

CLAUS PEDERSEN

ALL SYSTEMS

NOMINAL

A NOVELLA



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ALWAYS

The last light was leaving the sky the way warmth leaves a room after someone has gone. Not all at once. Not with drama. Just a slow, amber thinning along the western edge of the city, the towers catching it on their glass faces and holding it for a moment before letting it fade. Below, the streets were turning blue. The traffic was a low, continuous hum, distant and directionless, like the sound of the sea heard from a room with the windows closed.

The galleria was on the forty-second floor of the Meridian Complex, set back from the working offices and the data centers and the long corridors where engineers walked with coffee and purpose. It was built for this. For the looking up. A wide, curving terrace of dark stone and tempered glass, open to the air on three sides, with low benches and a few planters where winter grasses stood pale and stiff. In summer, people came here to eat lunch. To make calls. To sit in the sun and pretend the city was somewhere else. In winter, almost no one came.

Almost no one.

Tomás had the blanket spread over both of them,

tucked under their thighs, pulled up over Yael's shoulders. The thermos was between them, unscrewed, a thin curl of steam rising from it and dissolving into the cold air. He poured two small cups without asking. He always poured without asking. He had done it so many times over the years that the act had become a kind of language. I see you. I know what you need. I am here. She took the cup. Their fingers touched on the handle. Neither of them moved their hand away for a moment longer than necessary.

Above them, the sky was doing the thing it did in early winter, when the air was dry and the city lights had not yet fully risen. The blue deepened. The first stars appeared, not all at once, but one by one, like a signal being slowly decoded. And then the band of the Milky Way emerged, faint but unmistakable, a river of crushed light arcing from one edge of the dark to the other.

Yael leaned back against the bench and looked up.

"God," she said. Quietly. Not to him. To it. To the sky. To the sheer, stupid, overwhelming fact of it.

Tomás looked up too. He always looked up when she did. Not because he saw the same thing. Because he wanted to see her seeing it.

"The light from that one," she said, pointing with her cup toward a bright point low on the horizon. "The one just above the antenna array. That light left before we were born."

"Before we were born," he repeated. Not a question. An echo. He liked hearing her say things. Even things

he already knew. Especially things he already knew. Because the knowing was not the point. The saying was. The sound of her voice in the cold air, steady and warm and here.

"Before the building was here. Before the city. Before all of it." She lowered the cup. The steam curled around her chin. "It just kept going. For all that time. No one watching. No one catching it. And then it hits a glass lens on a Tuesday evening and some woman on a galleria says God and that's the end of the journey."

Tomás smiled. "That's a good journey."

"It's a long journey."

"It's the same thing."

She looked at him. The way she looked at him when he said something simple and true and she was not prepared for it. A look that was half amusement, half something deeper. Something that lived below the words. She did not say anything. She just looked. And he looked back. And the city hummed below them. And the stars kept coming.

They sat in it. In the silence. In the cold. In the warmth of the blanket and the thermos and the small, steady heat of another person's shoulder pressed against yours. They did not need to fill it. They had long ago passed the point where silence was something to be solved. Their silence was a place. A room they had built together, brick by brick, year by year. And they could sit in it and be full.

And underneath it, underneath the stars and the steam and the easy, wordless grammar of their

closeness, there was the other thing. The thing they had not said. The thing that was in the room but not in the room. The thing that sat in the space between the words like a cold draft under a door.

Tomorrow.

Tomorrow, Yael would take the elevator down from this galleria to the transit level. Tomorrow, she would cross the plaza to the launch complex. Tomorrow, she would put on the suit and walk the corridor and strap into the Meridian and become the first human being to travel faster than light. The Meridian would not fly through space. Space would fold around it, and inside the bubble the ship would rest, still, a pocket of quiet carried on the dark. A second aboard would be a second on Earth. She would come back the same age as the man who stayed, and the waiting would be the same length for both of them. The bubble would cross a light-year in twenty minutes. The edge of the arm — the edge of everything — was months away, not lifetimes.

And the sky she was looking at now, this sky, this specific and unrepeatable arrangement of stars and cold air and city glow, would be the last sky she saw from the ground. For a long time. For a very long time. For longer than either of them wanted to think about.

They did not say this. They did not need to. It was in the way Yael's hand found the edge of the blanket and held it, not pulling, just holding, as if confirming the texture of it. The weave. The weight. The fact that it was real and here and warm. It was in the way Tomás

poured a second cup even though neither of them had finished the first. Because pouring was a way of staying. A way of saying I am still here, I am still here, I am still here without using the words.

"Look at that," Yael said. She pointed up. Not at a star this time. At the whole of it. The band. The river. The vast, indifferent, beautiful sprawl of it. "You ever think about how it doesn't care?"

"The sky?"

"All of it. The light. The distance. The whole... architecture." She made a small, vague gesture with her free hand, as if trying to hold the shape of the cosmos in her fingers and finding them too small. "It doesn't care that we're looking. It doesn't care that we're here. It just is. And we're just... in it. For a little while."

Tomás was quiet for a moment. He drank from his cup. The tea was too hot. He drank it anyway.

"I think it cares," he said.

She looked at him.

"Not the stars. Not the light. But the looking." He turned the cup in his hands. The steam curled between them. "The fact that the light goes for a billion years and no one sees it and then two people on a galleria go God and point at it. I think that changes something. I think the looking matters."

Yael was quiet. She watched the steam. She watched the stars. She watched the reflection of the stars in the glass wall of the galleria, doubled and trembling slightly in the wind.

"Yeah," she said. Softly. "Maybe it does."

And the silence came back. And they sat in it. And the city hummed. And the stars burned. And the cold air moved over them and through them and around them, carrying the signal they could not hear, the vast and silent broadcast of the field they would never name, the thing that made the looking possible, the thing that made the God possible, the thing that made the warmth of the cup and the weight of the blanket and the sound of the other person's breathing matter. The signal was everywhere. In the air. In the stone. In the glass. In the spaces between the stars. In the space between their shoulders. They were swimming in it. They had always been swimming in it. And they did not know. Because you do not notice the thing you have always had. You do not notice the water until it is gone.

She was standing at the far end of the galleria, near the glass railing, where the planters gave way to open stone and the wind came in clean and cold from the west. She had come up from the lab on the thirty-first floor because the numbers were not resolving and her eyes were tired and the fluorescent panels overhead had begun to feel like a weight pressing down on the back of her skull. She needed air. She needed the sky. She needed, for a few minutes, to look at something that was not a graph.

Elara Voss stood with her hands in her coat pockets and watched the stars come out. She did not think about work. She tried not to. She let the cold air fill her

lungs and held it and let it go and watched the Milky Way assemble itself above the city like a thought forming slowly in a vast and patient mind.

And then she saw them.

Two people. A bench. A blanket. A thermos between them. The small, unconscious choreography of long familiarity. The way one of them refilled the cup without being asked. The way the other leaned into the shoulder. The way their silence was not empty but full, not an absence but a presence, a thing they had built and lived in and carried with them like a room.

Elara watched them for a moment. She did not know them. She did not know their names or their story or the specific, unrepeatably texture of their life together. She just saw the shape of it. Two people under the sky. A thermos. A blanket. The easy, wordless grammar of being known.

And she felt something. A small, warm pang in the center of her chest. Not envy. Not loneliness. Something closer to recognition. A reminder. That the universe was not just data. That there were things that could not be graphed. That the signal she spent her life trying to isolate and measure and pin to a peer-reviewed page was, in the end, just this. Two people. A cup. The sound of breathing in the cold. The feeling of being seen by another mind and finding, in that seeing, the proof that you were real.

She watched them for a moment longer. And then she turned and walked back toward the glass doors. And the warmth went with her. And the cold air stayed.

And the stars kept coming. And the couple on the bench did not see her go. They did not need to. They had each other. And the sky. And the signal, humming in the dark, carrying them, holding them, keeping them warm and whole and present in a way they would never think to notice. Because you do not notice the thing that keeps you alive. You do not thank the air. You do not thank the gravity. You do not thank the signal. You just breathe. You just stand. You just lean into the shoulder and close your eyes and say, this is enough. This is here. This is real.

And for now, it was.

The tea was almost gone. The sky was fully dark. The city below was a grid of amber and white, and the stars above were a scatter of ancient light, and the cold had settled into their bones in the way it did in early winter, slow and absolute, as if the season were claiming them one degree at a time.

Yael set her cup down. She did not pick it up again. She looked at the sky. She looked at the band of the Milky Way. She looked at the point where the stars thinned and the dark deepened and the edge of everything she had ever known gave way to the rest.

"Come back to me," Tomás said.

He said it the way he said everything. Quietly. Without drama. Without performance. A statement of fact. A small, steady thing placed between them like a stone in a stream. Not a command. Not a plea. A truth. The most important truth he knew, spoken in the

smallest voice he had.

Yael looked at him. The cold had put color in her cheeks. The starlight was in her eyes. She smiled. Not the big smile. Not the one for cameras and colleagues and the long corridors of the Meridian Complex. The small one. The one that was just for him. The one that lived in the space between the words.

"Always," she said.

And the word hung in the cold air. Small and warm and certain. A promise. A fact. A signal sent from one mind to another across the short, precious distance between two people who had built a life in the spaces between the silence.

And the sky held them. And the signal carried them. And the stars burned on, ancient and indifferent and full of a light that had traveled a billion years to be seen, just once, by two people on a galleria who would never know how close they were to the edge of the dark.

And the word hung there. Always.

And the sky did not answer.

And no one noticed the silence.