TABLERO 13

62

Volume I

Nexo 13

Filardi Patricia M.

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Night. Jerusalem.

The chapel is empty.

The candlelight barely reaches the True Cross. Baldwin remains on his knees.

One of his hands is bandaged. He is breathing with difficulty. For a long moment he says nothing.

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At last he raises his eyes.

"You healed the lepers."

Silence.

"And I think I finally understand why you did not heal me."

His eyes remain fixed on the relic.

"If you had taken this burden from me… if I had never known pain… if I had never felt my own body rebel against me… perhaps I would have been just another king."

The wind makes a flame tremble.

"Proud. Blind. Comfortable."

The bandaged hand slowly closes.

"But he who suffers every day learns something that others rarely see. He learns to recognize suffering before it appears. He learns to see it in the eyes of others. He learns to prevent it while there is still time."

His words are serene. There is no bitterness. There is no reproach.

"That is why I can see the darkness when others cannot. That is why I can feel it drawing near. That is why I know what it is trying to do."

He lowers his head.

"I am not a martyr. I am not a saint. I am a soldier. Your soldier against this."

Silence fills the chapel.

"And if this is the burden I must carry… I will carry it."

One last look at the Cross.

"Thy will be done."

The flame stops trembling. The darkness recedes. And far away, shut in behind invisible barriers, something roars in helpless fury. He himself had created his greatest enemy.

The Weight of the World

Jerusalem, 1180. The King's Chamber. Night.

The fire barely warmed the walls. Tibaldo of Ascalon, counselor and master of memories, was waiting on his feet when the king came in. Baldwin did not stop. He crossed the room to the great window and stood looking at Jerusalem with the attention of one who gazes at something he knows he will not see for much longer.

"I chose them carefully," he said, without turning. "From my personal guard."

Tibaldo waited.

"The reports from their superiors agree. They do not speak of feats. They speak of decisions." A pause. "The kind you never see in the ballads."

The one who falls back to save another.

The one who disobeys when the order is unjust.

The one who keeps silent when everyone else seeks glory.

The king turned from the window. He went to the table. He began to name them in the voice of a man who has thought about this for a long time and has arrived at a certainty that needs no defense.

"Basileios Angulos. Orthodox. He has studied in Constantinople the texts the West forgot to burn. He reads what we no longer know how to read."

"Faithful?" Tibaldo asked.

"To God, yes. To us, to the extent that we are worthy of God," said Baldwin.

"Guilhem of Foix. Occitan. He has seen what the north of France does to his people and has not yet answered with hatred. That makes him able to promise and to keep his promise."

"Arnau of Castellnou. A physician before a soldier, though he has proven himself both when the need arose. He knows that serving does not absolve him from thinking."

He paused.

"And Renaud of Ibelin. A crusader's son. Born in this land, but dreaming of one he does not know. He is the only one of the four with nothing to lose. That makes him the most dangerous and the most necessary."

"Shall I give the order?" said Tibaldo.

"Have them come tomorrow. After the council."

He went toward the door. He stopped.

"Tibaldo?"

“Majesty.”

“The object. Do you believe in it?”

A long pause.

“I believe there are things that must not be found before the world is ready to find them.”

“That does not answer my question.”

“No, Majesty. But it is the only honest answer I have.”

And he left. And the door closed. And the king was left alone before the blank margin of the map, which is the place where cartographers wrote: *hic svnt leones*.

Jerusalem, 1180. The King’s Chamber.

The four came together without having been summoned together.

Baldwin received them standing, with Tibaldo at his side. There were no chairs. Nor any ceremony.

“I have not called you here to evaluate you,” said Baldwin. “That is already done. I want to know whether you understand what you are going to lose.”

Tibaldo looked at him.

“With respect, Majesty…
we do not know what is being asked of us,” said Basileios.

The four listened in silence.

“There is an object in the custody of this crown. I will not tell you yet what it is. I will tell you what matters: it cannot stay here. Saladin advances. Rome has its own aims. The crusaders of the north have theirs. There is no place in the known world where this object is safe from anyone who knows what it is.”

Arnau opened his mouth. Closed it. Baldwin went on.

“It is not a mission.”

Renaud looked up.

“What is it, then?”

“A chain. If it is cut once, everything is lost.” He paused. “And you will not be the last.”

Silence. Basileios was the first to understand fully what that implied.

“You cannot demand that,” he said.

“I do not demand it,” said Baldwin. “That is why you stand and do not kneel. If you leave, no one will stop you.”

“And if no one accepts?” said Arnau.

“I will look for others. But I will not find better.”

He turned back to the map. He looked at it for a moment.

"I will not see how this ends. Nor will you." A pause. "I do not need brave men. I need continuity."

Silence.

Guilhem was the first to speak. Not with his usual lightness but in another voice, lower, the kind he used when something truly mattered to him.

"My people in the Languedoc have carried their own burden for generations." A pause. "I understand what it is to bear a weight you did not choose but that is yours all the same." He looked at Baldwin. "I accept, Majesty."

Baldwin did not answer. He waited.

Arnau spoke next, in that physician's voice of his, the voice of one who needs the complete diagnosis before touching the patient.

"If something goes wrong on the road, is there anyone else who knows what we carry? Anyone who could continue if we cannot?"

"No," said Baldwin.

"And if the bloodline is broken? If none of our children can, or will, continue?"

"Then the chain breaks. That is why I chose men who understand the value of not breaking it."

Arnau took this in. He looked at his hands for a moment. Then he raised his eyes.

"You can count on me."

Basileios did not speak at once. He was the one who took longest when something mattered to him, because he was the one who understood best what it implied. A generational chain. Children not yet born, bound to something they would not have chosen. Grandchildren. Great-grandchildren. A line stretching toward a future none of them would see.

They all looked at him.

"In Constantinople," he said at last, "I studied texts that spoke of custodians. Of men who carried sacred things for centuries without seeing the end." He paused. "I always thought it was a figure of speech."

"And now?" said Baldwin.

"Now I understand that it was not."

Silence.

"Do you accept?" said Baldwin.

"Yes," said Basileios.

The three looked at Renaud, who had listened to everything without moving, who had the stillness of those who do not need to process aloud because they have already done so alone. He raised his eyes. He said nothing.

That was enough.

Baldwin nodded. He unfastened the brooch of his cloak, which bore an inscription on the inside that none of them managed to read. He laid it on the table.

"I do not give it to you for you to wear it. I give it so that the first of your children to go farther than you yourselves go will know that there was a king who trusted in their lineage before that lineage existed."

Basileios took the brooch. He read the inner inscription with that speed of his that always surprised people. He did not say what it said. He kept it.

"Now," said Baldwin, "Tibaldo will explain to you what you have chosen."

And he left. Alone. Without ceremony. With the step of one who has placed in the hands of others what he cannot carry alone and knows there is nothing more he can do.

Tibaldo had summoned them at dawn.

Guilhem arrived last, his hair not quite combed and an expression suggesting that his relationship with early mornings had been complicated for years… "Was it necessary for it to be at dawn?" he said.

"Yes," said Tibaldo.

"Why?"

"Because men who set out on important missions set out at dawn."

"Why?"

"By tradition."

"And if the tradition is wrong?"

"Guilhem," said Arnau, who had arrived first because Arnau always arrived first and it mildly irritated even him.

"What?"

"Be quiet."

Guilhem fell silent. But he did so with an expression that made it clear he was quiet by his own decision and not out of conviction.

The king's chamber was the same, but with one difference: on the table lay three chests, a roll of papers, a pouch that jingled with coins whenever someone moved near it, and an object that looked like a cylinder of ordinary wood about the length of a forearm.

Baldwin was standing by the window. He looked at them as they came in, with that expression of his that was not exactly joy but that recognized something in the four that had not been there before.

"You have slept," he said.

"Some," said Renaud.

"I have not," said Guilhem.

"So I see," said the king.

"It is dawn, Majesty. It is not my best hour."

"No hour is, for a mission of this nature," said Baldwin. "That is irrelevant."

"With the greatest respect, Majesty, it is not irrelevant when one has to think clearly and—"

"Guilhem," said Renaud.

"What?"

"He is the king."

"What you see here," said Tibaldo, "is everything you carry. Nothing more. Nothing less."

He pointed to the chests.

"Gold. Distributed in three different forms. Coins of various kingdoms so that you may use it without drawing attention, depending on where you are. Uncut stones, which are worth the same as cut ones but do not look like wealth at first glance. And letters of credit with three different merchants in three different cities, which will let you receive funds without carrying the weight."

"Do the merchants know what it is for?" said Arnau.

"The merchants know there is an account and that they must honor it. Nothing more. Merchants who know too much"—Tibaldo paused—"tend to become problems."

"And if the merchants die?" said Renaud.

“Their children inherit the account.”

“And if the children die?”

“There is a system.”

“What system?”

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“A system that works,” said Tibaldo, in the tone of a man who is not going to give more details about it. “Trust that it works.”

Renaud looked at him for a moment.

“Very well,” he said.

Basileios was looking at the roll of papers.

“That?”

“Maps,” said Tibaldo. “Of what we know. Which is not everything that exists, as you are aware.”

“The maps end before Finisterre,” said Basileios.

“Yes.”

“And after Finisterre?”

“After Finisterre, you make them yourselves.”

Basileios nodded as if that were entirely reasonable, which to him it probably was.

Guilhem was staring at the jingling pouch.

“Is that gold too?”

“That,” said Tibaldo, “is for the first expenses. Inns, food, minor bribes.”

“Minor bribes?” said Guilhem.

“There are always minor bribes.”

“And major bribes?”

“That is what the stones are for.”

“What an orderly world,” said Guilhem, with genuine admiration.

It was Guilhem who spoke first, inevitably.

“That’s it?”

“That’s it.”

“That’s what we carry to the end of the world?”

“Yes.”



The Darkness

Buenos Aires

Before anyone named it.

It did not arrive all at once.

Things that have waited a long time do not arrive all at once. They arrive the way cold arrives in autumn: gradually, in layers, so that by the time you notice, you have already been days inside something you could not name.

The first time was in the patio. A sunny afternoon, Sofía preparing mate, Salem in her lap, Orión asleep with his paws in the air. An afternoon with nothing wrong in it. And yet at some point between the third mate and the fourth, the steam from the thermos drew something in the air that was not a vision but a sensation. As if someone had been standing in the patio doorway a second before and had stepped aside just as Sofía looked up.

There was no one there. Naturally.

But the air had that specific density of spaces that have just been emptied.

The second time was at night, with the shop closed and Sofía alone, finishing the inventory count. The lamp in the corner flickered once. Only once. And in that hesitation of light, for less than a second, the shadow of the shelf took a shape that matched none of the pieces on it.

It was not a figure. It was more the suggestion of a figure. The possibility.

The third time was the cold. With no seasonal reason, no draft, no open window. A cold that came from inside things, as if the warmth had decided to absent itself for a moment to see what would happen.

Orión growled that night. A low growl, with no clear direction, the kind dogs make when they sense something that fits none of their known categories. Salem got down from the sofa, walked to the middle of the room, and stared at a point in the air for exactly four minutes. Then he went back to the sofa and curled up as if nothing had happened.

As if nothing had happened was exactly what Sofía told herself all three times.

Steam shows things. The patio has drafts. Lamps flicker. Animals hear sounds humans cannot. Everything had an explanation. Everything did.

But the Darkness did not need to be believed in order to exist. It only needed to be ignored long enough.

And in that, it had all the patience in the world. It had been ignored for a long time. Far longer than anything Sofía could imagine. It was an expert at waiting. It was, in a way, mainly that: a wait that had learned to have a shape of its own.

What it watched from that threshold, which was not exactly the patio doorway nor exactly any physical place, it watched with the attention of one who does not yet need to act.

The Darkness was in no hurry. It never had been. But it was beginning to move.

Summer, Years Ago

It is a sunny afternoon; the neighborhood is like so many in Buenos Aires, with trees shading the street and the rhythm of siesta.

Sofía and Luka are seven years old. They run along the sidewalk, laughing with that free joy of vacation. Their knees are scraped, their clothes loose, their backpacks half open.

“Whose turn is it now?” asks Luka, panting between laughs.

Sofía points to an old house with rusty iron bars.
“That one. It looks haunted.”

“What if a crazy old man comes out?”

“Even better!”

They take off running. Sofía tiptoes up to the doorbell and Luka, behind her, is already ready to flee.

She rings the bell, which echoes imposingly. They laugh. They run. They turn the corner.

But something changes.

A door, farther along, stands ajar. It is not the house where they rang. It is another, older one, with a faded “for rent” sign. A door they should never have noticed.

Sofía stops. So does Luka.
“Did you hear that?”

“No. But that door…”

They go in, out of curiosity, out of play. A smell of damp, dimness compared with the light outside; their eyes take a moment to adjust. And then they see it.

A chessboard scattered across the floor. A fallen figure. A dark stain beside an outstretched hand. And a strange thermos, tipped over, as if forgotten. Luka cannot speak. Neither can Sofía.

In the darkest corner, Vlad was curling in on himself. The body he had stumbled over on coming in was still warm. Now, mute with fear, he watched the other two frozen before something none of them understood.

The scene shatters with a noise outside. A distant shout. The children flee without looking back. In a building across the street, from a window, a little girl of five sees everything with round eyes.

None of them speaks of what they saw. Not that afternoon. Not that year.

The crime remains like a shadow. The thermos, forgotten. And their lives are tied together in silence, by a game that began with laughter and ended in a wound.

The Shop. Tablero 13

The clock was biding its time to become the protagonist, in a corner of the chess shop. At the precise moment the pieces would no longer be its surroundings; they would become its instrument.

In a neighborhood of Buenos Aires there is an unusual place. A fantasy space for those who love ***the game***.

The front of the shop, chessboards and pieces in a variety of styles and materials, gives us a clue: here is something different.

In a surprisingly bright space, a mix of classicism and madness, pieces displayed on little tables with gears, metal details, an abundance of copper-colored piping and a faded scent of Cape jasmine.

Sofía Castillo was arranging the fresh flowers on the counter, making the gears of her leather vest chime with every movement. The clatter of her lace-up boots echoed on the floor of the old casa chorizo.

The shop’s owner, a woman in her thirties who crowns her one-meter-seventy frame with a mass of chestnut hair. Her green eyes echo her perpetual good humor. She looks after her shop with tenderness, knowing herself the possessor of a treasure.

Sofía headed straight for the patio with the thermos under her arm, the mate, and a plate of cookies balanced on top, when something struck her legs, forcing her to juggle so as not to crash to the floor.

"Good grief... you big brute!" she exclaimed, as a giant with amused eyes wagged his tail happily, wearing an innocent face. Orión (a bobtail, yes, with a tail) had beaten her to the patio. The two found their places, the dog clearly awaiting his cookie; Sofía, besides the human kind, always kept one suitable for him at hand.

With a sigh and the sound of a dog chewing in the background, the first mate was prepared. Her black cat, Salem, leapt into her lap.

The thin steam from the thermos drifted toward the fountain, turning it into the stage of a game. *The eternal game...*

The space was strange and vast, a rocky, desolate place. In the center, a board with pieces of dazzling whiteness and a black that seemed to swallow the light. Two figures facing each other: the archangel Uriel and a reddish demon.

"A game," said the demon, sliding a sharp finger across the board, "if you win, the soul is yours. If you lose... well, you know where it will go."

The archangel gleamed, and with an impassive gaze contemplated what was only a game. Above the board floated the soul of a young man, caught between heaven and hell.

"I will play," answered Uriel, moving his white pawn, "but not for victory, but for mercy."

The demon smiled, showing sharp fangs. He advanced his black knight with a sharp rap. "Mercy is only another word for weakness."

The moves followed quickly, precisely. The angel sacrificed a bishop to save a rook; the demon swept away the pawns, laughing each time a white piece fell.

"See?" he murmured, leaning in. "The world is like this: weakness, one error leading to another, loss... and in the end, everyone falls."

Uriel did not answer. On the next move he gave up his queen. The demon burst into laughter.

"Celestial blunder! Now nothing protects your king!" The demon burst into laughter, making the desolate rocks vibrate. His clawed hand pointed at the white monarch, savoring the triumph. "You have fallen."

Uriel did not flinch. The silence crushed the echo of the laughter. Slowly, the angel raised his hand... and moved his rook. *Checkmate.*

The demon stood motionless; he had been tricked. The archangel had sacrificed his pieces to win the only thing that mattered.

"Love does not count its losses," he said, lifting the young man's soul, which at his touch shone like a star. "It only redeems."

The demon's roar of fury was heard; in a tornado of shadows he was gone.

The board stood out against the landscape a moment longer, and vanished. The light had prevailed... for now.

As the image faded, Sofía thought: thank goodness I live alone, or they would be carting me off to the psychiatric ward.

The Reunion and the Accounting System

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Sofía would be surprised that day. The shop had just opened, a scent of jasmine hinted in the air, the thermos had not yet shown its eccentricities, and the sun filtered its light through the turquoise blinds.

Luka Filippi walked in as if no time had passed, his backpack slung from one shoulder and his smile intact. He kept his tanned, wheat-colored complexion and an athletic bearing, a living contradiction for his profession as a computer scientist. His dark eyes, brimming with light, took in the place; his casual clothes, jeans, T-shirt and sneakers, accentuated his youthful look.

"Do you remember me, or do I have to introduce myself again?" he joked, while Sofía blinked, processing the leap from past to present.

He had come to visit years earlier, when they were barely children. Afterward, life. Tucumán, family, studies... but now he was in Buenos Aires, with remote work and a wish to settle. And he had heard rumors of a strange shop, a kind of temple of chess run by someone with her name.

"I didn't know you'd become a businesswoman," he said, looking around with curiosity. "And how do you keep the books?"

Sofía sighed with a mix of resignation and pride.

"The old-fashioned way... notebooks, pencil, a bit of Excel and a lot of improvisation. Why?"

Luka did not answer right away. He sat in one of the armchairs at the back, took out his laptop and, while they talked about mate, childhood and games that never got finished, began to design something. A simple, intuitive but powerful system. A personalized accounting assistant for Tablero 13.

"Look, with this you can record income, sales by type of set, online orders... and I'll alert you if you're forgetting to charge for shipping. I built it with a clean interface. Even Salem could use it if he had thumbs."

Sofía laughed. It was not just the system; it was the way. Luka had that manner of coming back without asking permission, as if he had never left.

"Let me see, show me," she said, moving closer to the laptop while stroking the cat in her lap.

Luka pressed the *Enter* key to start the program. The screen flickered for a second and the code ran without errors. But the calm did not last.

In the upper right corner of the interface, the system's digital clock began to blink a bright red. The numbers went wild. Instead of showing six in the evening of that spring day, the seconds counter began to race at full speed, but in reverse.

"Huh, that's weird..." Luka murmured, tapping a couple of keys. "The time server is configured fine. It must be a processor *bug*."

He tried to restart the application, but the screen froze. The digital clock's numbers stopped dead at one exact time: **13:13**.

"Hey, Sofi, you've gone pale," said Luka, tearing his eyes from the screen frozen at 13:13. "What's going on with that clock?"

Sofía could not stop staring at the clock, its hands turning backward. The chill at the back of her neck spread down her arms. She shifted her gaze to the counter, where the checkerboard-patterned metal thermos rested in silence.

"It's not just the clock, Luka," Sofía whispered, her voice a little broken. "It's how that thermos got here."

Luka frowned, looking at the object.

"A man came in. Calm-looking, quiet. He sat in that corner over there and asked for a collector's book. He stayed for hours looking at it. He asked me for hot water and took out that thermos."

Luka paid attention, tuning in to the seriousness of his friend.

"And?"

"And he left without even saying goodbye. He left the thermos on the table. When I realized, I ran out to the sidewalk, but the street was deserted; I asked the guy at the kiosk on the corner... No one saw him come in. No one saw him leave. It's as if he vanished."

Luka looked at the thermos with distrust.

"And why do you use it?"

"At first I kept it in case he came back. But I got curious and started using it for mate."

After several hours of conversation, Sofía walked Luka to the bus stop to chat a little longer.

In the shop, the checkerboard thermos began to vibrate on the counter. The backward ticking of the wall clock sped up and a dense white steam burst from the metal spout, spreading. The scent of jasmine was replaced by the smell of leather, dung and wet stone.

Through the mist of the steam, the walls of Boedo were transformed into the walls of a palace in Jerusalem...

The counselor watched in silence as the four young men finished adjusting the cinches in the inner courtyard. They had exchanged their noble tunics for plain traveling clothes, without shields, without court colors and without any insignia to identify them.

And yet, behind them, there was a small problem.

"Allow me to understand this," said the old man, rubbing his temples. "You intend to travel incognito?"

"Exactly," answered Guilhem with a smile.

"And you will take those horses?"

The four nodded.

The counselor looked first at Basileios's enormous Lombard, at Arnau's elegant Barb, at Guilhem's swift Arabian. And finally at the imposing black war destrier ridden by Renaud.

"It is like trying to hide four bells inside a library."

"They are not that conspicuous," protested Guilhem.

The old man looked at him.

"Young man, that horse is worth more than my house."

"Well... seen that way..."

Basileios crossed his arms.

"We cannot leave them behind."

"Why not?"

"Because they are our companions."

The counselor sighed.

"That is a sentimental answer. I need a practical one."

"They are also smarter than some soldiers," added Renaud.

"That does not help either."

Arnau stroked his mount's neck.

“His Majesty entrusted us with a mission, but these animals have been with us for years. They know us, they protect us, and they have shared battles.”

“Besides,” said Guilhem, “if four travelers appear on foot, anyone will be suspicious.”

“And four travelers mounted on the finest horses in the kingdom will not?”

There was an uncomfortable silence.

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“He has a point,” admitted Guilhem.

The counselor began to walk around the animals.

“Let me see if I understand. You wish to pass unnoticed.”

“Yes.”

“Without escort.”

“Yes.”

“Without banners.”

“Yes.”

“But accompanied by four horses capable of drawing the attention of half a continent.”

“That would be an exaggerated description,” said Arnau.

At that moment the Barb raised its head proudly and whinnied as if announcing the arrival of an emperor.

The counselor closed his eyes.

“Of course.”

Basileios tried to keep a straight face.

“We can dirty the saddles.”

“And will you also hide the way those animals walk?”

No one answered. At last the old man let out a small laugh.

“Very well. Take them.”

The four looked at one another, surprised.

"Just like that?" asked Guilhem.

"No. Because I have understood something."

"What?"

The counselor observed the horses.

"Even if I forced them to stay, they would end up escaping and following you."

The four exchanged glances. The truth was that this was probably exactly what would happen.

The old man smiled with understanding.

"Some men serve a king out of duty. Others out of loyalty. Those animals follow you by choice. I do not intend to argue with so ancient a loyalty."

Then he opened the gate for them.

"Go. And try not to draw attention."

The horses moved off with the elegance of a royal procession. The counselor watched them go and murmured to himself:

"A magnificent piece of counsel, mine… sending four unforgettable knights out incognito. I hope His Majesty never asks me how I allowed this."

The Embarkation

Acre. Harbor. Dawn.

The harbor of Acre at that hour neither slept nor woke. It was the in-between moment when those arriving and those departing crossed without looking at one another, each with his own weight upon him and no interest in anyone else's.

The four arrived at the dock separately, as agreed.

The horses would board by the cargo ramp. They were already in the hold when Basileios arrived last, bag on his shoulder and that pace of his that did not change with urgency, because Basileios did not recognize urgency as a valid category.

"Any trouble?" said Arnau in a low voice.

"None." A pause. "They followed us from the spice market to the tanner's street. I lost them in the alley behind the synagogue."

“How many?”

“Two. No visible weapons. They only watched.”

Renaud heard this without moving. He looked at the ship. He looked at the dock. He looked at the city beginning to light up behind them.

“Then they already know we are leaving.”

“They know we are departing. They do not know where to.”

“Did no one see the destination in the papers?”

“The papers say Genoa,” said Arnau. “Genoa is almost true. What comes after is in no paper.”

Guilhem looked at the horizon with that expression of his of one calculating something that is not mathematics.

They embarked while the light was still gray. The amphora lay at the bottom of Arnau’s bag, wrapped in linen cloth, beneath the medical instruments. No one named it. No one looked at it.

When the coast of Acre began to shrink, they were on deck. The wind brought salt and the particular smell of open sea, which is not the smell of harbor sea.

Guilhem was the first to speak.

“Well,” he said. “There is no turning back now.”

“There was no turning back from the moment we accepted,” said Renaud.

Basileios watched the city recede. He had lived in Constantinople, had crossed the Mediterranean twice, had studied in monasteries where the books were older than the buildings that held them. But something in that moment, in that shrinking coast, had a different weight.

It was the first time he had set out without knowing when he would return.

Without knowing whether he would return.

Without knowing whether that mattered.

“Are you well?” said Arnau, beside him.

“I am thinking.”

“About what?”

Basileios took a while to answer.

“That Baldwin chose us because we have nothing that binds us.” A pause. “And that until now I had not fully understood what that meant.”

Arnau looked at the coast. It was only a line on the horizon now.

“And now?”

“Now I understand.”

The ship creaked. The wind changed direction. In the hold, in the dark silence of the cargo, the four horses shifted slightly, adjusting to the new balance of the sea.

And the amphora, at the bottom of Arnau's bag, gave off the briefest thread of steam it had given off since they left Tibaldo's chamber.

Almost nothing.

Enough for Arnau to feel it through the cloth, that cold. That cold that predates all known cold.

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He said nothing. He rested his hand on the bag for a second. Withdrew it.

The ship held its course northward.

Acre disappeared.



The Librarian

Buenos Aires. Tablero 13.

The afternoon light came into Tablero 13, falling on the tables with the even luminosity of a gray day.

On one of them, the chessboard presided over the space with military neatness; each wooden piece rested on its square like a soldier who has waited too long for the order to attack.

Luka occupied his space with the ease of the master of the house, with a natural arrogance.

The door creaked and Vlad crossed the threshold. His eyes scanned the perimeter at once, precise, not lingering on the decorative details, until they fixed on Luka. He walked toward him and dropped his backpack beside the empty chair, a curt gesture that dispensed with any courtesy or request for permission.

"That seat is taken," Luka said, his eyes fixed on the symmetry of his pawns, denying him even a glance of greeting.

Vlad measured the emptiness around them. A desert of vacant tables.

"I didn't see any sign," he replied, in a voice stripped of weight but firm.

"You don't need one."

Silence fell between them like a block of cement. Vlad did not move, but neither did he take a single step back. He stayed there, planted, inhabiting the space Luka meant to deny him.

“I can wait,” said Vlad.

Luka raised his eyes. He scanned him from head to foot, searching for the crack, the nerve, the trace of doubt. He found nothing. After a second of calculation, he pushed the board to the exact center of the wood. The gesture was a mute lash of the whip: sit.

“Board’s free,” Luka remarked, drawing a smile with the edge of a razor. “But I’m warning you: here nobody resigns before checkmate.”

“Neither do I.”

Vlad sat down, fitting his body to the geometry of the corner. From the counter, Sofía watched them with the attention of one anticipating the first spark of a short circuit.

“By the way… I’m Sofía. The one with the unfriendly face is the challenger, Luka. And you…?”

Vlad stood up. The chair slid back only slightly, cleanly. Unhurried, without ceremony, as if standing were the most natural thing in the world.

“Vlad Markov.”

A brief silence. Luka did not rise. He watched the scene with the look of someone seeing something that bothers him without being able to say quite why.

“You don’t need to stand here,” he said dryly.

Vlad looked at him for a moment. Without confrontation. Then he sat down again, slowly.

“It’s a custom.”

Luka murmured low, almost to the board:

“You’ll get over it.”

Sofía answered kindly, briefly, closing the crack before it could open wider.

“Welcome.”

She nodded. Went back to the counter. She did not look at either of them.

“White,” Luka decreed.

“Black,” Vlad countered, reaching for a piece.

“You don’t get to choose,” Luka cut in.

The air tightened another millimeter. Vlad held the gaze for a full heartbeat and, instead of taking the bait of the provocation, yielded with an almost exasperating calm. There was no submission in his gesture; only the unhurried manner of one who knows that the order of the factors will not alter the other man’s shipwreck.

“Fine.”

Luka opened the game. The impact of his first pawn against the wood resounded in the shop like a dry gunshot. It was not a move; it was a declaration of war.

Vlad lowered his eyes to the wooden map. He took his time, breathing the rhythm of the place, disarming his opponent's haste with sheer inertia.

"Don't take forever," Luka pressed, drumming his fingers, visibly irritated by the other's stillness.

"I don't rush the first moves," Vlad answered, without raising his head.

"I thought you'd play faster."

"I don't like making mistakes."

Luka let out a short laugh, tinged with contempt.

"It's chess. If you don't want to make mistakes... don't play."

Then Vlad lifted his eyes from the board. There was no crude defiance in his expression, nor fear, only a clean, fixed gaze of surgical intensity that laid bare Luka's intentions.

"I play anyway."

Luka's response was physical: he struck the table with his knuckles, making the light pieces tremble.

"If you're going to play like that, put up with it."

"That is what I do," Vlad declared, restoring peace to the room with his monotone.

"Try not to scratch the table, please," Sofía's voice intervened from the counter, floating over the tension like a reminder that the real world was still going on outside that table.

"Yes," the two answered in unison, a mechanical reflex that sprang from their mouths without either taking his eyes off the other. Nobody smiled.

The game gathered speed, but unevenly. On one side of the board, Luka's fingers moved with an electric, almost spasmodic aggression; on the other, Vlad's hands moved with the fluid slowness of heavy water. That asymmetry, that clash of frequencies, began to wear on Luka's nerves faster than any bad position.

"And what do you do," Luka blurted after a bold move, "when you're not humiliating strangers?"

"Librarian."

The fact hung in the air. Luka stopped his fingers and looked up, arching an eyebrow in genuine amusement, though the edge in his eyes remained intact.

"And what do you do there? Make sure nobody steals 'Little Red Riding Hood'?"

"I classify archives. Manuscripts. Inventories of collections."

"So... you're a dust ninja."

Vlad stretched out his fingers and moved a knight. The dull clack of wood against the table made Luka lower his eyes sharply. The geometry of the game had changed in the blink of an eye. Something in the new arrangement forced him to recalculate, to hold his breath.

“Silence is only strategy,” said Vlad, his gaze lost in the map of sixty-four squares. “Like check.”

Luka took a second too long to find a retort. That gap, that slightest thousandth of doubt, was all Vlad needed to know the blow had landed.

“Touché, librarian,” Luka conceded, savoring the bitter taste of forced respect.

The atmosphere grew dense, almost physical, as if the walls had shrunk. Outside, the afternoon was sliding into storm: the ghostly reflection of lightning crossed the shop window, lighting their concentrated faces for an instant. The thunder, dull and distant, had not yet arrived.

“Tell me something…” Luka murmured, caught by the fixity of his rival. “You always look like that. As if you knew something the rest don’t.”

“Sometimes it’s the other way around. The rest know too much and prefer to forget it.”

Luka twisted his mouth into a sharp grimace.

“Ah. A philosopher, our boy. He must come with his own instruction manual.”

“Manuals are for those who believe everything can be fixed.”

The silence that followed was different; it was no longer one of confrontation, but of astonishment. Luka looked at him steadily, finally shedding the mask of mockery. For the first time, he gauged the real danger sitting in front of him. This man was not playing to win; he was playing by other rules that Luka had not yet deciphered.

“And you don’t.” A pause. “So… what are you doing here? It doesn’t seem like your kind of place.”

Vlad raised his eyes barely a millimeter, a fleeting flash.

“I work where I can read without being interrupted. That is rare.”

His fingers pushed a rook.

Luka watched the move. Looked at Vlad. Went back to the wood. The noose was closing around his king; the position was untenable and the board no longer lied. Luka’s silence was, this time, his only and most honest answer.

From the distance of the counter, Sofía contemplated the mute duel of words. She rested a pen on a notepad, wrote a quick line, crossed it out savagely until the paper tore, and began again.

“Where did this guy come from?” she whispered to herself, her gaze lost on the motionless silhouette of the librarian.

Vlad raised his eyes from Luka’s cornered king. He let his gaze wander over the shop—like one who has already considered the matter closed—and then his eyes stumbled upon the object that had made him walk into the shop without hesitation. It was a thermos with a checkerboard design and inlaid chess pieces, plus a clock on the side, resting beside a matching mate. He observed it with a strange, silent fixity. In his archivist’s mind, the pieces

fell into place with a brutal irony: Sofía, standing beside her notes, guarding an unremarkable-looking object in an exposed corner, identical to the ash-gray mule that once carried a sacred secret across the bridges of Liguria without understanding the weight of what it bore.

"That object... shouldn't be so exposed," Vlad murmured, almost voiceless, as if speaking to himself.

Sofía looked up from the counter, bewildered.

"Sorry?"

Vlad blinked. He dissolved the anachronism in his mind and recovered his neutral expression to close the crack before they could doubt his sanity.

"Nothing. Just... it looks important."

A second of dense silence. Luka broke it like someone opening a window.

"If you want to drink mate, there's another, newer thermos."

"Calm and tranquility," Sofía intervened, recovering her tone. "There's room here for hackers and scholars"—she smiled—"alongside an ingenious mate maker. In peace. All of us."

She laughed. The atmosphere eased slightly. The steam from the thermos rose slowly. At first it looked like condensation. Ordinary steam against the light; then not.

The shapes organized themselves, without anyone summoning them: three children on a street that no longer exists. Long shadows. And in the background, almost out of frame, a body on the ground.

Sofía grew serious. Luka said nothing. Vlad was utterly motionless. His eyes fixed on what the steam was showing.

"It can't be..." he murmured. And then, lower still, as if saying it inward and not to them: "They didn't see me. They never knew I was there."

Just the Two of Them.

Buenos Aires. Tablero 13. Three days later.

The door closed behind Sofía with a faint click and the shop was submerged in that specific silence of spaces when the person who organizes them has just left.

Vlad was still standing by the counter, motionless as a statue. From the other side, Luka looked up from his laptop, holding his gaze with a rigid jaw; he still found it hard to swallow that this man kept turning up at the shop every few minutes, inhabiting the corners so naturally.

"Well, the lightning rod's gone," said Luka, slamming the laptop shut. "Are you going to keep staring at me with that poker face, or will you deign to sit down and lose a game?"

Vlad did not answer. At that exact moment Salem, the cat, stretched out a paw from the top shelf and, with the surgical precision of one who does it on purpose, pushed over the chess rook that presided over the table. The thud of wood against the floor rang loudly in the emptiness of the shop.

"Perfect. It's begun," Luka muttered.

Vlad bent down and picked up the piece without hurry. From on high, Salem watched him with that look of absolute superiority felines have when they have just proven something irrefutable.

"Ready to lose in style?" Luka provoked, setting the rook back on its square.

"Styles change. Defeats teach," Vlad replied, taking his seat.

The chess clock marked the start with a metallic click. The game began.

"You're too calculating," said Luka, moving his pieces with the electric impulsiveness of one who blindly trusts his instinct. "You lack heart."

"And you have too much impulse. The board does not forgive that."

Salem leapt to the edge of the table and studied the layout with that mathematical concentration that makes people wonder whether cats understand chess or merely pretend to, to cause discomfort. From his corner, Orión, the dog, half-closed his eyes, oblivious to the duel.

On the board, Vlad slid his bishop to a peripheral square, a silent move that seemed to threaten no one. Luka leaned over the wood, searching for the counterattack line, but suddenly froze. He looked at his white king, examined the lines of defense and felt a dull blow in his stomach. He was boxed in, suffocated with no way out.

"How...? I didn't even see that line coming," Luka muttered, frustration coloring his cheeks.

"It isn't speed," said Vlad, withdrawing his fingers from the piece. "It's memory. It's an opening from the twelfth century."

Luka observed the sixty-four squares with the expression of one processing a defeat that has not quite finished happening. Then something changed in his face. The tension eased and he leaned forward, resting his elbows on the table.

"You know Sofía left us here on purpose, right? So we'd put up with each other for a while."

"I know," said Vlad. "But this place is strange. It smells of wood, of metal. And of trust."

Luka looked at him steadily. It was the kind of disarmed sentence Vlad did not usually let fall.

"My grandmother used to say that if a cat stays, the place is yours," Luka remarked, searching for common ground.

"Mine said the same. But with dogs."

Salem and Orión looked at each other from their respective positions with the polite disdain of two animals who have coexisted for years without the slightest need to be friends.

"Then we're approved by both species," Luka concluded, with a half smile.

Vlad picked up a captured piece. Something in his expression softened, shedding his usual rigidity for an instant.

"And that is already quite a lot."

They kept playing. They did not speak for a long while, but the silence that settled over Tablero 13 was no longer the one Sofía had left behind when she went. It had another weight. More comfortable. More honest.

The Three Houses. That Night.

Vlad entered his house. He hung his raincoat on the coat rack and the silence received him as the only inhabitant of the place. The millimetric order of the space was not comfort; it was the discipline of someone who has made method his way of inhabiting the world.

He went to the library. He ran a fingertip along the worn spine of a volume without taking it out. On the table sat an empty cup, one of those he used with his grandmother on days of tea and shared silences. He looked at it for a long moment. Then he opened his notebook of games, but this time he noted no moves or opening variations. With quick strokes, guided by memory, he drew the interior of Tablero 13: the lines of the counter, the curve of the shelf, the geometry of the tables. A map he needed to put in safekeeping.

In the margin of the paper he wrote in neat calligraphy: Life can be heard there. He did not underline it. The weight of the words did not need it.

At the other end of the city, Luka's room smelled of the neighbor's tomato sauce and damp cables. The bed remained unmade, socks hung from a lamp and a chair wobbled in a corner. He turned on the computer with the automatism of one who seeks noise to beat loneliness before deciding what he wants to do.

He searched the hard drive for a photo he had taken without permission a few days earlier: Salem curled up on the counter, Orión asleep in the background and Sofía, at the farthest angle of the frame, pouring an out-of-focus mate. He looked at it a while, suspended in the image. Then he opened a new browser tab and typed in the search bar: Rental with patio near Boedo or surrounding area.

In a low voice, to no one, he murmured:

"There are places where mate tastes like something more."

Sofía turned off the light in the main room, but did not go up to her bedroom right away. She stayed leaning against the counter, holding in her hands a cup of tea that had already gone

cold. Salem slept peacefully on an open book with yellowing pages; Orión breathed heavily, stretched out by the front door.

In the midst of that absolute stillness, a thought brushed her without her having sought it: I am the queen of this place. She did not think it with haughtiness, nor even with a full awareness of power. It was barely a physical certainty, the intuition that the whole board turned with her at the center and that her knights, almost unwillingly, had settled around her to guard the flanks.

Vlad with his protective silence, inheritance of ancient archives. Luka with his bright energy and sharp logic. There was no romance, no words were needed. It was only a new and strange comfort, as if the world had at last settled into its proper square.



Genoa

Ligurian Sea, 1180. Night.

The cold of the Ligurian Sea cut off their breath as soon as they threw themselves into the water from the side openings of the tarida. The maneuver was fast, almost criminal. The Genoese captain, whose silence had been bought by the crown of Jerusalem at an astronomical price, did not wait for them to reach land; he turned the tarida in the blackness of night to avoid the customs officers and spies of the main port. He knew that if the secret leaked, he would lose his life and his commercial license in the Republic.

They reached the almost deserted beach of Sestri Ponente in the dark, leading the horses by the reins. The animals, accustomed to the discipline of war, had waterproof skins of provisions tied to their saddles. A black cat balanced on the destrier.

At dawn, the urgency changed shape. They needed to pass unnoticed inland.

"Let me do the talking," said Guilhem, wringing out his soaked tunic as they approached a country inn at Pegli. "If they see Renaud negotiate, they'll think we're an advance guard of the emperor and call the constables."

The Occitan loosened his shoulders and adopted the rustic accent of the cloth dealers of the north. Minutes later, he came back dragging an ash-colored mule.

The local farmer was still laughing in the distance in the yard, stroking the plain silver coins Guilhem had given him, happy to have rid himself of a curse.

The mule was already living up to her reputation. She carried on her back a ragged, dirty blanket, under which various valuables lay hidden. As if she knew what she carried, she

planted herself every fifty paces to nibble the wild fennel shoots along the road. The disaster came kilometers later, on the stone bridge that crossed the river.

The column advanced as a king's guard ought to advance: with the weight of one who need not announce himself. First the destrier, dark and massive as a wall on legs, whose mere presence made the peasants move to the edges of the road without anyone asking them to. Behind, the Arabian and the Barb, light and nervous like two nobles at someone else's funeral. After them, closing the line, the Lombard, noble even in boredom. And last, the mule.

The problem became visible when the column reached the narrow bridge. The horses crossed it without drama: the destrier first, crushing the planks with the indifference of power, and the rest behind in order.

Halfway across the narrow passage, the mule stopped dead. She flattened her ears and dug her hooves into the ground.

"Come on, you cursed creature," Renaud whispered, pulling the rope until his hands turned red. The mule did not even blink.

Behind them, a line of vegetable carts, local merchants and peasants laden with firewood began to halt. The passage was completely blocked.

"Hey, strangers! Move that piece of junk!" shouted a man from a cart, cracking a whip. "We have to get to market!"

No one in the line said it aloud yet, but everyone thought it at the same moment: that man has a smith's shoulders and hands that have held swords, and yet he walks behind an animal carrying frying pans.

No one answered him. Everyone watched.

The mule did not back away. She did not fret. She simply stopped, with the quiet determination of one who has reached a philosophical decision and is not prepared to debate it.

Renaud—red-haired, with the build of someone who had spent the last five years bearing armor—pulled on the rope. The mule did not flinch. He spoke to her. He begged her. He explained to her, in the tone of one accustomed to being obeyed, that the bridge was perfectly safe.

"Look at that one," murmured the cloth merchant, with the careful respect of one calculating exactly how much he can risk. "Walks like he owns the duchy… but can't convince a three-coin mule."

The mule looked at him.

Then Renaud drew breath, stood straight, and in the voice used to order cavalry charges, roared:

"Move te, fiera obstinata! Per deos!"

The silence that followed was almost reverent.

Then, from somewhere in the line of peasants that had been building up behind, a voice:

"Don't speak Latin to her, sir, she's a village mule and never went to church! Shout at her like regular folk!"

The laughter was discreet at first. Then it stopped being so.

Renaud turned red. Not the soft red of embarrassment, but the deep, even red of someone simultaneously processing humiliation and the need not to kill anyone. He swallowed. He looked at the line. He looked at the mule.

In a voice that sounded like a man learning a foreign language in real time, he tried:

"Come on… filthy beast! Walk, by the beard of… the neighbor lady!"

The peasants split their sides laughing.

It was then that the old man stepped forward. Perhaps a miller, perhaps a muleteer; the sort of man who is always in a hurry without it showing on his face, who has seen more mules than years. He sidestepped the animal's flank with the casual grace of one who has done it a thousand times and looked at the redhead with something that was not exactly pity, but resembled it.

"Lad," he said, in a Provençal accent that made every word sound like a verdict, "you'll end up breaking the beast's neck or bursting yourself. The mule isn't afraid of the bridge. She's afraid of what she sees at the end. Cover her eyes and trick her with her stomach."

He tossed something from his satchel. A wild apple, small, bruised. And he pointed at the traveler's cloak.

The elite guardsman of Baldwin IV, a man trained in high military strategy, a member of a column that had crossed deserts and survived ambushes, looked at the apple.

He looked at the cloak. He looked at the mule. He took off the cloak.

With slow and very careful movements—the same he would use to disarm a trap—he draped it over the animal's ears and eyes. The mule, suddenly deprived of the outside world and all its dangers, stopped tensing her legs. The universe had disappeared. She was fine.

Renaud held the apple under the covered muzzle. The mule stretched her neck. Took a step.

And so began the most dignified and undignified procession the bridge had seen in years: the imposing Renaud crossing backward, back first, with an apple in one hand and a blind mule in the other, step by step, glancing sideways at the peasants who were watching him.

The applause began slowly. Then someone cheered. Then everyone.

The mule crossed the bridge without any trouble. Renaud did not look at anyone again until he was on the other side. Guilhem doubled over in the saddle with laughter, which made his sensitive horse begin to sidestep elegantly, growing nervous at his owner's spasms.

"Move along, muleteer," Basileios murmured to Renaud as he passed, before the peasants' mood could change.

They had not gone ten paces beyond the bridge when the metallic sound of spurs and the clash of mail froze them. A patrol of the guard of the Republic of Genoa, in white tabards with crossbows on their shoulders, emerged from the bend in the road.

The peasants' laughter was cut off short. By pure military instinct, Renaud, Basileios, Arnau and Guilhem straightened their backs in unison, adopting the posture of men accustomed to giving orders. Realizing the terrible mistake, they tried to stoop to look like mere merchants, but the movement was so clumsy that they ended up looking like men suffering a sudden pain in the small of the back.

The patrol captain raised his hand, halting his men. His eyes swept the group with distrust. He dismounted unhurriedly and began to circle Guilhem's Arabian and Arnau's Barb with narrowed eyes. He stroked the Arabian's rump, gauging its bearing. Before Renaud—still red with fury—could make things worse, Guilhem stepped forward and took the floor.

"Greetings, gentlemen of the watch," he said, forcing an amiable smile. "We are only humble horse traders... livestock dealers, yes. We are taking these animals north, to the stable of the Baron of Montferrat. A great lord, as you will know."

At the baron's name, something in the captain's face changed. Not much. Enough.

"Dealers, with animals like these?" he asked, in an icy voice. "I have seen royal tournaments with worse mounts."

Guilhem opened his hands with calculated modesty and did not answer. He let the silence do its work.

The captain kept looking. His men waited behind, motionless. Then, without anyone deciding it aloud, Guilhem lowered his eyes to the officer's boots.

Good boots, too good for the pay of a patrol captain. And the tabard, though white and regulation, bore on its hem a stain of reddish mud found only on the roads that descend toward the old port: the district the Republic of Genoa officially had not patrolled for three years, ever since the agreements with certain shipowners had made it convenient to look the other way.

The captain saw that Guilhem was looking at the boots. Guilhem saw that the captain had seen it. Neither of them said anything.

Renaud, seeing a chance to save his hide and at the same time avenge his humiliation, pointed at the mule with a resentment so real that he did not need to act:

"We spent every last coin of our travel money on them, my lord!" he exclaimed. "The baron's cook demanded a pack mule for his pots... and this spawn of the devil is costing us our sanity! Thanks to the damned creature we nearly wrecked the bridge back there. Look at her."

The guards looked at the mule. The animal chose that exact moment to shake her head, leaving the sack of bundles tilted halfway over her eyes, with a sour expression that would intimidate a wolf.

The captain observed the animal's ragged silhouette and the genuine desperation on Renaud's face. Then he looked at Guilhem again, barely an instant. A fraction of a second in which two men who know nothing of each other communicate with the precision of those who have spent years practicing the art of not knowing too much.

"Move along, horse dealers," said the captain, settling his reins. "And good luck with the donkey. The road north is full of mud."

The patrol spurred their horses and rode off at a trot toward the south.

The four knights waited in silence, motionless, until the dust of the road settled and the soldiers vanished behind the hill.

Basileios was the first to speak, very low:

"What just happened?"

"That we are not the only ones with something to hide on this road," Guilhem answered, without turning. "Move on."

Renaud did not answer. He went to the mule, roughly adjusted her load and muttered through his teeth:

"Walk, beast. Before I remember that I know how to use a sword."



Stormy Night

Buenos Aires. Tablero 13. Night.

The rain beat on the big windows with an insistence that no longer seemed meteorological but personal. All of Buenos Aires had decided to get wet, and Tablero 13 was the last warm refuge for several blocks around.

Luka had tried twice. The first time he stuck his head out the door and the rain soaked his face before he could form an opinion. The second time he got as far as the sidewalk and was back in three seconds, his jacket dripping and the expression of someone who has just received information he did not ask for.

"This is never going to stop," he said, shaking himself like Orión after a bath.

Sofía did not look up from what she was writing in her notebook.

"Nobody's going out. It's dangerous."

At that exact moment the sky produced an enormous flash of lightning. The thunder that followed shook the windowpanes with a seriousness that admitted no argument, and the light of the entire neighborhood went out at once.

Darkness. The kind of total darkness that the city hardly produces anymore, that makes the eyes search for something to hold on to and find nothing. Sofía's voice came from where she had been a second before, completely calm.

"As my grandmother used to say: if you know where you put things, you'll find them in the dark. Come into the kitchen."

And she found the candles exactly where her grandmother had taught her they should be kept. Three flames in the kitchen. Three faces lit from below with that ancient light that makes people look like characters from something older than themselves. The smell of wax mingled with the smell of wet earth coming through the cracks of the window.

Salem appeared out of nowhere and settled among the three with the authority of one who does not need to be invited. Orión curled up by Sofía's feet. Outside, the storm went on without apology.

"On nights like this," said Luka, with the specific energy of someone who has just had an idea he thinks is brilliant, "back home we used to tell each other horror stories. To see who could scare the most."

Vlad looked at him with the expression of one evaluating whether an idea is bad or merely ill-timed.

"I'm not very fond of that," he said. "We could suggest ourselves into something."

"What is life without excitement?" replied Luka. "I'll start. What happened to my grandmother in her village."

Luka's grandmother was seven years old when it happened, in a country town that is now a city, sometime around 1950. Another era. Another world. Her father sent her out to run errands at night, which was something you could do then because darkness did not weigh as much as it does now, or because people were less afraid, or because errands simply did not wait.

A full-moon night. Everything was visible. Seven blocks to the general store, a field beside the road where at the far end of the land stood a *solitary* tree. Halfway along, the sound began.

Ting-a-ling, ting-a-ling.

Like small bells or calf cowbells. Faint at first, clearer as she advanced. The girl expected to see the animal at any moment, behind the next bend, beneath the foliage, somewhere that made sense. She reached the tree. The sound was at its loudest. And beside the trunk there was no calf.

There was a small being. A big hat. Colors that did not belong to that field or that night. An outstretched hand offering sweets and a voice calling her by name with a familiarity it had no right to have.

The girl backed away slowly. She turned around. She began to walk back. And the ting-a-ling, ting-a-ling followed her.

Panic has its own laws of motion. She never quite knew when she ran or how she got there, but she got to the house. Her father saw her coming from far off; the way she ran, her face distorted, something that was not simply fear but something older. He went out to meet her. He embraced her, covering her face with one hand while with the other he gave a curt order to whoever was inside: put out the lights.

They stayed in the dark until she calmed down. Neighbors arrived, alarmed by the way they had seen her pass. When she could speak, she told it. Her father listened without interrupting. Over the years she learned that in that area there were old tales of the goblin's apparitions, that some muleteers had been hurt, and that the country people avoided that stretch once dusk began. No one said so aloud during the day, but everyone knew it at night.

Silence in the kitchen. The wind pushed the rain against the windows. Salem had nestled closer between the two young men. Orión had his eyes open, fixed on the door.

"Yes, I remember she told us once when we were kids," said Sofía, breaking the stillness. "Mine isn't as dramatic. But just as true."

Sofía's ancestor was named Mónica. A woman of unmatched mettle, a midwife when needed, used to traveling at all hours through every sort of hostile terrain. Night caught her traveling without having reached her destination, but she was lucky: on the road appeared the pulpería of some acquaintances, a country store and tavern. The family was in mourning for the recent death of the father.

"Hail Mary most pure," said Mónica from outside, on horseback, as was the custom.

"Conceived without sin," they answered from within.

She asked to stay the night. They offered her the room next to the storeroom, with a warning: she could stay if she dared, because the deceased walked the premises at night. Mónica accepted without turning a hair. With a candle beside the bed she lay down and slept peacefully; that was what a woman who had brought half the town into the world did, and she was not going to lose sleep over someone else's dead man.

Deep in the small hours, the footsteps appeared. They echoed hollow on the wooden floor, from one end of the store to the other, back and forth, with a dragging regularity that could indeed resemble that of a specter who finds no rest.

Mónica lit the candle. Rolled up her nightgown sleeves. Went to face the dead man.

To her great amusement, she discovered that the footsteps were made by mice. They went from a bag of country biscuits to the exit in the wall, carrying them in their mouths, one after another; since the biscuits were large, they struck the wooden floor with a most convincing regularity.

The next day she told them—and Sofía clarified that she could not reproduce her ancestor's exact language, which was extremely colorful—essentially that they were cowards, letting their own business be robbed by a handful of rodents while they kept vigil over a dead man who was probably laughing at them from purgatory.

Luka laughed openly. Vlad had that expression of his that was almost a smile; that was more than a smile because it cost him more effort to draw it. The candle flickered, stretching the shadows on the kitchen walls. Outside, the rain did not let up.

Then Vlad rested his elbows on the table. He looked at the flame for a moment, like one deciding how much he will tell before he begins to tell it.

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The wind howled against the tall mahogany windows. Ivan, aged 22, brought the flame of a match to the wick of an Art Nouveau oil lamp. The storm had left half of Buenos Aires in darkness, including his home, a sumptuous mansion inherited from a family that had known opulence; the electricity had yielded to the fury of the sky. Here, among the dancing shadows of thousands of books, the flickering light was more fitting.

He was a librarian of priceless collections, but his true world was this one: the familiar crowded shelves that rose to the ceiling, an invaluable collection gathered over generations. Here, in a corner facing a tall window, he had created his krasny ugol, his red corner. A small portable iconostasis with the Virgin of Vladimir and Saint George, before which a silver oil lamp burned perpetually. Beside it, on a filigree tray, steamed his magnificent samovar, which matched the elegance of the room.

A knock of the door knocker resounded like a cannon shot through the empty hall and pulled him from his reverie. No one usually came so late, least of all in a storm. He opened the door warily.

On the threshold, drenched and tiny against the scale of the door, stood a man. His clothes dripped on the floor of the entrance hall. What astonished Ivan was the angular face, with a graying beard, and eyes of a pale blue that reflected, for an instant, the light of the candle he carried. A gaze of ancestral weariness, the weariness of exile.

"Forgive me, barin," he said in a thick, musical Slavic accent. "I... I saw the light of the lamp from the street. In this storm, it is a familiar sign."

Ivan, surprised, made a gesture of assent; hospitality, even toward a drenched stranger, is a mandate stronger than prudence. He led him to the library, where candles lit the room.

He seemed out of place, in his threadbare, humble clothes; he moved like a ghost among shadows. "A great fortune for so young a man," murmured the visitor, who introduced himself as Yakov, as he ran his eyes over the spines of the books, with a look not of envy but of curiosity.

"It is no merit of mine," Ivan explained, serving him hot, strong tea in fine porcelain. "It is a family inheritance. I only look after it, as I do the books..."

Yakov nodded, taking the cup in calloused hands that trembled slightly. The warmth seemed to give him back a little life.

"Books are also icons," he said suddenly, his rough voice finding an echo in the vaulted room. "They keep souls, as mine does."

From an inner pocket he took a small package, carefully wrapped in linen cloth, incredibly dry. Delicately he unwrapped it on the oak table.

Ivan held his breath. On the polished surface, surrounded by incunabula and catalogs, lay an icon. It was not large, but its presence was overwhelming. It depicted Christ Pantocrator, but its background was not the usual gold. It was of crushed lapis lazuli, a deep night-blue like the sky of the storm, and the halo around Christ's head was inlaid with minuscule fragments of mother-of-pearl that shone in the light like distant stars. The expression was severe; in the eyes there was an infinite compassion, a sadness that seemed to understand all exiles.

"From Novgorod," whispered Yakov. "It survived fire, ice, the crossing on a cargo ship. My grandfather saved it, my father hid it. I... no longer have walls of my own on which to hang it. I have only wet roads."

A blinding white flash of lightning lit the library, freezing their faces for a thousandth of a second; Yakov's expression was one of resignation and surrender. The thunder that followed made the windowpanes rattle.

"Why me?" asked Ivan, bewildered.

Yakov smiled, a painful crack in his face.

"Because in the midst of all this stone and this luxury, you keep your red corner lit. Because you look after the souls of books. And this"—he said, pointing at the icon with a reverent gesture—"is the lady of my lineage. She needs a custodian, not an owner."

"A librarian of the spirit. The storm... the storm did not bring me to a luxurious house. It brought me to the only familiar light in this city of strange shadows."

A gust of wind stronger than the earlier ones flung open an unfastened shutter. The flames of all the candles shook in a chaos of dancing shadows. Ivan turned to close it, fighting the force of the gale.

When he turned back, Yakov had vanished. There had been no sound of steps or slamming doors. Only the icon remained on the table, glowing with its own light in the half-darkness, and a small trace of dampness on the chair where he had been sitting.

Ivan ran to the window; another flash of lightning lit the outside, deserted, as if no one had ever crossed his threshold. The storm eased at dawn. Ivan spent the rest of the night in the library, with the icon before him. At daybreak he placed it with infinite caution in the center of his krasny ugol, between the Virgin and Saint George. The three were reflected in the tall windows.

He knew himself the custodian of a fragment of the night sky of Novgorod, brought by a ghost of the storm. His most important task: to guard the light of an oil lamp, illuminating the deep blue of a faith that had crossed oceans and tempests to find a place in his solitude.

The Minstrel on the Road

The Camino de Santiago. Between the Pyrenees and Pamplona.

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Bertran found them, or they found Bertran. Afterward, none of them could say for certain which of the two had happened first.

They saw him from afar: a man alone on the road, a tabor slung on his shoulder and a gait that was in no hurry but that moved forward. The kind of stride that belongs to those who have walked a long time and made their peace with distance. Guilhem was the first to step ahead, naturally.

"Where are you bound?"

"Wherever the road goes," said the man, without stopping.

"And if the road goes to Santiago?"

"Then to Santiago. If it goes elsewhere, elsewhere."

Guilhem measured him with his eyes. He was Occitan, like himself, with that drawling accent of the south that the north of France never learns to imitate. Thirty years in the open had given him a face that was a map of everything he had seen, and a body that knew precisely how much weight it could carry.

"Are you truly a minstrel?" asked Guilhem.

"Thirty years at the trade," said Bertran.

"We are horse traders, taking these mounts north. Any advice for traveling the road discreetly?"

Bertran looked at them truly for the first time. He rested his eyes on the four. On the saddles. On the horses, especially; he examined them with the attention of one who knows their worth and knows that such animals did not belong to the kind of men they claimed to be.

"Your lack of experience on the road shows," he confirmed.

They traveled together the rest of that day without anyone expressly deciding it. At night, by the fire, Bertran watched them try to make camp with the specific, rigid efficiency of four men accustomed to military discipline. He said nothing for a long while. Then he rose, took some branches and straps, and began to do what had to be done with the economy of movement of one who has done it a thousand times.

"If you are to be discreet," he said as he worked, "you need to learn three things."

"Which?" Arnau wanted to know.

"To be invisible. Not to look like what you are. And to forget your pride."

The lesson in invisibility lasted three days. It was not what any of the four expected; it was not about disguises, rags or theatrical performances. It was something else, a denser art: the way of walking that arouses no suspicion, the manner of entering a village without anyone registering that you have entered. The subtle craft of looking without the eye being noticed, of listening without leaning the body forward, of inhabiting a space without occupying more of it than is strictly necessary.

"Minstrels do not entertain," Bertran explained to them one afternoon. "Minstrels disappear. Entertainment is only the excuse to be anywhere without anyone asking why you are there."

"And the horses?" asked Renaud. The animals were the loose end Bertran had not yet addressed aloud.

Bertran looked at the beasts, looked at Renaud again and pronounced:

"The horses are what you are. Not what you say you are."

"And if someone asks?"

"You say you are transporting them for a lord of the north whom you will not name because he paid you to keep your mouths shut. That will be enough. People do not ask what already has an answer."

As time passed, the group came to understand something frustrating. The horses were not the real problem; they were only the most visible complication. The truth was far worse: they themselves drew attention.

The revelation came one night, around the fire.

"We have to be more discreet," said Guilhem for the umpteenth time, arranging the dry branches.

Bertran watched him in silence for a few seconds. Then he began to laugh, a raspy laugh that held no malice, only weariness.

"You still do not understand."

"Understand what?"

"That you could give the saddles away tomorrow and you would go on drawing attention in exactly the same way."

A dense silence fell among the four.

"Don't exaggerate, old man," Renaud murmured.

"No?"

Bertran stretched out his arm and pointed at the group with the end of a stick.

"Look how you sit."

The four looked at one another. They examined their postures, the distance between their shoulders, the way they rested their hands. They saw nothing strange.

"Exactly," pronounced Bertran. "That is the problem."

To a man who had spent half his life crossing villages, fairs, taverns and wretched roads, the differences were glaring. The four stood straight, without the stoop of one who has carried firewood since childhood. They spoke clearly, without chewing their syllables. They never shouted out of nowhere, never interrupted one another. They never mocked the humble or treated a servant with contempt. And above all, they never argued over the price of a ration of bread in front of strangers. On the roads, that was not normal.

"A peasant sees four healthy, well-fed young men," Bertran went on. "That is already odd. Then he discovers they can read, that they speak several languages, that they handle animals with mastery, that they also know stories of distant lands. That they know how to use their hands for something more than tilling, and are polite even when exhaustion bends their bones. Nobody swallows that you are simple merchants."

Guilhem was the first to lower his head, admitting it reluctantly.

"Perhaps you are right."

"Of course I am."

"My mother would have broken a stick across my ribs if I had spoken ill to an old woman," added Guilhem, trying to justify the habit.

"It shows," said the minstrel. "But your mother was not a sharecropper."

Basileios was another insurmountable obstacle. He stood nearly six foot three, carried his back straight as a galley's mast, and surveyed his surroundings with eyes that seemed to register the weight of every man. He spoke little, but when he did, the tone was too firm. In any small village, his mere presence was enough to generate stories that lasted weeks in the taverns. A smith from the outskirts went so far as to say aloud that this man had the bearing of a knight; when Guilhem retorted that he was only a cloth merchant, the smith spat on the ground and answered that then he was the most chivalrous merchant the earth had ever borne.

Renaud did not help the farce either. He treated everyone with meticulous respect, even the highwaymen who tried to cheat them, and kept the damned habit of thanking them for every jug of cold water he received. One night an innkeeper remarked that if that redhead were noble-born he would not be so kind to the servants; another, shrewder, answered from the corner that it was precisely because of that kindness that he was sure he was.

Arnau was, perhaps, the worst of all. He tried to mingle with the locals, spoke with the sick, listened to the old, and at first the farce worked. The trouble began when he opened his mouth to ask questions. He asked questions that were too intelligent. Too precise for a livestock dealer. Within minutes, any illiterate could tell that the young man was not what he seemed beneath his filthy tunic.

One afternoon, after leaving in haste an inn where they had unintentionally sown suspicion once more, Bertran set out his definitive theory in the shade of the chestnut trees.

"People do not watch you because they think you rich. Nor because of the value of the horses."

“Then why do they stare at us?” asked Arnau.

Bertran fixed his eyes on the company.

“Because you look like people who know exactly who they are. Most people do not walk through this world that way.”

“What way?”

“With purpose.”

He had traveled thousands of leagues. He had dealt with beggars, kings, mercenaries, bishops and criminals of three kingdoms, and the road had taught him a single certainty: true nobility did not depend on hose, or gold, or titles sealed on parchment. It resided in certain habits impossible to bury beneath mud. The way of listening to the one who speaks. The manner of looking fear in the face.

“No one in these lands knows your true names,” Bertran concluded, as the fire began to die. “No one knows what your mission is, nor from what corner of the East you come. But everyone smells one thing: that you are not common men. Not because you dress better, but because even covered in mud, sleeping in the open and sharing a rancid soup, you keep a quiet dignity that cannot be bought but also cannot be faked. And that, boys, is much harder to hide than any horse.”

The crackle of wood was the only sound left in the forest. A few meters away, the horses rested in the half-light.

At that moment a whinny was heard. Loud. Brief. Perfectly timed.

Everyone turned their heads toward the gloom. The black destrier had raised his head, interrupting his rest; he was observing the group fixedly and had just emitted exactly one whinny. A single one. As if expressing an informed opinion on the minstrel’s theory.

“Did he just agree with you?” asked Guilhem, stupefied.

“Yes,” answered Bertran with absolute seriousness.

“Horses don’t do that, old man.”

The destrier snorted again, shaking his mane. This time he did so with an expression so damnably satisfied that it was hard to dispute the point with him.

“It doesn’t help that the brute looks proud,” grumbled Guilhem.

“Because he is,” answered Renaud, who knew the animal better than anyone.

“What can a horse be proud of?”

“Of himself, probably.”

Bertran rose unhurriedly from the log where he sat and made an exaggerated, almost grotesque bow toward the black beast.

“I deeply thank His Equine Majesty for his approval,” he said, sweeping the ground with his hand.

The destrier arched his powerful neck at once. Which made things much worse, because the gesture looked exactly like what a monarch would do accepting the due homage of a vassal. Arnau began to chuckle; Basileios covered his face with one hand, resigned, and Guilhem had to look away so as not to catch it.

"Do you see?" Bertran continued, pointing at him. "Here is another insurmountable problem. That horse does not behave like a horse of this world."

"Perhaps it is not you who look noble," Bertran let fall, sitting down again.

"No?"

"Perhaps it is he who teaches you to be."

The indignant whinny that followed the remark provoked an explosion of laughter that startled the night birds from the crowns of the chestnut trees. For, for the first time in many months of travel, the four knights shared exactly the same absurd suspicion. The destrier was not protesting the minstrel's mockery; he was correcting an error of appraisal. By the carriage of his head and the fixity of his gaze, he was no mere noble. He was something considerably more important.

Clara

Buenos Aires. Tablero 13.

Clara did not walk into Tablero 13 by chance.

She had passed in front of the shop several times in recent weeks without stopping, without quite looking, carrying that armored determination of people who have an urgent destination and allow themselves no distractions. But that afternoon something changed. Perhaps it was the light, which came in through the big window and made the interior seem to be at a different temperature from the world outside. Perhaps it was the carved chess knight in the display window. Perhaps it was something that did not yet have a name.

She stopped. She laid her hand on the brass door handle. The moment she did, the air around her seemed to hold itself in, as if time paused to see what would happen before resuming its course.

She went in. The little bell rang with a faint echo, an ancient peal that did not quite correspond to the size of the shop. Clara's steps on the worn tiles were soft, almost careful; the gait of one entering a place she already knows intimately, even though it is the first time she has crossed the threshold.

Sofía was behind the counter. She watched her enter and something in her own body made a small, involuntary adjustment, hard to name. It was not discomfort. It was more like what one feels on looking into a fogged mirror and seeing a silhouette one did not expect to find.

Clara was tall, with defined features and honey-colored eyes that absorbed the space with the specific attention of one used to turning what she sees into something else. She wore a blouse printed with small flowers, a light knitted cardigan and her red hair loose, falling over her shoulders as if it had decided to stay that way forever. She walked with a confidence that was not arrogance but habit: the habit of one who has learned to occupy the space she needs without asking permission or apologizing.

She swept the shop with her eyes. The original chess pieces, the steampunk boards, the Chesterfield armchair. And then the thermos on the counter, which gleamed with that uneven reflection of its own that Sofía already knew, and which Clara noticed at once without yet knowing why it drew her attention.

"This place is different," she said, in a soft voice with a particular cadence. "It's like being inside a memory."

"Is that good?" asked Sofía, resting her hands on the wood of the counter.

"It's intriguing."

"Are you looking for something?" Sofía inquired.

Clara hesitated. She had her sketchbook in her hand; she had taken it from her leather bag without realizing, in a reflex. She looked at it a moment, as if the paper knew something she was still finishing deciphering.

"May I stay and draw here for a while?"

Sofía blinked, surprised by the frankness of the request.

"You want to draw here?"

"I don't know why, but I feel I have to be here. Just for a while."

Sofía invited her in without further questions. She offered her a mate and pointed her to a table.

Clara opened the notebook and the pencil began to trace lines her mind had not planned. Orión came over to her from the bar without hesitation, without a single growl, as if he knew her from another life. She crouched and stroked his back with the ease of one who has always had noble animals in her care.

The graphite kept running across the paper. She drew a board. She drew the profile of the thermos. And then, in the margins, she sketched four human figures seated around the table, endowed with a heavy presence that was not a faithful portrait but a blind recognition.

Sofía, from the distance of the counter, watched her work in silence. As the days passed, the visit became a habit; they shared the afternoon hours, getting along wonderfully.

Tablero 13. Weeks later.

The entrance bell rang with its usual peal. Luka came in with a medialuna in his hand and that electric energy of his, that of one who enters any place as if arriving at the exact center of his own universe.

He stopped dead on seeing Clara seated at the corner table. The medialuna hung halfway to his mouth, frozen in the air.

"Clara, this is Luka," Sofía put in from behind the counter, in the light tone of one who had anticipated step by step what was going to happen. "Programmer by trade, coffee-maker hacker by hobby and official supplier of technical excuses in this shop."

Clara raised her honey-colored eyes from her notebook and smiled.

"Really? Can you make a coffee maker work only if you say 'please'?"

Luka straightened up too fast for the movement to pass as casual.

"Of course. And I warn you, if you don't say 'thank you,' the coffee comes out ice cold out of pure digital resentment."

"Does the invention have a name?"

"Yes, it's called Caffeine with Dignity, version one point something. But if you like you can call her Lula. The coffee maker, I mean. Not me." Luka paused briefly, recalculating. "Or me, I don't know. It's confusing."

Sofía let out a clean burst of laughter from the counter.

"And with that, his first verbal escape of the afternoon is officially inaugurated."

"I liked it," Clara conceded, tucking a reddish lock behind her ear. "It has its charm."

"Thanks," Luka replied, shifting his weight from one foot to the other. "I trained for years to sound this relaxed when I don't know exactly what to do with my hands."

"Try the mate," said Clara, holding it out to him with complete naturalness.

Luka took it, barely brushing her fingers.

"Carefully, please. It's the only stable relationship I have at the moment."

She took the mate back with a low, musical laugh. Luka looked at her steadily for just one second longer than the situation strictly required. Then he lowered his eyes to the tiles, like one jotting an urgent warning in the margin of his own head: don't ruin this, please.

The door sounded again, but this time the density of the air in the room changed completely before anyone could look up to see who was crossing the threshold.

It was Vlad. His steps, as always, made no noise. His eyes scanned the shop with the surgical speed of the archivist who assesses the terrain before settling in.

They met Clara's eyes head-on.

It was one exact second. No more than that. But it had the consistency of the seconds that matter in a life, the ones one stores in memory without quite knowing why.

"Vlad," he said, stopping beside the table.

"Clara. Pleased to meet you."

He nodded in mute acknowledgment and went on to his usual corner. After a moment, the faint, dry rustle of a book's pages opening was heard.

No one said a single word, but the three of them felt it at once in their bodies. Something definitive and irreversible had mutated in the chemical composition of the shop; something that did not yet have a name but was as real and tangible as the weight of the thermos on the counter.

A while later, the shop acquired that specific calm of refuges where people are simply well. Clara went on drawing with silent strokes. Sofía arranged the new pieces on the shelves. Luka pretended to type lines of code on his screen. Vlad read, and the hands of the wall clock marked an hour that seemed in no hurry to pass.

When Clara finally gathered her things and left, the door closed behind her with its usual little bell. But the silence left floating was another, much thicker.

"Well," Luka blurted, breaking the inertia as he closed the laptop. "This is going to get truly interesting."

Sofía did not bother to answer. She only smiled to herself, keeping her eyes fixed on her notebook. A tiny pang ran through her; with inner discomfort she recognized the jealousy caused by a new queen on the board. It lasted a few seconds; the imprisoned entity treasured those seconds, equivalent to time in which it could exert influence outside its prison, and would use them when the occasion arose. A faint steam emerged from the thermos.

Vlad shut the book abruptly. The dry sound echoed off the walls.

"She is not like the others," Vlad pronounced.

And no one in Tablero 13 dared dispute the point.

The Lesson Nobody Asked For

Arnau had gone to the nearest village because someone on the road had mentioned a woman with a high fever. After twelve years as a Hospitaller, he could not hear that and ride on untroubled. He said he would be back before dark.

Bertran disappeared after a sound of water that turned out to be the river, where he sat down to tune his tabor with the peace of one who has found an activity that needs no explanation.

That left Guilhem, Renaud and Basileios with the horses, the cat and the problem of dinner. They looked at the fire Renaud had lit. They looked at the provisions bag: stale bread, two onions, bacon, lentils, salt and oil. They looked at one another.

“Does anyone know how to make lentils?” asked Renaud.

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Silence.

“I know they get cooked,” said Guilhem.

“Everything gets cooked. The question is how.”

“With water.”

“And what else?”

“With fire.”

“We already have fire.”

“Then, water and fire,” Guilhem concluded, satisfied with a logic that had nothing behind it.

Basileios examined the lentils like one studying a difficult text.

“In Constantinople they are cooked with onion and spices.”

“For how long?”

“I don’t know. I did not cook. There was someone who cooked.”

Renaud sighed.

“We all had someone to cook for us.”

They tossed the lentils into the pot with water and waited. The pot did nothing. Renaud stirred with a stick he cleaned approximately against the grass, because Arnau always stirred.

“The bacon goes first,” said Basileios.

“We already put in the lentils.”

“Then it goes after.”

“After how?”

Basileios thought about it.

“On top, perhaps.”

Then came the onion. None of them remembered how Arnau cut it, because while Arnau cooked, the others were doing other things.

“Medium,” said Guilhem.

“Medium what?”

“Medium as in the middle ground between large and small.”

Renaud decided that was definition enough. The cat approached the fire, observed the process and went to sleep. It was an opinion.

When the water boiled, everything floated: lentils, bacon and chunks of onion, with a democratic equality that did not bode well for the result.

“Does it smell good?” asked Guilhem.

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“It smells like food.”

“Like good food or like food in general?”

“Like food in general.”

Then Basileios remembered the salt, and Renaud added a considerable amount.

“How much?” asked Guilhem.

“Enough.”

“That’s a lot.”

“It’s enough.”

Bertran came back from the river with the pot already boiling. He came near, sniffed, looked inside. He looked at the open pouch of salt beside the fire, with what little remained. He looked at the three of them. His face did not change: he was a man of the road and knew that certain expressions cost more than they yield.

“How much salt,” he said, almost to himself.

“Enough,” said Renaud.

Bertran picked up the pouch, closed it with its cord and put it away in the provisions bag with a delicacy that was in itself a comment.

“Are you eating?” asked Guilhem.

“With you, yes.”

Arnau returned after dark. They gave him a bowl. He looked at it, smelled it, tasted. The four watched him like an audience about to receive a review.

“How much salt did you put in?”

“Enough,” said Renaud.

“From the pouch in the bag? How much is left?”

Renaud went to the bag and weighed the pouch in his hand. Arnau looked at it with the precision of one who knows the exact value of what has been lost.

“You have used half. There was enough for two weeks, with care.”

“It’s salt,” said Renaud.

"It is salt. In the last village it cost the same as three days' bread, and in the Pyrenees we will not find it easily. Without it nothing keeps, and what rots on the road is an illness waiting to happen."

Renaud looked at the pouch. What was on his face passed from defensiveness to understanding.

"I did not know," he said, without excuse, as he stated all facts.

"I know," said Arnau, also without excuse. "That is why I am saying it now."

Guilhem had been looking at the paper where the remains of pepper and ginger lay.

"And how much of this did you put in?"

"An amount that seemed reasonable to us," said Basileios.

Arnau closed his eyes a moment. Opened them.

"Pepper on this road is worth what a good horse is. Ginger, somewhat less, but not much less. What you put in that pot is worth more than what we took in at the square."

Silence. Bertran watched the fire like one who had known it since he saw the spices and had decided it was not his place to say so.

"And why are we carrying spices of that value in the provisions bag?" asked Guilhem.

It was the question everyone had and only he asked, because only he asked it without calculating whether he should. It was also, they all understood at once, precisely the one they could not answer in front of Bertran.

Arnau looked at Guilhem. Something passed between the two without words, but completely clear.

"We got them on the road," said Arnau, turning toward Bertran with a naturalness that cost him a little. "A merchant who needed a physician. He paid with what he had."

Bertran nodded. It was plausible; it was the kind of payment a roadside physician might receive. But Bertran had thirty years of road behind him, and thirty years of road teach you to hear what is not said. He asked no more. Which was, Guilhem thought, almost worse than if he had asked.

The next morning, Arnau prepared breakfast. It smelled considerably better than dinner. When they had finished, he looked at them.

"We have a problem. I cannot always be the one to cook."

"You cook well," said Guilhem, trying to soften it.

"It is not a remark about quality, but about logic. There will be times when I am attending someone, or sick myself. And in those moments you will eat lentils with a week's worth of salt."

"They weren't that bad," said Renaud.

“They were terrible. Salty, the bacon not browned, the onion raw inside and the lentils half cooked because nobody put them to soak.”

“We did not know about the soaking,” said Basileios.

“Exactly. That is what needs solving. I do not ask you to cook well, which takes years. I ask you not to ruin what is already there, which takes an afternoon.”

“I know how to cook,” said Bertran.

The others looked at him.

“A little. Thirty years on the road without money for an inn every night teach the basics.”

“Why didn’t you say so last night?” asked Arnau.

Bertran considered the question.

“Because nobody asked me.”

“Then the two of us will teach you,” said Arnau. “I know how to do it well. He knows how to do it with what there is. On the road, the second is more useful than the first.”

Bertran nodded with the modest satisfaction of one who has been promoted without applying.

The lesson began that night. Arnau explained the soaking, the bacon that is browned before anything else, and the salt, which goes in last and little: always less than you think necessary, because it can be added and cannot be removed. Renaud had to accept that his palate, calibrated on campaign, was not like the others’. Basileios cut the onion into perfectly equal pieces and put on a face as though that triumph meant nothing.

“And if we have no bacon?” asked Guilhem.

“Any fat. And if there is none, oil.”

“And if there is no oil?”

“Then…”

“We do not exist as a civilization,” said Guilhem.

“Practically.”

Meanwhile, Bertran had put his own pot on the fire. He asked nothing and explained nothing: he cooked. In no time there was an excellent smell around his fire.

Arnau tasted the students’ pot. He thought for a few seconds.

“Tonight it is acceptable.”

It was, coming from Arnau, the closest thing to praise. The cat approached, sniffed the students’ pot, sniffed Bertran’s and sat down in front of Bertran’s.

“The cat has taste,” said Guilhem.

"The cat has taste," confirmed Bertran, with a professional pride completely disproportionate and completely justified.

They ate around the fire. The horses were calm. For that night, the road left them in peace.

What Power Smells Like

62

Jerusalem, 1181. Three weeks after the departure.

The house had no visible name, located in the Armenian Quarter, the most discreet place in Jerusalem, because the Armenian Quarter had been discreet for centuries with the efficiency of one who has learned that discretion is survival and that survival requires constant practice.

From outside it was like the others. Inside it was something else. Not because of the decoration; there was no particular decoration. It was the absence of certain things that set it apart: absence of icons, of crosses, of the religious marks that everyone displayed one way or another, as one displays belonging to something when belonging is the only thing that protects you. This house belonged to nothing visible. Which meant it belonged to something that did not need to be visible.

Three men were seated. Not around a table; those imply equality or visible hierarchy, and this meeting was neither. They were simply in the same room, each in the place he had chosen, which was also information about each one.

The first was by the window. His name was Cord. Only Cord. He was Flemish by origin, though the origin had ceased to matter so long ago. Forty years old, a build neither large nor small but exactly what was needed not to draw attention in any specific context. He had that quality of men who have learned to exist without being remembered, the quality of having no memorable features, which is paradoxically the hardest feature to cultivate and the most useful to have.

Cord watched the street through the window with the attention of one who catalogs without intervening.

The second was leaning against the back wall. His name was Mared. Welsh. Thirty-five years old. He had a scar crossing his jaw from left to right which on another man would have been a memorable feature, but on Mared was simply part of the inventory, like hair color or height, something that was there without telling anything in particular. He was the most physical of the three, not in the sense of Renaud, who was a warrior, but in the sense of the man who solves problems with the body before the head because the body has proven more efficient.

Mared looked at nothing in particular. He waited. He was very good at waiting.

The third was sitting on the floor with his legs crossed and his eyes closed. His name was Yusuf. Syrian. Twenty-eight years old. He was the youngest and the stillest and the only one of the three who seemed to be doing nothing when he was the only one actually doing something. He had the capacity, which the organization had identified in him at twelve and had been cultivating for sixteen years, to perceive certain things others did not perceive. It was not sight. It was not prophecy. It was something more like what a dog does when it lifts its head before the noise sounds, the perception of something that has not yet arrived but already exists at some point between here and there. He had spent three days with his eyes closed. He ate when someone put food in front of him. He slept when the body forced him. The rest of the time he listened to something that had no sound.

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On the fourth day Yusuf opened his eyes.

Cord went on watching the window.

Mared went on waiting.

"It moved," said Yusuf.

His voice was calm. It was not the tone of discovery nor of urgency. It was the tone of one confirming something he had expected to confirm, though he had not known when.

"When?" said Cord, without turning.

"Some time ago," said Yusuf. "The trail is old. Weeks."

"Where to?"

"West." Yusuf considered. "Far. Very far from where it was."

Mared peeled himself off the wall. Not dramatically. With the same naturalness with which he had leaned on it for days. As if peeling away were simply the next state of waiting.

"Did you lose it?" said Mared.

"It is not lost," said Yusuf. "It grows weaker. That is different."

"How weak?"

"Enough that it has taken weeks and only now do I feel it clearly." Yusuf stood up. He did so with the fluidity of one who has not been still but concentrated, which are different states though they look alike. "Someone moved it with care. They know what they carry."

"How many?" said Cord, who was still looking at the window but whose attention had changed direction even if his body had not.

“I cannot know that this way,” said Yusuf. “The object does not report on whoever carries it. Only on where it is.”

“And where is it?”

Yusuf closed his eyes a moment longer. Opened them.

“Outside Jerusalem,” he said. “A sea between. The land of the Franks.”

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Cord at last turned from the window; what showed was not exactly an expression, it was the absence of expression that in some men is more informative than any gesture, meaning that they are processing something without letting it be visible.

“How long a lead do they have?” he said.

“Weeks,” said Yusuf. “Perhaps a month.”

“Is it recoverable?”

“Everything is recoverable,” said Yusuf. “The question is the cost.”

Mared looked at Cord, Cord looked at Mared. It was the look of two men who have worked together long enough that certain conversations happen without words.

“How many do we send?” said Mared.

“Three,” said Cord.

“There are three of us,” said Mared.

“There are three of us,” confirmed Cord.

There was in this neither enthusiasm nor reluctance; it was simply the next job.

The organization they served had no name that they knew of. It had instructions. It had resources. It had the capacity to detect certain objects of power when they moved, which was the capacity Yusuf represented in the group, the nose, the precision instrument.

And it had the doctrine that the three knew by heart without ever having read it, because it was not written anywhere a stranger could find it.

The doctrine was simple. Power must not be in the hands of one who does not know how to use it. Power that is detected must be recovered. Power that is recovered must be delivered.

Delivered to whom was the part the three did not need to know to do their job, which was also part of the doctrine. Dogs do not need to know where they carry what they fetch. They need only fetch it.

Yusuf gathered what little he had. It was little because the three traveled with little; it was part of how they worked, lightness was speed and speed was the only real advantage when pursuing something weeks ahead.

Mared checked the weapons with the routine of one who does it so often the gesture is now as involuntary as breathing. Cord went to the window one last time. He looked at Jerusalem, with the gaze of a man who records a place before leaving it, because the record is information and information is a tool.

"Can you follow the trail from the road?" he said to Yusuf.

"If the object stays active, yes," said Yusuf.

"And if it is not active?"

"Then we follow the logic," said Yusuf. "An object of that power moving west from Jerusalem has possible routes. Not infinite ones."

"How many?"

"Enough for us to take a while," said Yusuf. "Not so many that we do not arrive."

Cord nodded. It was enough.

Neighborhood Vacant Lot at Sunset – Buenos Aires

The sun falls sideways and it already smells of dirt, sweat and warm beer. The grass is sparse, the ball

is flat, and those who arrived early have already put away half a case of beer.

There are at least fifteen people around: players, hangers-on, girls sitting on apple crates, buckets and whatever they could improvise as seats, two kids selling modeling putty, and a guy standing against the fence whom nobody seems to know, but everyone respects the silence he creates.

Luka arrives with the ball in his hand and an enthusiasm that doesn't match the weather.

"Come on, Vlad. We're playing against the guys from the next block, you're not going to war."

Vlad stands in black joggers and a gray T-shirt, looking at the improvised field as if it were hostile territory, a backpack and a pile of clothes forming one goal, on the other side a stick driven into the ground with a jacket hanging from it and a bucket forming the other. There is something... he doesn't like. The uneven ground as if announcing a battle.

"I haven't played since high school," he says with a sigh.

"Perfect. That way we're even!"

Vlad follows him, in silence. He looks around: six kids in sweat-soaked jerseys, bottles on the ground, a speaker blasting cumbia. One is smoking a joint. Another has a knife hanging from his pants, as decoration... or not.

"Is that the Pole?" asks one, unfiltered.

"His name is Vlad. And he's not Polish," Luka answers, already uncomfortable.

"Oh, right, *Vlad*. Sounds like Dracula," another laughs.

The game starts. At first they run hard, with speed and claws. Vlad surprises: he takes hits, returns passes, has good footwork. Luka feels confident, until a guy—the most worked up—goes in on him with everything from behind.

Luka falls face-first. Dirt in his mouth.
"What the hell are you doing, you psycho?!"

"Don't cry, skinny. Suck it up," he said in a thick voice.

Vlad runs toward the clash. Not with violence, but with firmness. He puts his body in, moves him out of the way, looks at him.

"Hey! Play clean."

"And who are you, the bodyguard?"

The mood turns tense. Someone shouts "forget it," keep going, keep going. But the one who hit him spits on the ground near Vlad, provoking him and adding:

"You got a problem?"

Vlad doesn't answer. He pushes him.

The guy raises his fist. Luka, who has already stood up, steps in between.
"That's enough, knock it off! We're leaving!"

The other shoves him, knocking him down again. **And that is when Vlad reacts**: fast, precise. He grabs his arm, spins him, throws him without breaking anything but making it clear that he could have.

The guy stays on the ground. His friends don't get involved. The beers have already lowered their blood.

A loud, **dry** burst of laughter is heard amid the murmur. It's the guy against the fence. Tall, in a dark jacket, hands in his pockets. He watches. He doesn't take part. But he smiles.

Luka gets up, furious and muddy.

"They're a bunch of idiots!"

Vlad grips him firmly by the shoulder.

"Let's go."

The tall guy who had been watching moves away from the fence and from the group and leaves, without a word. He looks at Vlad as he passes. Memorizes him. Like one making a note of something important.

They leave the lot in silence. No one follows them. No one apologizes.

"Well... that went to hell," says Luka, holding his bloodied elbow.

Vlad walks beside him.
"I told you I hadn't played since high school."

"Yeah. But you didn't say you knew how to disarm a drunk without leaving him a bruise."

"It was done with respect."

Luka looks at him. After a few more steps, he bursts out laughing. With rage. With relief.
"You're my favorite bodyguard, man!"

Vlad barely smiles.

Exterior – Sidewalk, minutes later

On the way to the shop, Luka laughs somewhere between anger and adrenaline.

“Did you see the guy in the jacket? Who was he?”

“I don’t know. But he wasn’t there for soccer.”

“Then why was he there?”

“Watching. You. Me. Everyone.”

Luka stops.

“I don’t like this.”

“Neither do I,” says Vlad.

They say no more. But that day marks something different between them. It isn’t friendship out of affinity. It’s an alliance for survival. And respect earned through shoving.

Vlad remembered…

An Ordinary Afternoon

He was coming home alone from school, his frayed backpack hanging from one shoulder and his shirt untucked. The sidewalks were cracked, and the shadows of the buildings fell long across the cobblestones. Vlad, thin as a scarecrow, bony and silent, walked with his eyes down, counting the broken tiles the way one reviews chess moves in one’s head.

It was the shout that made him look up.

“Ma’am, no!”—a shrill voice, accompanied by the dull thud of a body against the ground.

Across the street, an older woman lay sitting on the asphalt, her purse open a few meters away, its contents scattered. Two teenagers were running off, one with a backpack slung across his chest. The scene lasted a second. No one else moved.

Vlad ran across the street.

“Are you all right?” he asked, crouching. His hands were trembling, but he used them to help her up.

The woman had gray hair gathered in a tight bun and a pair of crooked glasses. She wasn’t bleeding, but the blow had been hard. He gathered her things in silence: a notebook, a coin purse, a bag of pills.

“Can I call someone? Do you want me to walk you home?”

She shook her head, curtly, and tried to smile.

"Thank you, son... it's not necessary. But what a sadness..." she murmured, almost to herself.

Vlad stood still a moment, watching her totter away, refusing the help of a belated passerby who at last dared to intervene.

That afternoon he told no one. Not even his grandmother, who was waiting for him with hot soup and a story about saints who spoke in dreams. But something hardened inside him. A new certainty.

Not her. Not my grandmother. That must never happen to her.

From then on, he began to pay more attention. To walk on the street side. To watch for shadows behind corners. Not because he was strong, but because he could not bear the thought of arriving late again.

That night, while his grandmother recited the names of the holy martyrs before sleep, Vlad did not listen. He kept seeing the woman's crooked glasses on the asphalt. The trembling of her hands. The helplessness.

"And you? Are you all right?" his grandmother asked, noticing his silence.

He nodded, without lifting his eyes from the plate. But something had changed. He felt it, though he could not put it into words. That mixture of mute anger and urgency, as if he had failed in a game he did not know he was playing.

Later, in his room, without saying it aloud, he formed his first true wish:

I don't want it to happen to me again.
I want to be capable.
I want to be able to do something next time.

He did not think of it in terms of strength. He did not dream of muscles or vengeance. His was something else: a silent determination, like his grandmother's when she spent whole hours restoring an old book with her fingertips.

The following week, he asked one of the boys at the lot to teach him to defend himself. He did not say why. He only watched, listened, and when he fell, he got right back up. Without complaining.

And when no one was looking, at home, in front of the bathroom mirror, he practiced clumsy moves he had memorized. Without noise. Without telling anyone. Because fear does not go away with words. It is trained.

He had no money for classes. Nor did he want to draw attention. So Vlad watched. At the lot, when the older ones came to blows over a badly called foul, he did not look at who was winning: he looked at the feet, the hands, the moment when someone passed from threat to attack.
In the private library where his grandmother worked—and where he began to go ever

more often—he leafed through books on ancient fencing, self-defense, anatomy treatises, chronicles of duels, anything with clear illustrations or precise descriptions. He learned alone, in silence.
He noted down movements, repeated them until the body responded before the head. He learned to fall, not to close his eyes, to turn quickly. To defend more than to attack.

The neighbors saw him as thin, pale, always alone. No one knew that every day he did push-ups with bare feet on the cold floor, that he used cans and any object that would serve as weights, that every imaginary blow had an invisible recipient.

But his real training was elsewhere. He began to notice things others did not.

The finger that closes just before striking. The eyebrow that moves before a lie.
The shoulder that leans before fleeing. The silence that anticipates bad news.

It was not magic. It was attention. An extreme way of reading the world.

In time, his grandmother began to notice it too.

"Sometimes you go very quiet, Vlad. As if you saw what the others don't."

He did not answer; he nodded: it was true. *He saw before it happened; that made him feel less vulnerable.*

He did not train to fight; he trained to protect.

A Timely Warning

It was an ordinary Saturday in the neighborhood. Sofía had gone with her aunt to a used-book fair. Luka was in the shop,

fixing cables, talking to himself. Vlad had stopped by the lot and was now heading to Tablero 13 with a cold medialuna wrapped in a napkin.

On the corner, half a block from the shop, he saw something. Nothing concrete, not yet. It was an ordinary scene: a group of three kids walking together, a lady with heavy bags waiting for the light to change, a man talking on his phone leaning against a car.

But something in that man's body was wrong.

Not the gesture with the phone, not the gaze. The weight on the heels, the tension in the jaw, the way his fingers drummed on the glass, without quite touching it. The waiting was not casual.

Vlad said nothing. He quickened his pace.

"Ma'am, can I give you a hand with that?" he said to the woman with the bags, placing himself between her and the man just as the light changed.

The lady smiled, surprised, not fully understanding.

Behind them, the man seemed to hesitate. He switched the phone to his other hand. He turned slowly. Then he walked away. Without a word. Without stealing. But with his body tense like an unused spring.

The lady crossed with Vlad and went on her way.

He only watched her until she disappeared down the next block. Only then did he enter the shop.

Luka looked at him with a medialuna in his mouth:

"What was that? Feeling like a good Samaritan?"

Vlad did not answer. He shrugged. But something in his gaze remained sharper than usual.

That night, when Sofía came back, Luka told it as a funny anecdote.
"The skinny guy has a radar for little old ladies, I think."
"Or for danger," she said, not quite laughing.

No one fully understood. But Vlad did. He knew that what he had seen was not an act. It was an intention not carried out. And that, sometimes, is the only window one has to prevent something.

What a Lovestruck Tongue Lets Slip

Roncesvalles, 1181, the hospital inn, night.

One did not reach that particular inn rested. The mountain pass was cold, wind and wet stone, with a horizon that did not draw nearer in proportion to the effort made. The horses went at a walk, tended by their riders so as not to harm them in the least. The cat had settled in a saddlebag, showing barely the line of his eyes. His logistics were impeccable.

Roncesvalles at the end of the descent was a vision of warm comfort; it was not beautiful: the pilgrims' hospital, the collegiate church, the inn, everything organized for people who arrive exhausted and hungry and in need of food and fire before architectural beauty. A warm light showed through the windows, accompanied by a faint smell of food, the promise of good shelter.

Bertran sighed with the relief of having survived one more difficult road. "Roncesvalles," he said, as if it were part of the rest. Guilhem echoed him, his lips blue.

Arnau visually checked his companions for signs of frostbite before thinking of getting comfortable; medical inventory first. Renaud gave an evaluating look to the exits, how many people and what kind, where he himself would place someone if he wanted to cause trouble. Nothing so far that set off alarms.

He dismounted, ready to take the first watch with the horses.

Many roads converge at the inn; everyone was from somewhere and no one asked from where, the answer was always complicated and supper did not wait. The fire was generous, the food simple, thick soup and bread, something that might have been lamb, hot and plentiful, making one forget the weather outside. Bertran ate with the speed of one who is hungry; Guilhem slowly, studying the room with attention though it did not seem so; Arnau methodically, in the order in which Hospitallers ate in the refectory, an involuntary habit. Basileios ate without noticing that he ate, intent on not delaying in order to relieve Renaud, which he did with his usual efficiency.

With Renaud now at supper, Bertran saw her. She was serving the table opposite. She carried a jug of wine and moved efficiently; she would be about 22, dark-haired, with a practical, graceful way of moving, like one who has learned not to spill what she carries in her hands regardless of what happens around her. She looked at Bertran with a slight smile that could be courtesy or something else. Bertran had spent years on the road without anyone looking at him that way... this sequence was measured by Guilhem, the smile, the reaction processing the situation before it had finished happening. He thought several things: that Bertran was a good man and deserved to have someone look at him that way; that the road was long, and moments of ordinary humanity made it more bearable; and that a girl who

serves wine at an inn sees many people, and tongues loosen with drink. This last thought came too late.

The girl said her name was Inés; as she gathered the bowls, efficiently, she asked absently, “Where are you from?”

Bertran answered eagerly: “The north.”

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“First time in Roncesvalles?”

“Third.”

“The whole road all three times?”

“All three.”

She nodded with something that looked like genuine respect, or a good enough imitation of it.

“And your group, from the north too?” she said with the same naturalness.

“The south.”

The exchange continued, seemingly innocent; Guilhem began to give all his attention to the dialogue, to the way each of the girl’s questions opened the next. Too precise to be casual.

Fatigue had made him slow; he listened a moment longer without intervening.

“Where do you go after Santiago?”

“West… I don’t know.”

“You are discreet.”

“I am of the road,” said Bertran.

“Are they dangerous?”

“Them?” He looked at his traveling companions with the affection earned in this shared time. “No. Odd, yes.”

“Military?” said Inés, with the same naturalness with which she had asked everything else.

Bertran did not answer at once; he did not know, and had decided not to ask them. She smiled again with something slightly different from the earlier smiles, which Bertran did not notice and Guilhem did. When she disappeared toward the kitchen, he asked.

"What did you tell her?"

Bertran looked at him with the expression of one who has had a pleasant conversation and does not understand why the other is looking at him like that. "Nothing," he answered.

"Bertran…"

"Ordinary road questions, where we come from, where we are going, if you were military…"

"How long has she been here?" Basileios asked in a very low voice.

"She appeared during supper," said Guilhem.

"And did she ask from the beginning?" Renaud investigated.

"No, she let a few moments pass… waited until Bertran was comfortable."

Bertran watched them with an expression that was slowly changing from incomprehension to something like understanding, and rather more like shame.

"She was an inn girl," said Bertran.

"She was a girl who asked specific questions in the right order," Guilhem pointed out.

"What right order?"

"The one that starts with the general and ends with the particular without the one answering noticing he has gone from one to the other. It is a technique. It is not an inn girl's."

Bertran thought it over and his expression finished changing; the shame was complete and unadorned. "I didn't know…"

"I know; that is why it is not your fault," Guilhem pronounced.

"Whose is it, then?"

Guilhem did not answer, because it was complicated and time was what they did not have. Renaud was already on his feet.

"How much time do we have?"

“It depends on whom she warns, and how far away that someone is,” Guilhem answered.

“Do we leave now?” said Arnau.

“The horses need rest, and so do we; staying is a risk that includes swords, we don’t know how many, this is their terrain,” Renaud remarked.

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What the Cat Sees *Road from Roncesvalles to Pamplona. Night.*

They had been riding for two hours in the dark. Not in silence exactly. The horses made their night-horse noises, hoof on stone, rhythmic breathing, the occasional involuntary remark of an animal that would rather be sleeping but has learned that its preferences are not relevant to the itinerary. The cat was in the luggage bag with his head out.

He was watching the darkness. With the concentrated, still attention that cats have when something exists in the space that humans have not yet noticed. All of them were too tired to notice the difference between the cat’s distracted attention and the cat’s concentrated attention, a distinction that required knowing him well and that at that moment none of the five had the energy to exercise. The road to Pamplona from Roncesvalles descended among hills. By day it was a clear, well-traveled road, with pilgrims’ marks and signs that the hospital monks had set up so that no one would get lost.

At night the signs vanished into the darkness and the hills changed shape, and what by day was obvious now required constant attention, and constant attention after the Pyrenees and Roncesvalles was the scarcest resource they had.

Renaud rode ahead. He watched the road with that attention of his that never rested but that tonight had a new component, fatigue, which is different from tiredness, the fatigue that comes from within and that the body can ignore for a time but not indefinitely.

The main road continued straight south. On the left was a side road, narrower, that went in between two hills and that in the dark seemed as valid as the main one, perhaps more so, because it had something the main one did not. A shape. Faint. Barely visible. Like the vapor that rises from the ground on cold mornings, but darker, denser at the center, with a consistency that was not exactly smoke and not exactly fog but something between the two that moved in a direction that was not the wind’s. It moved toward the side road. Slowly. With the patience of something that knows it will be followed.

Renaud’s horse saw it first. Or sensed it. The distinction between seeing and sensing in horses is hard to establish, because at night horses use senses that humans have forgotten exist and that work in ways for which we have no precise vocabulary.

The fact is that Renaud's horse turned. Not abruptly. Not with the panic of a frightened animal. With the inexplicable gentleness of an animal following something it feels must be followed, the same gentleness with which horses follow other horses in the herd when one of them decides to move in a direction without anyone understanding why. Guilhem's Arabian turned too. Arnau's Barb. Basileios's Lombard.

Dientona, with the luggage. All of them toward the side road with that inexplicable gentleness, one after another, like water that finds a slope and follows it because physics determines it before will does.

Renaud noticed that he was turning and that he had not decided to turn, that his hands had not given the instruction and that the horse had taken it from some other place; he took a second to act, because that second was when his tired mind processed what was happening, and fatigue made that second longer than it would have been by day. He opened his mouth to say something; someone else beat him to it.

The cat meowed. Once. Sharp. Without drama, with an intensity that none of the sounds he had made since Jerusalem had had, neither those of approval, nor of disapproval, nor of boredom, nor of the cold of the Pyrenees. This was another sound; it was that of something that knows danger before it has any recognizable form.

The horses stopped. Not gradually. They stopped with the abruptness of an animal that leaves one state and enters another without transition, like a candle being put out. The silence of the aftermath. The absolute darkness blurred slightly. The cat leapt between the horses' legs and guided them with short, sharp meows. They followed the sound with absolute trust.

Their heads cleared; no one spoke for a moment. Renaud watched the side road; a faint shape was still moving. Slower now. As if it had lost something it was counting on and was recalculating.

"Do you see it?" said Guilhem, very low.

"I see it," said Renaud.

"What is it?" said Arnau.

No one answered that, because no one had an answer more useful than silence. Basileios watched the shape with that scholar's attention of his that recognizes things without being able to name them, which was the worst version of his skill, because to recognize without naming is to know that something matters without knowing what to do about it.

"What I understand," said Basileios, "is that some objects are not only containers but also signals. When they are active they attract certain things." He paused. "And certain things seek them."

Silence. Arnau looked at the bag where the object was. The bag in which the cat traveled.

"And the horses?" said Bertran, who had been silent since Roncesvalles with the newly acquired discretion of one who has learned that keeping quiet is also a skill.

"The horses followed the shape," said Renaud.

"Without you guiding them?"

"Without our guiding them."

Bertran looked at the side road. He looked at the hills between which it disappeared.

"Where does it lead?" he said.

"To the precipice," said Renaud. "There is one half a league away, from what I saw by day before it grew dark. The side road goes straight down toward it."

No one said anything for a moment. The faint shape kept moving. Slower. Almost still. Like something waiting with the patience of one who is in no hurry because time does not apply to it in the same way as to those who have bodies.

"How much does the cat know?" said Bertran.

"More than we do," said Arnau, with the clinical honesty of one who reached that conclusion long ago and has already accepted it.

The faint shape dissipated without drama, in the way danger disappears, without announcing that it is leaving, because that would imply it is subject to the same conventions of presence and absence as ordinary things, and truly dangerous things are not.

The cat gracefully leapt onto the bag, lowered his head. Yawned. Settled on it with the air of one who has finished what he had to finish and can return to what he was doing, which was existing with the tranquility of one who does not need anyone to understand exactly what he did for what he did to count.

At dawn, as the Pyrenees fell behind, Guilhem rode up to Renaud; they rode together.

"Bertran wants to stay," he said.

Renaud did not answer at once, looking ahead. "I know," he said finally.

"Do you accept it?"

"He talked too much, but I accept his mistake... Yes," Renaud closed the subject.

Guilhem turned his horse toward the mule on which Bertran was riding. “You stay.”

“Thank you.”

“Don’t thank me, thank him,” he said, pointing with his eyes at Renaud.

“How do I thank him?”

“By not talking too much—especially with girls who serve wine at wayside inns and ask questions in the right order.”

Bertran nodded with the seriousness of a man who has learned something at a price he will not forget.



Twenty Years Chasing a Reflection

For two decades, Roberto Neri followed tracks no one else saw.

He did not know exactly what he was looking for. He did not know its name. He had only fragments: a cryptic description, a steaming object that was no boiler, a gleam in the middle of an interrupted game.

It was the broken testimony of a learned woman—Anzhela, a specialist in manuscripts and impossible objects—who spoke of an artifact that “showed, if one knew how to look.”
She did not call it a thermos. She did not call it anything. She only said it must not fall into the wrong hands.

From the moment he heard that phrase, Neri knew he had to find it.

For twenty years he combed old catalogs, chess houses, lost inheritances.
He failed many times. He mistook the object, the city, the lead.
But he never gave up. Because an obsession like that is not abandoned: it breathes on the back of your neck.

Until one day, in an ordinary square, he saw it. Not the object. The reflection. A young man with an icy gaze and a reader's hands, playing a game in silence. An echo of someone he did not know, but whom Anzhela had mentioned with pride: her grandson. Vlad.

Neri watched him for minutes. In the young man's eyes he did not find peace.
He found confirmation. He had found the heir. And if the grandson was there… so was the object. From then on, he needed no more clues. Only time. Only closeness. The rest was a matter of making his move.

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Neri Takes the Stage

The measured steps of someone entering are heard. The door does not swing open; it slides as if asking permission. A man enters. Tall, slender, a well-cut suit. He is well past fifty, but with the kind of elegance that can be mistaken for well-preserved youth, hair just graying, polished shoes, an exact smile.

"Good afternoon," he says, in a soft tone and a neutral accent, hard to place.

Sofía is behind the counter. Luka types something on his laptop. Vlad reads at the back. Orión gets up and sniffs him from afar, in silence. Salem disappears up the stairs.

"Welcome," says Sofía, kind but with that invisible alertness of those who grew up in Buenos Aires. "Looking for something in particular?"

"A good conversation, and perhaps a travel chess set," the man answers. He looks over the shop slowly. He pauses at the shelf, at the mate, at the decorated thermos behind the glass. He does not name it. He only sees it.

Luka greets him with a nod. Vlad says nothing, but watches him. Something at the back of his neck switches on. The man smiles toward him, like one recognizing a face he does not in fact know.

"Lovely place. I have seen few like it. It is not just a business, is it?"

Sofía shrugs.
"Depends on the day."

"Today seems a special day," he says, as if he knew something. Then he points to the shelf. "Is that a Staunton or a reinterpretation?"

"Inspired," Sofía answers. "I designed it."

The man nods. He looks at the thermos again, just one second longer.
"And do you take custom commissions?"

“Depends on the time. And on how strange the commission is.”

The man smiles wider.
“I never cared for the ordinary.”

In that instant, Vlad sees him turn his hand, a minimal gesture, a ring. Black. Polished, with a barely perceptible engraving: three curved lines that cross like blades. Something in Vlad clicks, he does not know why, his body does. *He has seen it before, at the lot, in the past, in a place he cannot place*. The man notices, holds the gaze a second too long. Then he smiles again.
“Lovely shop. Perhaps I will return with more time.”

And he leaves. Unhurried.

He had not expected to find anything of value at first glance. By now, he no longer trusted display cases or labels. What he sought was not exposed to the public. It hid in corners, in gestures, in distracted glances.

He crossed the shop’s door unhurried. The faint sound of the little bell was almost childlike. A nostalgic detail. In the air floated a scent of polished wood and old paper, as if the place kept memories of its own. Promising.

“This is it.” Three young people. One behind the counter—attentive eyes, serene bearing. Another with a bright, relaxed expression, who pretended not to observe but did so constantly. And the third… the third was reading, or pretending to, from an armchair. Tall. Light eyes. Too much like a silhouette he still had filed in his memory as a possibility.

The recognition was not immediate. But something in his posture, in the way his shoulders tensed on seeing him enter, confirmed his suspicion. He felt it. *He* felt it. He did not say his name. There was no reason to. The words he chose were others. Harmless. He had perfected the art of seeming harmless. Of passing for an occasional collector, a retired diplomat, a lover of art. Someone who only seeks… objects with a history. His eyes swept every corner without lingering. Too much interest would be suspicious; too much coldness, too. In his palm, the black ring was only a wink, a trap for attentive minds; he let it show. When he spoke, it was to test the ground.

“Chess is fascinating, don’t you think? Small contained wars. What is played on the board is rarely what is truly being played.”

Vlad. The one in the corner. He knew it without needing confirmation. The tension in his pupils. The micro-gesture in his jaw. Someone had taught him to hide fear. But not enough. *Good.*

Before leaving, he let the phrase fall like one tossing a key in the middle of a forest, sure that someone will find it.

"Sometimes objects find their custodians... even though they do not yet know they are protecting them." And then he left.

First move: made. It is not yet time to attack. First, let them get used to seeing me. Let them underestimate me. Afterward... it will be a matter of choosing which of them to break first.

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