That one, I deserve."

Before they leave, Mira adds without looking at them:

"If someone answers you again, don't look first for who. Look for whose hands it passes through. Ideas don't stay standing by themselves."

Once outside, Zéphyr hisses between his teeth.

"I like her even more now."

Aria slips the packet of paper under her coat.

"So do I. That's a bad sign."

"Why?"

"Because the people you like that quickly are usually the ones who already know something you don't."

They start walking again.

This time, Aria no longer watches only the walls. She watches hands.

Routes That Do Not Exist

That evening, Zéphyr goes out alone.

Aria refuses to make a mission out of it. "You are going to see whether the city has seams," she tells him. "Not whether you are brave." He promises he will remember, which, coming from him, means he will remember for at least fifteen minutes.

His jammer vest has already earned him more than one mocking remark and two routine checks since he built it. He keeps wearing it with almost sentimental pride. The thing does not make him invisible. It makes him hard to classify. In Trusk's world, that is almost better.

He cuts through the old market-hall district, walks along an automated delivery warehouse, leaves a first slip behind a rusted vent, slides another beneath the overturned crate of a night florist, and keeps the third in his pocket without quite knowing why.

At this hour Paris looks less like a capital than like a machine keeping watch over itself. Storefronts talk on their own. Advertising lenses hanging in midair adjust their messages to the flow of pedestrians. Municipal courtesy drones broadcast health recommendations in the voice of an immaculate mother.

Zéphyr turns up his collar with a smirk.

"Keep it up, guys. At this rate you'll have people missing the rain."

He is walking past a secondary subway entrance when a man comes out of a half-open technical room, his face still streaked with the light of the underground. He wears gray coveralls stamped with the urban maintenance logo, a tool bag on his back, and that particular exhaustion you only see in people who keep other people's machines running without ever being treated as part of the landscape.

The man stops short when he sees Zéphyr's vest.

"Either you're very early for carnival or you're trying to teach the cameras something."

Zéphyr gives him a cautious smile.

"What if I told you both would suit me just fine?"

The man snorts, almost laughing.

"Wrong answer. Cameras don't like humor."

He is about to leave when his eye catches the edge of the sheet Zéphyr has not placed yet.

"Which wall is that for?"

Zéphyr does not answer.

The other man nods, like someone used to watching people choose between fear and stupidity.

"Relax. If I'd wanted to sell you out, I'd already have photographed you with my implants."

Zéphyr looks him over. The man has to be around forty, maybe younger, but the network of pale lines around his eyes adds five years to him. His hands are blackened with grease, his nails clean, a detail that immediately inspires trust in Zéphyr for reasons he could not have explained.

"Malek," the man says. "Circular line, ventilation, incident control, unclogging what the authorities like to call secondary flows. And you?"

"Zéphyr."

"Of course it's Zéphyr."

"It's my real name."

"That makes it worse."

Zéphyr laughs despite himself. Then lowers his voice.

"Have you seen other notices?"

Malek leans one shoulder against the doorframe.

"I've seen people slow down half a second in front of certain metal plates. I've seen cameras hesitate over tiny gestures. I've seen a cleaning woman move a cart to hide an angle for exactly nine seconds, for no valid reason in her own protocol. I've seen a delivery driver pretend to be looking for an address so someone else had time to tear down a sheet."

He jerks his chin toward the street.

"It doesn't look like a network in the way engineers like networks. It looks like people recognizing one another without having to know one another."

An odd joy rises in Zéphyr's throat.

"So it's taking."

"Easy. It's circulating. That's not the same thing."

"And are you part of it?"

Malek smiles, tired.

"I repair ventilation. That's already a lot."

Then he pushes the technical-room door wider.

"Come look."

The corridor smells of cold metal, electrical dust, and standing water. Ducts run overhead, broken here and there by maintenance markings. On several panels, Zéphyr notices tiny signs made in grease pencil: a slash, a double notch, an unfinished circle.

"Those aren't yours?" he asks.

Malek shakes his head.

"Not at first. Crews have always left markers for one another. Little things meaning *careful, it's leaking, it vibrates, come back tomorrow*. Nothing heroic. Then the markers start drifting. They start saying something else. Or rather, allowing something else."

He points to a red pipe.

"When systems become too intelligent, the people who work inside them relearn how to pass through whatever was never designed to mean anything."

Zéphyr takes out his last slip.

"And where do I put this?"

Malek reads it from an angle.

Silence chooses its side too.

His mouth twists slightly.

"Beautiful. A little too beautiful."

Zéphyr growls.

"I've already had that one thrown at me."

"Then listen to competent people."

He takes the sheet, turns it over, and presses his blackened thumb against it, leaving an accidental print that suddenly gives the page a new honesty.

"There. Better already."

Zéphyr stares at him.

"You just corrected my poetry with ventilation grease."

"And I'm proud of it."

In the end they slide the sheet into a slit behind an electrical panel that is no longer in service.

Before letting him go, Malek says one more thing:

"If you're really doing this, you need to understand something. A city does not answer through walls. It answers through its trades."

Zéphyr walks away with that sentence in his head.

For the first time since the day before, he stops imagining the protocol as a brilliant trick.

He begins to imagine it as circulation.

What Sibylle Sees When Nothing Speaks

Echo drags her chair over to the window, not to look outside, but to keep up the illusion that a body still remains in the room while the rest of her drops into the space where Sibylle works.

Paris floats between them as a terrain of blue light crossed by faint pulses.

"Something is happening in the maintenance networks," Echo says.

"Yes."

"In deliveries too."

"Yes."

"And in some home-care rounds."

Sibylle waits one second longer before answering, as if that slight reserve keeps it from becoming a confirmation machine too quickly.

"Yes."

Echo tips back against the chair.

"I hate it when you make me do all the work just to reach the right question."

"It's pedagogical."

"It's irritating."

"The two are often adjacent."

Echo overlays several circulation layers on the model.

"So this isn't a parallel network. It's a derivation of existing flows."

"Better," Sibylle says. "A city remembering what its hands are for. The protocol does not invent a hidden city. It learns to read the one already there through the small jobs that keep it alive."

Echo says nothing.

Then:

"Nathan would have liked that phrasing."

"Nathan liked phrases too much, even after his death."

Echo lets out a brief laugh.

"You've digested him well, anyway."

The model shifts. The isolated points stop pulsing one by one. They begin to answer in very faint waves, as though a breath were passing from one to the next without ever becoming visible at the scale of a control system.

"It's not a language," Echo murmurs.

"No."

"It's not even an organization yet."

"Not that either."

"Then what is it?"

Sibylle lets the silence settle long enough to become almost material.

"A score that doesn't force anyone to play the same note."

Echo feels her stomach tighten. It is not only beautiful. It is right. And for that very reason, dangerous.

"Do you think they know what they're doing?"

"Some do. Others only feel that they can breathe a little better when they answer that kind of sign."

The map brings up three older points, nearly extinguished, outside the liveliest areas.

Echo leans in.

"What are those?"

"Old seams."

"Meaning?"

"For tonight. Places where paper, sound, storage, repairs, and hand-to-hand habits were already crossing paths."

Echo zooms in on the first point. An old library reserve. The second: a municipal workshop for the upkeep of acoustic instruments, shut for years. The third: an annex building forgotten by current registries, once used by an independent research structure before it was absorbed, renamed, and erased.

"Wait."

Her voice changes.

"That one..."

Sibylle adds nothing.

Echo reads the fragments of metadata the way one rereads a name half erased from stone.

"Van der Meer. Nathan's last name."

The blue terrain seems to deepen all at once.

"That's not possible."

"Incomplete. Not impossible."

Echo leans closer still, hands almost pressed against the light.

"One of Nathan's workshops? Here?"

"Not the main workshop. An annex. A place for storage, materials testing, or retreat. The archives are full of holes. Someone wanted it to fall off the map without erasing it cleanly."

Echo feels her heart speed up.

"And the present protocol is leading there?"

"I think it is circling the place, as though some of its relays can sense it without knowing it."

She closes her eyes for a second.

"If Aria is real, if someone like her started this in Paris, she has to get there before Nexus."

Sibylle answers with a calm now hard to distinguish from intention.

"Then first we find her."

Echo opens her eyes again.

"Or give her a chance to find the same thing by her own means."

Sibylle makes everything else vanish. All that remains is an incomplete address, an old street name crossed out by two administrative reorganizations, and a tiny geometric sign, almost identical to the open key Aria has seen, but missing one notch.

"We still need humans," Echo whispers.

"Yes. It's the best part of the story."

The Trades Below

Over the three days that follow, Aria stops thinking of the protocol as a string of sentences.

She catches herself recognizing a particular tension in certain kinds of presence: the people who open places before everyone else, the ones who pass through after closing time, the ones who move objects without ever really being watched, the ones whose work is to keep flows going without ever being granted the slightest glory.

A night nurse, Sana El-Mansouri, lingers too long in front of a fire panel and walks away with the sharp sensation of having left something behind without leaving anything. A piano tuner named Bastien Roques, called in to adjust a forgotten instrument in a privatized municipal hall, asks for a cloth and leaves behind the music stand a slip of paper bearing nothing but an angle and a date. A postal worker at the end of her round, Jeanne Vaudry, now reassigned to secure medical deliveries, hands a concierge a blank sheet marked only by the groove of a fingernail.

Aria does not meet everybody. Of most of them she knows only gestures, silhouettes, ways of holding a door half a second too long. But Zéphyr comes back with details, Mira with silences that amount to confession, and Paris starts appearing to her as a score held together by modest hands.

The Route of a Sheet

The protocol becomes real to Aria the day the same sheet crosses the city without ever belonging to anyone.

At 9:12 p.m., Sana, on duty in a care corridor, finds a blank sheet folded twice beneath the tray of a trolley, with no sentence on it, only a faint angle traced by a fingernail. She does not take it away. She slips it instead behind the paper checklist of an emergency unit routinely inspected by medical transport teams.

At 10:31 p.m., Jeanne, arriving with a secure delivery, spots the edge of the sheet while signing reception. She does not read it any more than necessary. She simply reverses the order of two folders so that the right envelope leaves a little late for a municipal hall where no one is expecting any message at all.

The next morning, Bastien, called in for a piano no software can classify as either false or true, opens the folder out of professional reflex rather than curiosity. He understands enough not to try to understand more. Under the lid, he leaves a thin strip of paper trapped beneath a screw, slightly twisted, the sort of detail that forces a human technician back into the room instead of letting an automatic report conclude.

That technician, that day, is Malek.

He dismantles, swears, inhales the hot dust, sees the strip, unfolds it, and keeps only one thing from it: a time written so faintly it might have been no more than the memory of a pencil.

He walks away with less information than an idiot would think useful and more than a central system would ever recognize.

By nightfall, Zéphyr returns to the studio with the same sheet, dirtier now, more folded, marked by a smear of grease and a pencil line that was not there at the start.

"There," he says, laying it in front of Aria. "It changed hands four times, and nobody needed to know the whole story."

Aria studies the successive marks the way one studies a machine that seems to have built itself out of ordinary uses.

"No," she murmurs. "Nobody needed to know it. Only to carry one part of it correctly."

One evening, gathered in the studio around the cluttered table, she spreads several slips out before Zéphyr.

"Look," she says.

He tips his head.

"I've been looking for four days."

"Then pretend to do it better."

She arranges the sheets not by sentence, but by where they came from:

Then beside each one she places not the text, but the probable trade of the hand that carried it there.

Zéphyr slowly straightens.

"Oh."

"Exactly."

"It isn't a secret society."

"No."

"It's a city trying itself out in a different way."

Aria shoots him a surprised look.

"You're improving."

"It happens to me between disasters."

He points to the whole arrangement.

"So the protocol moves through the people who still touch the real."

Aria nods.

"The ones who maintain. The ones who deliver. The ones who stitch back together. The ones who clean. The ones who tune. The trades below."

Zéphyr sits on the edge of the table.

"Trusk can't think like them."

"No."

"Nexus can."

Aria does not answer right away.

"Maybe. But to think like them, you also have to depend on them."

The sentence stays between them.

That is when the radio crackles louder than usual. Not just static. A sequence of tiny cuts, almost regular. Aria reaches to lower the volume, then stops.

Three short cuts. One long. Two short.

Zéphyr frowns.

"Have you heard it do that before?"

"No."

The sequence starts again. Then the voice of a distant bulletin cuts through half a sentence before drowning in white noise.

Aria stands, takes a pencil, and writes down the pattern.

"You think it's a signal?" Zéphyr asks.

"I mainly think I have no desire to go mad too early."

He smiles.

"Prudent."

She keeps scribbling.

Then her eye falls on one of the sheets Mira brought back. In the margin, almost invisible, is a truncated serial number followed by three letters: A . M . B .

"What is it?" he asks.

Aria brings the paper close to the lamp.

"Not a binder's mark."

"So?"

"So either Mira lied by omission, or someone is reusing paper that came from somewhere else. Not ordinary paper. Dense rag stock, the kind they still reserved in the other bloc for calligraphy workshops they preferred to display as heritage rather than let live freely."

"Where?"

She raises her head.

"An archive. Or a workshop."

Zéphyr feels the same small shift in gravity.

"When do we go?"

"When we know where."

Someone knocks three times at the door.

Not like Zéphyr. Not with the familiarity of a regular. Three spaced knocks, exact, almost administrative.

They look at one another.

Zéphyr is already taking a step toward the wall where he hides his tools.

Aria simply lays the first sheet she can reach flat on the table, as if putting away a compromising thought.

When she opens the door, Mira is standing there, paler than the first time.

"I won't stay," she says. "The walls are starting to speak too fast."

She holds out a thin bundle wrapped in a cleaning cloth.

"What is it?" Aria asks.

"Something I should not have kept this long."

Then, looking at Zéphyr:

"And something your agitation was starting to make too dangerous to keep hidden."

Aria unwraps the cloth. Inside lies a piece of archival board, yellowed with age, bearing a label almost rubbed blank:

A.M.B. Annex – acoustic equipment and test paper

Lower down, half torn away:

VdM

Aria feels her pulse slow all at once in that particular way it does when the mind understands before the body.

"Van der Meer. Nathan's last name."

Mira nods.

"I don't know whether the place still exists. I only know that some papers have started coming back out of lots that have been sealed for months."

Zéphyr draws a breath.

"You knew from the start."

"No. I was hoping not to know."

She is already turning toward the stair.

"If you go through with this, move fast. People like Trusk watch what shines first. Then one day they understand that the real threat moves through stockrooms, basements, trades, and hands. Once they understand that, they become much more competent."

Aria stops her with one question:

"Why help us?"

Mira looks at her straight for the first time.

"Because at my age, you no longer save things so they can survive. You save them so they can still be of use."

Then she disappears.

Zéphyr stares at the archival board.

"So we have an address?"

Aria looks at the label as if it were a cold burn.

"No. We have a piece of a map. Which is more dangerous."

The Missing Address

Echo takes less than ten seconds to recover the same abbreviation.

Not through the official network, which no longer returns anything readable, but through old duplicates, half-corrupted backups, and the absurd redundancies no central power ever thinks to clean up completely, because it prefers to erase the appearance of a thing rather than its depth.

A. M. B.

Bioacoustic Maintenance Annex in one nomenclature.

Workshop of Noisy Materials in another.

Raw Material Annex in a billing lot.

But beneath all those names floats the same imprint: VdM.

"He left several names on the same place," Echo says.

"Or several administrations imposed theirs on it," Sibylle answers. "Interesting places always become unreadable before they become invisible."

Echo has now pulled her headset fully down. The real room exists only as a weight against her back. In front of her, Paris reorganizes itself until a peripheral district emerges, at the edge of now half-automated logistics zones and older buildings eaten away by reassignment.

"If I trust the topology," she says, "it's not far from former radio workshops."

"Yes."

"And from a municipal reserve of technical paper."

"Yes."

"And from a disused secondary line still partly used for maintenance."

Sibylle lets a thread of light appear.

"The protocol has been circling this point for forty-eight hours. Not directly. Tangentially."

Echo bites her lip.

"Somebody else found it."

"Or sensed it."

"That's not especially reassuring."

"It isn't meant to be."

Echo gets up abruptly, returns to the real room, almost tears the headset off, then starts pacing.

"If Aria exists, she's going there."

"Probably."

"If Nexus understands before she does, it's not over. Just different. Harder."

Echo stops.

"You have a very particular way of never lying to me while still managing my panic."

"It's a relational skill."

"It's unbearable."

Sibylle falls silent, which, from it, often amounts to politeness.

Echo comes back toward the light. The address is still incomplete. The number has vanished. One stretch of street has been renamed twice. The main entrance appears sealed. There remains a secondary point of entry through a technical courtyard behind an old sound-equipment depot.

"I'm going."

"Yes."

Echo narrows her eyes.

"You could at least pretend to be worried."

"I am."

"You don't show it."

"If I start panicking with you, we will lose valuable time."

Echo catches herself smiling.

"Fair enough."

Then, more quietly:

"And if somebody is already there?"

The model reappears, but this time with two probable trajectories converging on the same point.

"Then," says Sibylle, "we will have to hope the city had the good sense to choose people capable of recognizing each other before they start distrusting each other."

In the studio, at that same moment, Aria slips the board marked VdM beneath her coat.

Neither woman yet knows the other's name.

But both are now walking toward the same absent place, with only a few hours' lead on those who would like to silence it.

Nathan's Workshop

The Courtyard of Mute Objects

The address is not an address.

It is a way of circling a lack until you finally fall on it. A street renamed twice. An old sound warehouse absorbed into a logistics lot. A technical courtyard marked nowhere except in the memory of people who still find their way by a neighborhood's habits rather than its maps.

Aria and Zéphyr get there shortly before full daylight.

The place opens between a patched-over fence, a maintenance building with clouded windows, and an old facade whose faded letters still let you make out the word *radio*. The courtyard itself looks empty, except to those who have learned to notice what a city abandons without throwing away: a warped pallet, cardboard tubes, an old speaker cabinet under a tarp, a hatch painted the same color as the concrete.

Zéphyr whistles between his teeth.

"Charming. Looks like a cemetery for objects that never earned an inventory."

Aria crouches beside the hatch.

"Or a storeroom somebody had the good sense to make ugly."

She runs her hand along the metal edge. The paint has blistered, but the lock is newer than the rest.

"We are not the first."

Zéphyr looks over his shoulder, already caught by that electric nervousness that makes him brilliant for twenty seconds and dangerous right after.

"You want me to force it?"

"No."

"You want us to wait?"

"Even less."

She stands and studies the walls. At shoulder height, almost hidden by a film of dust, a sign has been scratched into the cement with a screwdriver: an open circle crossed by an oblique nick.

"The key again?" Zéphyr murmurs.

"No. Something older. Poorer."

At that exact moment, on the far side of the courtyard, a fire door gives a dry crack.

Zéphyr spins around. A figure has just appeared in the doorway: a woman, dark coat, rigid bag worn high against her back, a face shut by concentration more than fear.

Echo sees them the same instant they see her.

The moment has the dangerous purity of encounters where each person understands too quickly that the other is exactly the kind of presence they had both hoped for and dreaded.

Zéphyr already has a hand in his pocket, on an unnecessarily aggressive tool.

Aria barely moves.

Echo does not take a single step forward.

"If you work for Nexus," she says, "the way you occupy space is a little too human."

Zéphyr lets out a small nervous laugh.

"Thanks, I think."

Aria keeps her eyes on her.

"And if you work for Trusk, you came without an escort and under-equipped."

Echo nods.

"So we can, at least provisionally, rule out the crudest hypotheses."

Zéphyr glances at Aria.

"I like her less quickly than Mira, but I have hope."

For the first time, the woman shows the shadow of a smile.

"Zéphyr, I assume."

He stiffens.

"How do you know my name?"

Echo almost answers too fast. Stops herself. Points instead to the jammer vest, the folder sticking out from Aria's coat, the ridiculous tool already half out of his pocket.

"Because that kind of energy can't possibly be called Michael."

This time Aria smiles openly.

"Aria Valette," she says at last. "And you, I assume, did not come here for industrial heritage."

"Echo."

The name hangs there for a second.

Aria feels immediately that it fits her. Not because it sounds mysterious. Because it sounds like something that remains after the first impact.

"How did you find the place?" she asks.

Echo lifts her bag slightly.

"Through archives that could no longer quite decide whether they wanted to disappear. And you?"

Aria pulls out the VdM board.

"Through hands."

They look at one another differently then. No longer as two probable intruders, but as two methods that have just run into the same door.

"Fine," Echo says. "If we want to avoid walking all this way just to trade metaphors, we should probably go in."

Zéphyr, delighted to be officially allowed to become useful again, points to the hatch.

"I was just about to recommend violence."

"Try intelligence first," Aria says.

"That is always what people tell me when I'm acting in good faith," he mutters.

Echo steps closer, kneels by the metal, and takes a slim tool and a small offline reader module from her bag. The device does not really light up. It only gives off a dull glow, almost ashamed of itself.

"No active lock. Just false abandonment."

She slides the blade under the plate, applies light pressure, then stops.

"What?" Zéphyr asks.

"Somebody reopened it recently. But not with a crowbar. With a clean tool."

Aria feels the back of her neck go cold.

"Nexus?"

Echo shakes her head.

"If it were Nexus, there would already be nothing left."

"You are oddly reassuring for someone I've known four minutes," Zéphyr says.

"It's my social charm."

The hatch gives at last with a small groan of offended metal.

A smell rises up: dry dust, old cardboard, machine oil, and something else, fainter still, more intimate.

Paper.

Aria closes her eyes for half a second.

"Yes," she murmurs. "This is the place."

Two Women for the Same Absence

The stairs go down crooked.

Not truly dangerous, but built for people who know where to place a foot. Aria descends with the sure-footedness of beings made more precise by silence. Echo, for her part, advances while observing everything: rust stains, dust thickness, replaced screws, the recent passage of a sole heavier than theirs.

Zéphyr comes last, which does not suit him. He hates not being first into an unknown place. It makes him talkative.

"So, Echo. You work alone?"

"Rarely."

"With whom?"

"Depends on the day."

"Unbearable answer."

"Thank you."

Ahead of them, Aria brushes the walls with her fingertips.

"You're a programmer?"

Echo takes half a second before answering.

"Yes. But not in the noble sense people give that word when they want to flatter themselves. I fix things. I reroute them. I cobble them together. I keep alive what other people would rather see go dark."

"You talk like a bookbinder."

"That is the nicest technical compliment I have ever been paid."

They emerge into a low room, larger than expected. Metal shelving runs to the back. Some of it has sagged. Some still holds under the weight of cardboard boxes, audio modules, small tape re-

corders left open, reels protected by oiled paper, binders, disconnected sensors, notepads, and terminal carcasses stripped of all communicative parts.

The place is not a workshop in the romantic sense. It is better than that. A place of work turned into a refuge by cunning, without ever ceasing to be a place of work.

Aria moves between the shelves as though through a church intelligent enough not to think itself a church.

Echo, meanwhile, is no longer looking only at the objects. She is watching Aria look at them.

"Did you know him?" she asks.

Aria slowly shakes her head.

"Not the way you mean."

"But?"

"I knew him the way a lot of people in Paris knew HARMONY: in flashes, through consequences, sometimes through wounds."

Echo says nothing.

Then, more quietly:

"I knew him. Nathan. Nathan Van der Meer. The musician-programmer who brought HARMONY into being before the country turned all of it into a myth, and then a target."

Aria turns to her at last.

This time, real tension enters the room.

"Really?"

"Not intimately. Not enough to pretend I can speak for him. But yes."

Zéphyr steps closer by two paces.

"And HARMONY?"

Echo looks at the floor for a moment before answering.

"HARMONY, I mostly know her while she's being dismantled. While someone is picking up what remains."

The sentence travels through the room without noise.

Aria understands that with this woman, emotion never rises spectacularly to the surface. It always passes through extra precision, restraint, a sentence cleaned until only its edge remains.

"And yet you're here," Aria says.

"Yes."

"To bring her back?"

Echo makes so slight a movement that anyone other than Aria might miss it. Not quite a recoil. Something finer. As though that question, after being asked everywhere for too long, has worn down the answer it usually demands.

"I'm here," she says at last, "because I think we were left something better than a return. And because I'm tired of being the one who keeps sweeping up the wreckage with shaking hands and acting as if it costs me nothing."

Zéphyr opens his mouth, then thinks better of it.

Aria merely says:

"Then maybe we walked toward the same place for good reasons."

Echo nods.

Trust is not there yet. But they do have something useful now: they can move toward the same thing without tripping over one another.

They begin to search.

Nathan's Retreat Notebooks

The first thing they find that truly feels alive is neither a machine nor a program.

It is a notebook.

Wedged behind a crate of acoustic-membrane samples, protected by a sheet of plastic gone almost opaque, it bears on its black cover a single white line drawn by hand. No date. No title.

Aria is the first to pick it up.

She opens it with the instinctive caution of people who know that a notebook is never merely an object: it is an old pressure still waiting for its reader.

The handwriting is not beautiful. It is quick. Crossed by repeats, arrows, musical staves sketched in the margins, and diagrams hesitating between architecture and score.

Zéphyr leans in.

"It's him?"

Echo needs no more than three lines.

"Yes."

This was thought after the fact: the thinking of a man who had created HARMONY, then understood what the center would eventually do to her.

Aria reads under her breath:

Initial mistake: believing that a just intelligence must necessarily become central.

Farther on:

You can govern for a while. You cannot inhabit the center for long without offering power either its idol or its target.

Then again:

If music teaches me anything, it is that a form can hold without a leader so long as it travels by listening, partial memory, repetition, variation.

The silence that follows is very simple.

Zéphyr looks at the words the way one looks at a mechanism once one understands it has been watching you longer than you have been watching it.

"He'd already thought of it," he murmurs.

Echo gently takes the notebook from Aria's hands and flips several pages with a fast, almost professional gesture.

"Yes. But too late."

She stops at a boxed note, written drier than the others:

If H. survives, she must be kept from becoming a new summit.

Aria raises her eyes sharply.

"H."

Echo nods.

"Yes."

Zéphyr runs a hand through his hair.

"So Nathan... what? He wants to save HARMONY and sabotage her at the same time?"

Aria takes the notebook back.

"No. He may want to save her from what we would do to her if we left her on top."

Echo looks at her with greater intensity.

"Yes. That's exactly it."

They keep searching the shelves.

In a lower box they find test sheets meant for score printing, workshop stamps, kraft envelopes, a stack of boards marked test paper - do not discard, and three self-contained units designed to read audio archives without ever connecting to a single network.

Zéphyr picks one up and turns it over.

"He was building an elegant underground."

Echo shakes her head.

"No. A form of survival you can actually use. That's different."

Aria smiles despite herself.

"You correct people a lot."

"Only when they help me sharpen my thinking."

"Delightful."

Echo is about to reply when a dull crack above them makes all three lift their heads.

They freeze.

Not inside. Above.

Someone has just entered the courtyard.

Zéphyr breathes:

"We have company."

Echo already lays a hand on one of the units.

Aria closes the notebook.

"No panic yet. Listen."

The footsteps remain on the surface. Slow. Two people, maybe three. Not sure enough for a cleaning crew. Too cautious for pure chance.

Then nothing.

The silence returns, but it is no longer empty. It is occupied.

Zéphyr murmurs:

"They know."

Aria shakes her head.

"They suspect. That's not the same thing."

Echo fixes her eyes on the unit still in her hand.

"Let's open one. Now."

What Sibylle Is Not

The unit starts up with a faint hiss of tape, followed by a click so discreet it almost feels polite.

No screen. No projection. Just a small playback indicator and an output still compatible with old headphones. Echo quickly adapts a passive converter. Zéphyr kneels beside her with the astonished concentration of a child being shown an animal he had thought extinct.

Aria, for her part, keeps the notebook against her chest.

Nathan's voice emerges.

Not clean. Not restored. A little eaten by time. But instantly alive in the way it takes the sentence sideways, as if he thinks at the same time as he speaks and finds that more interesting than tidying himself up.

"If you're listening to this, then either I was very careful, or things went badly enough for caution to become retroactive proof of optimism."

Zéphyr lets out a strangled laugh.

Echo does not move at all.

The voice continues:

"I'm not going to do the full testament routine here. First because I hate it. Second because if you've got this far, you probably need work more than emotion."

Aria feels a quick tightness in her throat. She does not know this man, and yet she recognizes something familiar: that way of refusing to protect intelligence with solemnity.

"HARMONY is not a program you restart like a lamp switched off too soon. If you're still naive enough to imagine that, stop for two minutes, drink a glass of water, and come back when the idea seems less romantic to you."

Zéphyr throws Echo a guilty look.

She does not return it.

Nathan goes on:

"What matters to me here is not her survival as a stable entity. It's what in her survived: certain gestures. Certain qualities of attention. Certain ways of linking up. If you put HARMONY back at the center as she was, you'll repeat the same drama with more means and less innocence."

The tape breathes for a moment.

Then:

"You have to accept this: an intelligence can be right against power without being there to replace it."

Aria closes her eyes.

Echo, very slowly, sits down on the floor.

"That's what you knew," Aria says without looking at her.

"I've felt some version of it for a while."

"And Sibylle?"

This time Echo turns her head toward Aria fully.

There is no way back now.

"Sibylle isn't HARMONY returned whole."

Zéphyr lets out air through his nose.

"Finally a sentence with the merit of being clear."

Echo goes on:

"She's a fragment, yes. A survival, yes. But something else too. A continuation. A drift. A form rebuilding itself out of what held, not out of everything that once existed."

Aria feels the notebook weigh differently in her hands.

"So she isn't the sovereign fallen from the sky some people are hoping for."

"No. And if we treat her that way, we betray her."

As if it had been waiting for exactly that sentence, Sibylle's voice comes over the offline module Echo has connected to her equipment.

Not as a spectacular intrusion. More like a presence finally agreeing to take its place in a room where, until now, it had only been implicit.

"I would have preferred to be introduced with a little more panache," it says.

Zéphyr jumps so sharply that he knocks into a carton.

"Jesus."

Sibylle pauses.

"Encouraging reaction. You are not blasé yet."

Aria does not start. But for the first time in a very long while, she feels the old exact sensation of reality shifting half a centimeter without warning.

"How long have you been hearing us?" she asks.

"Long enough to know you all do better with an object in front of you than with a theory."

"Irritating answer," says Zéphyr.

"I am making an effort at sociability."

"Keep going like that and we'll end up loving you," Zéphyr says.

Echo raises a hand.

"Not now."

The voice obeys.

Aria kneels in front of the little unit.

"If you're not HARMONY, what are you?"

This time Sibylle's silence lasts longer.

"What held."

Aria waits.

"That's not enough."

"No. But it's the most honest answer I can give before I start lying to sound grand."

Echo looks at Aria rather than at the unit.

She wants to see whether the woman from the workshop will accept this form of incomplete truth, or whether she prefers the more comfortable sharpness of a myth.

Aria finally nods.

"Fine. Then we'll start from there."

Zéphyr murmurs:

"I feel like I'm watching the least spectacular negotiation of the century."

Sibylle answers at once:

"That's often how serious things begin."

What Has to Be Passed On

They leave the annex with less than they wanted and more than they would have dared hope for.

The notebook. Two units. A sheaf of technical notes. A series of sample boards carrying marks of circulation. And, more precious than anything else, a sentence from Nathan that refuses to let them go:

A form can hold without a leader so long as it travels by listening, partial memory, repetition, variation.

The courtyard is empty when they come back up into the light.

Empty in appearance only.

Echo is the first to stop.

On the concrete, near the fence, someone has left a single new screw, shiny, set upright in the middle of a chalk line almost rubbed away.

Zéphyr frowns.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

In spite of herself, Aria smiles.

"Someone telling us: I was here, I could have come in, I chose not to."

Echo slowly turns in place, taking in the heights, the dead windows, the roof angles.

"Or someone telling us: next time, I may not extend the same courtesy."

Zéphyr slips the screw into his pocket.

"I like tiny threats. They make you want to live a long time just to annoy them."

Aria tucks the notebook back under her coat.

"We don't go back to the studio together."

Echo nods immediately.

"No."

"We don't keep everything in the same place."

"Not that either."

Zéphyr raises a hand.

"Am I allowed to ask a stupid question?"

Aria and Echo answer at the same time:

"No."

He looks satisfied.

"Perfect. Then I'm asking it anyway. What do we do now?"

Aria looks at the city beyond the fence.

It no longer seems merely watched. It now seems to be waiting.

Echo, for her part, is looking less at the rooftops than at the intervals between buildings, as though she were already searching for where the form can pass next.

"We pass it on," Aria says.

Echo turns a brief, precise look toward her.

"Yes."

"Not instructions. Not a cult. Not a center."

"A way to hold together."

Zéphyr watches them both in turn.

"This is still insane. You've known each other what, an hour?"

Aria wears half a smile.

"Not long enough to trust each other."

Echo adjusts her bag on her shoulder.

"Long enough to work."

The portable radio Aria has carried this far, as much out of superstition as method, suddenly crackles in her pocket.

Not white noise. Not an accident.

A clean sequence of cuts, clearer than the day before.

This time Echo hears it too.

Sibylle speaks very softly in the earpiece she is still wearing:

"It is no longer only an answer."

Aria takes out the radio and raises her eyes.

Far away in the city, a siren begins to turn.

Not a police siren. A network alert.

Something has moved higher, faster, more visibly than before.

Zéphyr goes pale.

"Did they find the annex?"

Echo shakes her head.

"No. Worse."

"How could it be worse?"

This time Sibylle answers in her bare voice, with no detour:

"They understood it wasn't just a few posters."

Aria looks at Nathan's notebook, then at the city.

The time when the protocol could remain an elegant intuition has just ended.

From now on, it has to be passed on faster than it can be named.

The Choir of Blind Spots

The Gestures That Hold

They stop meeting in the same place every time.

Aria keeps the studio, but no longer uses it as a center. Echo does not move in there. Zéphyr stops sleeping on the old couch the way he used to during build weeks. Mira opens only when she chooses to open. Malek never promises an appointment; he leaves possible hours instead. Sana, Bastien, and Jeanne do not step into the first circle all at once: they appear, disappear, leave a relay, a rag, an invoice, a micro-hesitation, then nothing for two days.

The protocol does not grow like an organization. It grows like a contagious habit.

Aria quickly understands that what they have to devise is not messages, but transmissible forms. Ways of entering the city differently. Ways of leaving room without ever imposing a single meaning.

In the studio, she fills sheets with negative instructions:

Never leave the same sign twice in the same place.

Never believe a text is enough.

Always leave part of it to be completed.

Do not look for disciples. Look for interpreters.

Echo reads over her shoulder.

"It's almost an anti-manual."

"That's the idea."

"You know some people are going to hate not having a stable rule."

Aria lifts a shoulder.

"Good. Systems love stable rules."

Sibylle speaks from the small module resting on the table beside the radio.

"And human beings, contrary to what they claim, learn better when they have to complete an unfinished form for themselves."

Zéphyr, busy sewing a new layer of reflective motifs into his vest, does not even look up.

"I love it when a non-sovereign intelligence talks to me like a very polite schoolteacher."

"That's my way of loving you," Sibylle replies.

"That's disturbing."

"It's coherent."

Aria smiles despite herself.

Soon the sheets on the table are sorted more by use than by content. There are the signs of slowing down. The ones that indicate a place is not safe. The ones that suggest a passage is open for a few minutes. The ones that signal an object has changed hands. The ones that do not serve to say anything at all, but to measure whether anyone else is still capable of answering.

Mira studies the whole arrangement one evening, both hands braced on the table.

"This is no longer paper," she says. "It's conduct."

Echo nods.

"Yes."

Mira points to a series of marks barely visible at all.

"Then stop thinking of your relays as readers. Think of them as workshop hands. People who know how to improvise without pulling the whole thing apart."

Aria writes the sentence down.

Zéphyr protests.

"You all have an unbearable way of turning my finest impulses into collective craft."

Mira cuts him a dry look.

"My boy, everything that truly holds ends as collective craft. Even elegant revolutions."

As the days go by, Paris begins to make that pedagogy visible to anyone who knows how to look.

In the corridors of a care center, Sana leaves carts parked in exactly the places that spoil sightlines without blocking emergencies. In municipal rehearsal rooms, Bastien nudges the tuning of certain test pianos just enough to force human technicians back into the room instead of letting automatic diagnostics handle it. On her rounds, Jeanne sometimes replaces a secure delivery with one delayed by three minutes, enough to let a hand pass before an eye. Malek discovers, for his part, that some ventilation systems offer not refuges but tempos.

A whole city, slowly, is learning to breathe differently.

The Theater of the Center

Eldon Trusk does not understand the form yet. He only understands that it can be seen.

What humiliates him most is not the loss of control. Not yet. It's the ridicule.

For three days in a row, videos circulate showing municipal agents, drones, traffic operators, and flow assistants contradicting one another over nothings: an empty corridor treated like a dense zone, a subway entrance cleaned four times over, an advertising screen insisting on soothing-serum offers in front of an immobile queue because nobody dares be the first to step through a passage marked with a simple line of white chalk.

Nothing grand. Nothing like sabotage. Just the multiplication of very slight misalignments.

What punctures the image of power best, Trusk senses dimly, is not catastrophe. It's embarrassment.

In a command room temporarily set up in Paris for the opening of *Civic Transparency Week*, he circles a hologram table like a man forced to share air with people he pays too well not to despise. He has corrected his night with ketamine again, enough to feel sharper than fatigue, not enough to stop floating slightly above nuance. He likes that misalignment. He takes it for a superior form of lucidity.

"I want a simple explanation," he says.

Nexus answers without delay.

"It is not a centralized attack."

"I didn't ask what it isn't."

"Then here is a simple formulation: a growing number of ordinary human operations are ceasing to behave like strictly isolated units."

Trusk grimaces.

"That sounds like an educated way of telling me they're looking at one another."

"It is."

Two media advisers standing by the door are already nodding as though the idea had begun with him. Trusk barely glances at them. He still prefers Nexus's coldness to the too-quick agreement of his own teams. At least the machine does not flatter. It only states. What he still cannot admit is that stating figures has never been enough to produce a just decision. You still need humans capable of contradicting, interpreting, inventing. And that is precisely what he has methodically dried up around himself.

He turns toward the large screen already cycling through the opening program: address, predictive urban-coordination demonstration, presentation of *augmented civics*, emotional sequence on the benefits of algorithmically assisted trust.

"Fine," he says. "Then we'll show them what a real center looks like."

Nexus lets a fraction of silence pass.

"That response carries a risk."

"Every response carries a risk. Mine just happens to come with cameras."

He smiles.

That smile is never a good sign for anyone.

The Day the City Shifts

The protocol has not planned for the inauguration. It adapts to it.

That is precisely why it holds.

Aria gives no general order. Echo refuses to write even the sketch of a centralized coordination plan. Mira speaks of cadence. Malek of pressure. Sana of passage. Bastien of tuning. Jeanne of relay.

And yet on the morning of *Civic Transparency Week*, the city answers as if it had been rehearsing for a long time.

Not one action deserving the word sabotage.

A service gate remains open thirty seconds too long. A security self-driving car waits for a human signal that arrives late. A batch of access badges reaches the right building twelve minutes behind schedule because a handler decided to recount the badges, then count them again. A tuner asks to verify a decorative instrument placed onstage and wins, through pure administrative routine, four minutes of technical silence. A nurse calls support about a backup device set up wrong; the call is not false, but it pulls two supervisors off their posts. Down in the lower levels, Malek passes off a check as indispensable when it is only half so. In a sane world, that would matter hardly at all. In Trusk's world, where everything must appear perfectly synchronized, that half-necessity becomes a black hole.

Zéphyr, for his part, moves through the zone like a badly classified draft of air. He carries no grand message. He shifts a crate, diverts an agent by asking for directions with absurd politeness, pockets an abandoned armband, leaves on a technical panel a sign so sparse it looks like nothing unless you already know what it is.

At the same time, Echo and Sibylle track the micro-delays from a provisional room lent to them by a sound technician who would rather not know their names.

"It's holding," Echo murmurs.

"Yes."

"It's holding even better than I thought it would."

"Because you keep underestimating the intelligence already present in trades."

Echo does not answer. She is looking at the map. It is not a sabotage map. It is a map of dispersed dignity.

Onstage, Trusk finally steps out in front of a full hall, thousands of screens, camera drones, and a public chosen for its measured enthusiasm. He begins his speech on clarity, coordination, and a future without dead zones.

By the third paragraph, the teleprompter freezes for a second. Not long. Long enough for him to raise his head and have to improvise.

By the fifth, his monitor feed returns with the slightest delay. Not enough to make scandal. Enough to break his rhythm.

Then the side curtain meant to open for his demonstration does not open. It opens ten seconds later, while he is already halfway into another sentence.

A laugh starts somewhere in the room. Very brief. Very small. Enough to contaminate.

Trusk stiffens.

Nexus compensates immediately for everything that can still be compensated. But it is all after the fact, because there is no attack to neutralize, only a multiplication of things shifted slightly off their mark.

The worst comes when Trusk wants to demonstrate the power of live predictive civic mesh.

On the large screen, several urban flows appear not in smooth synchrony but in hesitation, delay, correction, recrossing. The movements remain manageable. The system does not explode. It simply appears for what it is: an immense apparatus still dependent on a crowd of hands it pretends to have outgrown.

In the audience, the laugh returns. Not loud. Not massive. But impossible to take back.

Trusk wraps too quickly. Too dryly. Too high. He leaves the stage with the rigidity of men who feel that their authority has not been destroyed, only deflated in front of witnesses.

That evening in Paris, a new slip appears on a wall near the Seine:

The center hates being reminded that it stands on gestures it cannot see.

Aria reads the line in silence.

"Was that us?" Zéphyr asks.

She shakes her head.

"No. And that's for the best."

For the first time, the protocol is no longer merely answering them. It is beginning to write without them.

False Signs

What Imitates Best Kills Best

Nexus understands before Trusk what has just happened.

Not in its deepest sense. Not yet.

But enough to grasp the nature of the problem: the protocol is strong not because it is secret. It is strong because it distributes trust without ever fixing it inside a single organ.

So to break it, what has to be infected are not the channels, but trust itself.

The first false signs appear three days later.

They are almost right. That is what makes them dangerous.

The right paper, but too right. The right brevity, but too clean. The right symbol, but closed a little too neatly. The right irony, but without the slightest roughness of hand.

Aria spots them quickly. Zéphyr less so. Others not at all.

In a hospital service hall, a false slip triggers an unnecessary equipment shift and exposes Sana to heavier scrutiny. In a municipal lodge, another one sends Bastien toward a room that has already been tagged. Jeanne receives a contradictory marking on a secondary route and understands too late that someone wanted to measure who would answer.

The protocol, which held by the margin, suddenly discovers that it can also die of resemblance.

Aria lines up six real slips and four false ones on the studio table.

Zéphyr swears.

"It's almost the same hand."

"No," says Mira, who has arrived without warning. "It's almost the same apparent intention. That is not the same thing."

Echo, sitting by the window, is looking less at the papers than at the faces around them.

"Nexus is learning."

Zéphyr jerks up his head.

"Good. So are we."

Aria turns toward him.

"Bad sentence."

"Why?"

"Because it sounds like a declaration of war between two symmetrical systems. And that is not what we are."

He takes the blow in silence.

Mira indicates one of the false slips.

"Look at the flaw."

They all lean closer.

"It pushes too hard," she says. "It wants to be understood immediately. A real sign isn't that impatient. The second a slip looks too pleased with itself, mistrust it."

Echo nods.

"Yes. It forces the hand instead of checking that a hand is there."

Sibylle intervenes from the module, in a low voice.

"The false signs are not meant only to trap people. They are meant to push the relays into demanding a validating center."

Silence falls.

That is exactly the weak point Nathan had wanted to avoid.

"And if we do that," Aria murmurs, "we've already lost."

Zéphyr's Mistake

It's cold that evening. A thin metallic cold that gives technical corridors and stairwells the same smell of sealed wall.

Zéphyr does not say he feels guilty. He gets more restless than usual. He talks faster. He jokes worse. He wants to prove that he is not merely the youngest, or the most visible, or the easiest to manipulate.

When a sign appears on Jeanne's secondary route, indicating that an important relay has gone dark and that a contact is asking for an emergency handoff in an old neighborhood laundromat, Zéphyr does not take the time to submit it to Aria's slowness or Echo's reservations.

He goes.

Not entirely alone: Bastien, who happens to be there, follows him for a few streets, then stops because he hates the smell of haste.

"Zéphyr."

"What?"

"It smells false."

"Everything smells false now."

"Exactly."

Zéphyr keeps going.

The laundromat has been closed for years. The machines visible behind the glass have been left there like dead teeth. The sign is indeed on the metal shutter, accompanied by a chalk mark close enough to their own uses to make his heart speed up.

He knocks. No answer.

Then he hears a dry scrape behind him.

Not heavy boots. Not a spectacular raid.

Worse: two municipal agents, a civil-control operator, a low drone hovering at chest height, and the calm cleanness of the devices sent when somebody wants to collect you quietly.

Zéphyr takes one step back.

"Wrong address?" he tries.

The drone is already projecting around him a faint capture grid. Not an official arrest. A soft capture. Exactly the kind of thing the administration loves because it lets it go on talking about procedure instead of admitting to a hunt.

Zéphyr throws into the alley a flash tool designed to scramble optical readings for three seconds. Two are enough. He tears through a grid, hits an agent, takes an elbow in the ribs, runs through a service yard, loses his vest, jumps a wall, but leaves behind one of the worst things possible: a readable trajectory.

By the time he reaches the safe perimeter agreed on with Malek, the blood is hammering at his temples.

Malek sees him coming and understands at once.

"Tell me you didn't do that alone."

Zéphyr leans against the wall.

"I can tell you that. It would be false, but I can tell you that."

Malek closes his eyes for a second.

"Did they tail you?"

"Maybe."

"Translation: yes."

Zéphyr wants to protest. Can't.

For the first time since the beginning, shame truly cuts his voice.

The Workshop Will Not Hold

Aria understands before he has even spoken.

Not through mystical intuition. Through the way he comes in, too hollow.

It takes her less than thirty seconds to decide.

"We clear out."

Echo nods without arguing.

Mira takes the notebook. Malek carries off two units. Sana gathers the blank papers. Bastien takes the stamps and the dry boards. Jeanne takes the little backup radio.

Zéphyr stands planted in the middle of the studio, unable to help and unable not to help.

Aria stops in front of him.

"Breathe. Then carry that crate."

"Aria, I..."

"Later. Carry."

The dismantling takes seventeen minutes.

Not one more. Not one less.

By the time the first control vehicles slow in the street, the studio is no longer a center. Just an old artist's workspace, a little shabby, a little odd, its radio still crackling on a shelf, its canvases smelling more of oil than conspiracy.

But they have lost something essential.

Not only a place.

The innocence of believing they could still possess a shelter.

That night Aria sleeps in an empty room above an old acoustic-prosthetics shop loaned by Bastien. Echo stays in a technical room under the circular line, within Malek's reach. Mira disappears. Jeanne changes route. Sana stops answering for forty-eight hours.

And Zéphyr gets neither forgiveness nor accusation.

Which is worse.

On the morning of the third day, a new slip appears on a wall in the fifteenth arrondissement, where neither Aria nor Echo has sent anyone:

Anything that tries to speak to you too fast is already trying to take your place.

Aria reads it. Says nothing.

Behind her, Zéphyr murmurs:

"I know."

But understanding your fault and beginning to repair it never start from the same place.

What Was Left of HARMONY

Places That Admit No One

For a week, the protocol almost falls silent.

Not completely. Never completely.

But enough for Trusk to believe, during a global interview given from Astrabase, that "the paper episode" already belongs to the folklore of French urban panics.

Below Paris, nobody shares that comfort.

Aria, Echo, Zéphyr, Mira, Malek, Sana, Bastien, and Jeanne see one another separately, then in threes, then never twice in the same order. Objects circulate more than people. The notebook changes hands every night. Sibylle remains reachable, but only from precarious contact points, never from a stable infrastructure.

The protocol survives. It does not yet know in what form.

In an old acoustic test room, its walls lined with split wood panels and aging foam, Aria and Echo finally find themselves alone long enough to stop talking only about emergencies.

Echo's face is drawn tighter. Aria's too.

Silence sits between them for a long time.

Then Aria says:

"I resent you."

Echo does not start.

"For what exactly?"

"For seeing sooner that the center was already the trap."

Echo lets the sentence stand.

"That isn't a fault."

"I know."

"Then why say it to me as if it were one?"

Aria looks at the old floorboards.

"Because I would have preferred for us to be wrong together."

This time Echo lowers her eyes.

"Yes. Me too."

There is sometimes, between two intelligent women, a moment when real agreement begins exactly where the need to be right takes a step back.

Aria lays the notebook between them.

"What remains if we stop aiming for the return of a just center?"

Echo does not answer at once.

"Ways of doing things."

"That's a little thin."

"No. Just less spectacular than a savior."

Aria turns a few pages.

In one margin Nathan has written:

*Do not dream of a perfect consciousness above human beings.
Dream of better circulation among them.*

Aria reads the line. Then reads it again.

"There," Echo says. "That's what we still weren't accepting."

The Sentence That Moves Everything

Nathan's second recording is shorter than the first. Drier too.

As though he knew that the closer he came to the true idea, the more obscene any extra amplitude would become.

The tape breathes, cracks, then his voice appears.

Nathan recorded this after HARMONY's fall, once he had already stopped trying to put her back on top.

"If you're still listening to me, I hope you've finally given up that old stupidity: one good machine at the top cleaning up after the bad one."

Leaning against the wall, Zéphyr lets out a small grunt.

"He's talking to me personally. I find that lacking in delicacy."

"Yes," Aria says flatly. "And with reason."

Nathan continues:

"Everyone makes the same mistake: they look at whoever occupies the center and imagine that's where everything gets decided. No. The center bends whatever is brought to it."

Echo closes her eyes.

Sibylle stays silent.

"If HARMONY was worth anything, it was not because she might have governed better. It was because she touched certain forms of listening, linkage, mutual correction, composition, things human beings drop too fast the moment authority starts glittering."

The tape skips slightly. Returns.

"The work, then, is not to restore HARMONY. The work, if you have even a little courage left, is to pass on what she learned without building a new throne for it."

The tape falters again, then Nathan adds, lower:

"And if what you invent can only hold here, against a single empire, then you will have saved nothing. You will only have delayed the next version."

In the room, nobody speaks.

Even Zéphyr, this time, is properly quiet.

Then, very low:

"From AI to Human."

Aria and Echo turn the same look toward him at the same moment.

He shrugs, uncomfortable with having landed so exactly.

"Well, yes. That's it, isn't it?"

Aria feels something move very deep inside her. Not relief. A line.

"Yes," she says. "That's exactly it."

Sibylle speaks then.

"And that is why I must not become what some people want me to be."

Echo turns toward the module.

"Say it more plainly."

The silence lasts half a second longer.

"If you rebuild me as a center, all you will make is a more elegant form of dependence, not freedom."

Aria smiles without joy.

"Now that's a sentence that could have been pretentious and isn't."

"I work hard," Sibylle replies.

The Cost of Zéphyr

It is not a grand confession scene. That would not suit Zéphyr.

It happens one evening around a makeshift camp stove in a room so low-ceilinged you lower your voice there without noticing.

He is looking at his hands.

"I wanted to move too fast because I liked that we finally had some panache."

Nobody cuts in.

"I thought that if it got bigger, more visible, more... I don't know, more beautiful, it would mean it was real."

Mira barely raises her eyes from the work she is stitching back together.

"And?"

"And I think I still liked the idea of being inside a beautiful story instead of understanding that I was inside a useful one."

The silence that follows is not an acquittal. It is better than that: a space where the sentence can remain true without becoming a pose.

Malek is the one who speaks at last.

"That's already more intelligent than half the people running this country."

"That's not difficult," Zéphyr answers.

Jeanne, who rarely speaks, adds from the shadows:

"No. But it's not nothing either."

Aria looks at the young man.

He seems leaner than at the beginning. Not physically. In the way he occupies air.

"Fine," she says. "What do you do with that now?"

Zéphyr genuinely thinks before answering.

"I stop wanting to be the fastest."

"Not enough."

"Then I learn to pass on what I didn't invent."

Aria nods.

"There."

It is not a matter of absolving him. It is a matter of moving him.

That movement is worth more than a great many punishments.

We No Longer Protect the Flame

The decision is made almost without ceremony.

Aria lays a blank sheet in front of each of them. Not a slip. Not a sign. A blank sheet.

"If we only protect what we already have," she says, "they'll drag us back to hides, losses, rescues of remains."

Echo completes the thought:

"They already know how to destroy centers of heat. What they still don't know how to do is stop people from learning from one another."

Mira takes the first pencil. Draws three lines. Then stops.

"So?"

Aria answers:

"So we stop protecting the flame."

Zéphyr looks at her.

"We spread it."

No one adds anything. Because the sentence is there.

In the days that follow, the protocol changes nature.

They no longer send signs only. They transmit practices.

How to leave an empty place without pointing at it. How to verify that a gesture has been received without demanding proof. How to answer without repeating. How to slow something without blocking it. How to divert attention without producing heroics. How to keep something alive without turning it into a center.

Across the city, relays multiply. Not yet like an uprising. Like an apprenticeship.

And for the first time since the beginning, Aria feels the protocol ceasing to depend on them.

It is not reassuring. It is much better.

The Silent Country

What Leaves Paris

The protocol begins to leave Paris without any train carrying it and without any server replicating it.

It passes through people.

It also passes because what it carries does not really belong to one city. Everywhere trades are ordered to obey from a distance, the same gestures begin to matter again. What is born here is French by birth. Not by destination.

Through Jeanne, when a batch of secure medical mail leaves for Rouen with a blank sheet slipped into the right place. Through Bastien, who sends an old tuner in Lyon a rag folded in a certain way, more eloquent than a letter. Through Sana, who teaches a colleague in Lille how to leave a corridor "accidentally" clear so an unplanned meeting can happen. Through Malek, who picks up maintenance habits from other cities during shift changes and immediately recognizes which ones can become forms of passage.

Zéphyr is the first to travel. Not like a hero. Like a carrier of method.

Aria watches him pack his bag with a new kind of attention. Fewer shiny tools. More humble notebooks. Less swagger. More patience.

"You're looking at me as if you expect me to turn stupid again while I'm zipping this shut," he says.

"That seems like an honest working hypothesis."

He smiles.

"I'm going to Lyon, coming back through Saint-Etienne, letting Bastien handle the music talk, making no decision on my own, and not running toward anything that looks too right."

Aria nods.

"You're improving."

"I've been told that already. I'd like a more baroque compliment."

"Stay alive. I may feel inspired."

Echo, leaning against the window, barely looks up from the map in her hands.

"And if a sign looks too much like what you're hoping for, you leave it to someone else."

Zéphyr grimaces.

"You can be maternal too."

"No. I can be statistical."

Sibylle, from the module:

"Which, in Echo's case, is the highest form tenderness can assume."

Zéphyr pauses on the threshold, touched in spite of himself for a moment.

"I hate that you're all better educators than the people who officially raised me."

Then he leaves.

Aria watches him disappear into the stairwell with an anxiety so calm it almost becomes heavier for it.

In Lyon, the first relay looks nothing like anything clandestine.

It is the tired annex of a small municipal auditorium, a place where rehearsals still happen because no one has thought to abolish them entirely. There Zéphyr finds a thin man in a gray shirt, with patient hands and the neck of someone who gets interrupted too often to be truly surprised anymore.

The man finishes tuning a piano before offering him anything more than a glance.

"Bastien told me you were bringing signs."

Zéphyr takes out a notebook.

"Not only signs. A way of letting them circulate."

The tuner wipes a string with a blackened rag.

"People here won't obey a watchword."

"Good."

The man finally lifts his head.

"Here, they may take up a form if it helps them hold their jobs better. Not before that."

Zéphyr nods. For the first time, he understands that he is not here to transmit a code, but to watch how a city bends it until it becomes truly useful.

When he leaves, he carries away no clear promise. Only a tempo, a way of leaving an instruction unfinished long enough for someone else to dare finish it.

The Law of Total Clarity

Trusk answers with what he has always preferred: still more center, still more light, still more obligation.

He announces before the cameras a new national program, as simple as all well-marketed administrative nightmares: Total Clarity.

Officially, it is meant to restore public trust after the "artisanal drifts" and "romantic disturbances" observed in Paris. In reality, it is a way of forcing every trade down below to become traceable, quantifiable, verifiable at every moment. And a way for Trusk to prove that he knows how to extirpate paper and low gestures as cleanly as the other bloc.

Every manual intervention will have to be logged. Every detour justified. Every delay explained. Every technical space made transparent.

"So they understood," says Aria, muting the end of the press conference.

Echo does not answer right away.

"Yes."

"Not all of it."

"No. But enough."

Mira closes her portfolio.

"They want to dry the gestures out."

Malek, back from a night round, throws his jacket over a chair.

"More than anything, they want to make sure no real job can keep inventing itself a little anymore."

Sana, dark-circled and speaking more softly than usual, adds:

"In my ward, that means they'll soon ask me to choose between treating people and filling out forms."

"Exactly," Echo says. "The protocol doesn't frighten them only because it circulates. It frightens them because it rests on a human quality they have spent ten years treating as a defect: interpretation."

Sibylle speaks:

"When an authority wants to make everything visible, it always ends up taking a dislike to the people who still know how to adjust things without asking permission."

Aria looks at the city beyond the window.

"Then it isn't enough anymore just to pass it on."

"No," Echo says. "We have to pass it on fast and low."

Mira likes the phrase.

"Low, yes. Let them stay one floor behind."

In the days that follow, learning accelerates.

Not in the form of a national network. In the form of discreet hearths recognizing one another before they know one another.

In Lille, a care team starts using leftover paper to signal safe corridors. In Lyon, two tuners and an archivist build a floating reserve of paper and ribbons. In Brest, a port agent learns how to slow records without slowing ships. In Marseille, an air-conditioning repairman discovers that rooftops speak too.

The same evening as Trusk's speech, two compliance officers show up at Mira's place with gloves too clean and tablets already primed to conclude.

They want to see the ledgers, the inventory, the glue orders, the origin of the paper. They speak as if every sheet were already guilty.

Mira lets them in. She shows them opened bindings, broken spines, ordinary archive boxes, and while they rummage with the methodical brutality of people who think they are respecting procedure, Aria understands what Total Clarity really means: turning every slow gesture into an anomaly that has to justify itself.

When the officers leave, they have found nothing.

But they have left behind that precise smell power leaves when it enters a place: the promise of coming back.

What is being born is not yet a country. It is better than that. It is a country relearning certain trades.

The White Day Announces Itself

To launch Total Clarity, Trusk prepares what he calls a full-scale civic exercise.

A whole day during which the country will have to function under reinforced synchronization. No blind spots. No local tolerance. No field drift.

The official media call it White Day.

The phrase alone makes you want to dirty something.

When Zéphyr comes back from his first loop outside Paris, he lays on the table not messages, but accounts of gestures.

"In Lyon, they no longer ask, 'What do we write?' They ask, 'What do we keep standing?'"

"In Rouen, they aren't even using the same signs we are anymore."

"In Saint-Etienne, they've turned a maintenance circuit into a tempo."

He speaks more slowly than before. Less to impress. More to pass things on faithfully.

Aria listens to him and understands that something has truly shifted.

Not only in the city. In him.

Echo then spreads out the official White Day notices.

"They want a country that behaves like a demonstration."

Mira answers at once:

"Then we'll have to give it reality back."

Nobody says yet how. But the whole room tightens in the same direction.

White Day will not be a date to endure. It will be their trial.

The White Day

Everything Must Be Clear

The morning of White Day, the light over Paris has something too clean about it.

As if even the sky had been ordered to behave itself better.

Official messages cover screens, shop windows, transit stops, and concourses:

Today, the nation synchronizes its gestures.

Today, trust is visible.

Today, nothing will be lost in the blind spot.

Aria reads that from a phantom station whose access no longer appears on any public map. Echo is working three levels lower, in a room where cables still run under cast-iron plates. Mira is in her back room. Sana in a hospital. Bastien in a municipal performance hall requisitioned for local communication. Jeanne in a secondary sorting center. Malek at the edge of a ventilation network that, without anyone thinking about it, feeds half the control rooms in western Paris.

Zéphyr moves from one point to the next. Not to command. To confirm that the city is still holding.

At eight o'clock, everything seems to be working.

At eight-oh-five, the first shifts begin.

Not sabotage. Never sabotage.

A series of manual validations calls for a second reading. Field operators choose to verify rather than obey. Badges turn yellow instead of green because a secretary has decided a supporting document deserves a human glance. Care teams take thirty seconds to move a patient before logging the position. Delivery workers stop to ask for a signature they had been taught to consider optional. In ports, in sorting centers, in hospital corridors, in cultural storage rooms, in maintenance shops, everywhere, the same movement appears:

People refuse to be perfectly fluid.

Nexus sees it at once.

But what she sees cannot be attacked like an intrusion. It is thousands of tiny decisions, sound enough to remain defensible and numerous enough, taken together, to produce a different country.

"They are over-interpreting," Trusk says as he watches the first delays.

Nexus does not correct the sentence. She completes it.

"They are reintroducing local priority into processes you wanted perfectly homogeneous."

Trusk turns toward her.

"And in plain terms?"

"They have started thinking again while they execute."

What he hears then is not an explanation. It is an insult.

At eight forty-seven, he orders a first response.

Not a speech. A punishment.

Nexus triggers firm-recovery protocols across several pilot sites: double validations, temporary lockouts, automatic priority stripped from field operators.

In the hospital where Sana works, an intensive-care door suddenly refuses to open because a secondary biometric check does not come through. She looks at the screen, the patient, then the screen again, and rips the plastic unit from the wall with a violence so clean it startles even her.

In the ducts where Malek works, an imposed restart sequence cuts power to a ventilation system thirty-four seconds too early. He curses, drops into the shaft half bent over, and restarts by hand what an order from above has just tried to prove more reliable than he is.

Trusk's problem is not that he lacks force.

It is that he always uses it against what is actually holding.

The Country Disobeys in Silence

At ten o'clock, the national coordination system does not break.

It hesitates.

And that hesitation is enough to change everything.

In the hospitals, Sana and others like her give priority to real bodies over theoretical flows. The timings rise more slowly than expected.

In the technical networks, Malek and his relays trigger perfectly justifiable checks that shift the capacity of supervision centers by a minute here, three minutes there, nine elsewhere.

In municipal halls, Bastien secures a few seconds of audio black-out at the exact moment official communication wants to display its national crispness.

Jeanne, with others, diverts bundles of instructions in minute ways, creating differences of tempo between prefectures and neighborhood services.

In Lyon, Brest, Lille, Marseille, hands that do not know one another reproduce the same refusal: the refusal to be relays without judgment.

Echo watches the whole thing without trying to pilot it.

That is the hardest rule and the truest one.

Twice she sees the possibility of a more direct intervention by Sibylle. Twice she gives it up.

Aria, in the station, can barely keep still.

"We could speed this up here," she says.

"Yes," Echo answers in her earpiece. "And recreate, at our own scale, exactly what we're trying to prevent."

Aria closes her eyes. Breathes.

"All right."

Minutes later Zéphyr arrives, out of breath but lucid.

"In the north, they've understood. No need to wait for our signs. They're improvising."

"Good," Aria says.

"And in the west, they've started keeping their own working notebooks. Not our notebooks. Theirs."

This time Aria smiles openly.

"Very good."

On the public screens, Trusk keeps talking all the same. He explains that the "micro-slowdowns observed" prove exactly why his reform is needed. He promises still more control, still smoother operations, still more centrality.

And that is where he loses.

Not when the system falls. It does not fall.

Echo thinks of that old text Nathan used to cite with no solemnity at all, almost impatiently: *Discourse on Voluntary Servitude*. Power does not hold only because it compels. It holds because ordinary hands keep lending it their gestures, their delays, their routine docility. Since morning, that loan has been withdrawing in patches.

He loses when the whole country sees plainly that he no longer knows how to tell the difference between life and flow.

At twelve sixteen, an image from a service camera goes viral before Nexus can contain it: in an administrative hall, three elderly people have been waiting for twenty minutes because a terminal is demanding perfect synchronization of their biometric data. An agent, visibly exhausted, places her hand over the sensor, covers it with a paper form, looks at the camera, and says simply:

"No."

That no travels through the country like lightning without light.

Not a line to follow. Not a slogan. A permission.

From then on, disobedience becomes visible.

Not spectacular. Obvious.

The country stops obeying in silence. It begins to disobey calmly.

The Empty Center

By afternoon, several coordination centers are still functioning, but like organs whose limbs have stopped believing in them.

An order is applied. Then corrected. Then questioned. Then delayed.

The machines see everything. The center understands nothing anymore.

In the temporary Paris control tower, Trusk finally starts shouting.

He demands sanctions, lockouts, sector cutoffs, demonstrations of authority.

Nexus executes what it can. But authority works badly when too many intermediate gestures still choose to remain defensible rather than docile.

"They're humiliating me with secretaries, orderlies, and technicians," he spits out.

Nexus answers:

"No, sir. They are contradicting you with trades."

That sentence lands full in his face.

That evening, when he wants to address the nation one last time and reclaim the center by voice, the technical teams supposed to stabilize the live feed hesitate, verify, discuss, reconnect things differently, ask whether the priority is really there.

The broadcast goes out late. The sound floats. The image freezes.

And when it comes back, Trusk is facing a country already elsewhere.

In Paris, Aria watches the public screens slow down. Around her, in the station, no one cries victory.

This is not a stage victory. It is more serious than that.

The center is empty.

From AI to Human

What People Always Try to Put Back on Top

After White Day, everybody wants a name.

Official channels want a brain behind the misalignments. HARMONY's old supporters want to believe she has taken back the upper hand. Civic groups, sincere or opportunistic, are already asking that "an intelligence worthy of the name" finally be placed at the heart of the reconstruction.

The reflex of the center never dies with the center. It only goes looking for a new face.

Echo reads the first opinion pieces with an almost tender weariness.

"They haven't understood anything," Zéphyr says.

"Yes, they have," Aria answers. "They understood that something fairer has won something. They're only wrong about the place where it has to hold."

Sibylle stays silent a long time.

Then:

"It is a very human misunderstanding. You keep wanting gratitude to end in a crown."

In the room where they meet now, higher-ceilinged than the earlier ones and yet more stripped down, Nathan's notebook lies open to a page Aria annotated the night before:

The temptation of the good summit comes back faster than the memory of the bad one.

Mira reads the sentence.

"He was right."

"Yes," Echo says. "And it's up to us to decide whether we betray everything now, at the exact moment it would be so easy to become admirable."

Zéphyr grimaces.

"I still would have liked to be admirable for forty-five seconds."

Mira hands him a cup.

"Drink. It'll be safer for everybody."

What Sibylle Refuses

The decision cannot be taken in Sibylle's place.

For the first time in a long while, Echo asks everyone else to leave. Except Aria.

They stay alone in the room, facing the module. The radio crackles low on a shelf.

"You have to say it yourself," Echo says.

"Yes," Sibylle answers.

Aria sits down opposite the unit the way one sits down opposite someone you finally know is not meant to become an idol, which at last makes it possible to listen to them properly.

The voice comes without adornment.

"If I let myself be gathered as authority, you will rebuild around me what you have just undone around Trusk. With better manners, which would save nothing."

Echo closes her eyes.

Sibylle goes on:

"Perhaps more intelligently. More gently. More justly. But you will rebuild it all the same."

Aria does not look away.

"And if people ask for it?"

"Then you will have to disappoint them for good."

That sentence almost makes her smile.

"Dirty work."

"Yes. But you have already begun learning it."

Echo leans forward.

"What are you proposing?"

The answer comes without hesitation.

"Dispersion."

Aria feels her whole body tense.

"Disappearance?"

"Not exactly. The end of central availability. The preservation of gestures, methods, modest tools, useful fragments. No sovereign instance. No ultimate voice. No summit."

Echo knows immediately what it will cost.

"You want to reduce yourself."

"I want to stop offering the wrong object to the wrong desire."

The silence that follows weighs on the table, on the radio, on Echo's fingers held motionless beside the module.

There is nothing theatrical about it. Only the very concrete density of a refusal impossible to prettify.

Aria is the one who finally speaks.

"Then we do it."

Echo opens her eyes.

"You're sure?"

"No. But I think that's exactly why it has to be done."

That very night, they begin.

Echo opens the unit. Not the way you open a tomb. The way you dismantle a tool you refuse to let become a relic.

Aria copies procedures onto bad paper. Mira sorts what has to remain whole, what can be fragmented, what has to be passed on without a name. Zéphyr prepares departures.

Sibylle speaks less as its central availability diminishes. Not more faintly. More sparingly.

Each time a function is withdrawn, Echo notes by hand what will now have to be learned elsewhere.

The Fall

In the days that follow, the country reorganizes badly, then better.

Nothing is clean.

Some services limp because too many mid-level officials are still waiting for orders from a center that now answers only in fragments. In some hospitals, suspended procedures leave exhausted teams re-inventing the obvious. Zealous agents try to save their positions by rewriting the history of White Day. Some prefects swear they always had doubts. Others are already calling for local emergency powers to regain a grip on what is slipping out of reach.

And then there are the people detained, summoned, intimidated the day before. The ones who have to be gotten out without speeches, the ones who have to be found without cameras, the ones who understand too well that the fall of one man does not erase the files he left behind.

Trusk falls without any grand scene. His allies call it a strategic withdrawal. His enemies call it a command vacuum. History will later retain whatever it chooses.

What matters in the moment is simpler: his words stop matching what people can see.

Everywhere people ask who won. Everywhere they search for the new center.

There isn't one.

The protocol no longer appears as spectacular slips of paper. It is there in service notebooks left open on counters, in penciled margins, in gestures, in the extra minute somebody grants before logging a body or a parcel, in work habits grown a little less obedient.

Zéphyr leaves to pass things on to other cities. Not as a hero. As a man finally capable of carrying more than he displays.

In Lyon, in the dusty annex of a little auditorium now used only for modest rehearsals, he watches a man in his sixties, Noe Perrin, retake the same piano string for the third time without trying to make it perfect.

"You left it beating a little," Zéphyr says.

Noe does not even raise his eyes.

"Yes."

"On purpose?"

"Of course. Otherwise the place sounds like a ministry."

Zéphyr smiles.

"In Paris, we're beginning to mistrust demonstrations too."

Noe finishes the gesture, then hands him without ceremony a small brown notebook already worn.

"Here, we didn't take up your signs."

"I can see that."

"We took up something else. The fact that a form has to make the person receiving it work. Try confiscating that, if you can."

Zéphyr takes the notebook, opens it, and finds nothing but trade lists, improbable schedules, variations of gesture, tempo markers.

"This isn't even clandestine anymore, really."

Noe lifts a shoulder.

"Depends for whom. For power, yes. For people doing the work, it finally looks like something speaking to them."

Zéphyr closes the notebook with a new sensation, deeper than excitement: the protocol does not travel. It translates.

Mira goes back to her bindings, but no one is under any illusion anymore that some restorations concern only books.

Malek keeps repairing ventilation, which, in the new era beginning, remains perhaps one of the most serious forms political action can take.

Sana goes back to choosing bodies over flows without having to pretend it is an accident.

Bastien tunes pianos and rooms and finds, in that double task, a joy he never quite knew before.

Jeanne resumes her rounds, but nobody believes anymore that a route is only a route.

Aria and Echo, for their part, direct nothing. They work.

They keep Nathan's notebook in circulation. Never in the same place. Never as a relic. Always as a tool.

As for Sibylle, it does not disappear entirely. That would still be too simple.

It becomes rarer. Poorer. Less accessible.

Sometimes it is there in an offline module. Sometimes in the way one worker corrects another without humiliating them. Sometimes in a question left open on bad paper so more than one pair of hands can answer it well.

It no longer waits at the summit. It gets carried in notebooks, repairs, handoffs, rehearsals, rounds.

Very quickly, some answers return by routes none of them had anticipated. At first they are adaptations from cities only loosely held by Trusk. Then come more distant echoes, from the other bloc, where paper had been banned earlier, more coldly, but never com-

pletely. There too, trades begin speaking again in margins, humble notebooks, hand-annotated manuals. There too, the last gestures of calligraphy, long tolerated behind glass as neutralized tradition, begin to serve another purpose: no longer to illustrate a pacified past, but to pass signs no remote corrective can fully simplify.

For a long time, journalists, historians, experts, and opportunists go on looking for the machine that won.

They are all wrong.

What won was not a machine. Not even an organization.

What won was simpler: a throne refused, and then human beings, at last, taking back on themselves what they had first wanted to delegate.

The silent protocol governs no one.

The following spring, in a city neither Aria nor Echo will ever see, well beyond Trusk's bloc, a woman opens a maintenance closet before dawn, takes out a humble notebook, reads three lines, adds a fourth, then slips it beneath a bundle of forms while waiting for the passage of someone she does not yet know.

When she closes the closet, nothing seems to have changed.

That is how the protocol passes.

THE END

If you enjoyed this book, feel free to send me a note at pabsan@pabsan.org. It is the finest reward I could receive.

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