

# THE FIFTEENTH SAINT

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## THE FIFTEENTH SAINT

Sannali Emenev did two things with his life: he read a book with one page, and he ran a city.

Neither of these was his official role. There were eight judges in Junpalto. Every one of the eight of them got up in the morning, pulled a stretchy cap over their braided hair, placed a flowing wig over the cap, and sat in state to hear the problems of the city. But the first judge was brand new, the second was exhausted, the third was busy looking after his aging father, and the fourth was distracted by bickering among the Companies. So it ran through the list, and the conclusion was that if you needed someone to rearrange a department or reform a school, you spoke to Judge Emenev.

The book was private. Emenev rarely spoke of it, even to his clerk: it was the sort of thing hermits in the canyons or starfarers who had listened to voices in the deep cared about, not rational and responsible city folk. But Emenev had seen too many lives twist from oath to debt to quiet desperation to sneer at luck, whatever form it came in. So every morning, after he pulled the soft cap over his head but before he took his wig from its stand, Emenev removed the book's silk wrapper, spun the old-fashioned multi-dial lock till it revealed the initials of the prophets, opened the cover, and said, "Good morning."

The book responded with a line of praise for the sun that was or the sun that is or the stars scattered through the deep. From there, it jumped directly to advice. The

book held the wisdom of fourteen saints. In the chilled silicon and indium alloys pressed between its enamel covers there was a further, coordinating wisdom, to predict the fable each reader would need before they thought to require it. Interpreting the results was a different problem. Emenev kept a hand-written notebook on real paper with questions in the top half of each page. Sometimes he even went back and filled in a column of answers.

On that particular early autumn morning, Emenev had lain in bed longer than usual, pondering a question of contracts and watching the shadows on his ceiling turn from patches of lighter and darker gray to squares to sharp-edged latticework. He finally tore himself out of bed when he heard, or hoped he heard, a sound below. Thus, his greeting to the book was perfunctory. The book responded with two lines of verse:

\* \* \*

The planet tide draws the mountains higher than the sky.  
Beloved, is that moon-dust, or a wave breaking?

\* \* \*

Emenev preferred the adventures of saints and livestock to the book's more poetic excursions. He scribbled "mountains—dust—wave" in his notebook, then hastened down broad steps to the breakfast room.

The courtyard doors were closed, but the glass had turned transparent, letting light pour in. Emenev poured tea from the urn on the sideboard into a flared cup, rolling the word "beloved" round his mouth, then pushing it back with "moon-dust." When he turned back toward the windows, a man was waiting.

The man, whom Emenev knew as Kiza, had a compact build, and that morning he was clean-shaven, which made him seem younger than his thirty-odd years. His smile for Emenev was merry. But Emenev stood still for a moment, caught not so much by Kiza's expression as by the light. It shone through Kiza's unbound hair like the banked glow of polished garnet.

That free fall of waist-length hair meant possibility. Kiza was what people called a tongue for hire. He could be anyone or no one, a soldier or failed poet or Company man, as each mission required. Emenev, whose hair beneath his cap was twisted up with ribbon for his brother's daughter and his youngest sister's child and four distinct professional societies, shivered at the flaunted freedom. Instead of reaching out, he bowed and asked, "Will you have tea?"

Kiza laughed at him and gripped his shoulder. "Sani, I can find my own tea in your house."

Kiza's fingers were strong. Emenev, who moved with the habitual care of someone who had grown too tall too fast, longed to fling his arms wide and crush the man against him. But there was an order to even this most unheralded of duties. Emenev filled a tray with luxurious and unlaborious foods: cubes of melon fresh from the mountains, pâté of duck marbled with berries, crackers with sesame and black cumin. Kiza did pour his own tea, taking the opportunity to add an extra spoonful of jam.

They demolished the stacks of food together, brushing fingers against fingers in competition for the ripest chunks of fruit. Emenev tried to talk about velo-polo like an ordinary person. Kiza, who knew perfectly well how to play, asked sillier and sillier questions: There were always four riders to a team? Never five, or a threesome? These mallets, they were of a standard size? Did the judge not prefer an extra-long polo stick?

But when at last Emenev toppled into helpless laughter, Kiza said sternly, "Sani. Tell me what you need," and despite Emenev's many desires, they were instantly in the realm of business.

"I need you to go to Tengiz-Ushiyet."

"Ah, a holiday by the sea. With the entire Western Army." Kiza spun his hair out of his face in a temporary twist, leaving his stern gaze unimpeded. "Why now? Why not

ten days ago?”

Ten days ago, the army had moved into Ushiyet. The news bulletins made cheerful noises about the importance of practicing urban maneuvers and extra discounts on military wheat. It wasn't unusual for a group of officers to grow bored and decide they wanted more parades and less supervisory farming. A brief incursion wasn't cause for alarm.

But Emenev could not be calm. He offered his first uneasy piece of evidence: “The judges there aren't talking. Last week, I sent their second judge white tea. She hasn't answered.” You didn't hold a meeting without food or drink, not even a virtual one; you didn't accept tea without a meeting. The etiquette breach rang like a siren.

Once Emenev had started noticing the strangeness, other facts piled up. Half of the news bulletins were recycled from another year, though the scenes of cheering crowds seemed current. The price of emmer was rising. The Pellona Company had moved its base of operations to the southeast.

“All the nodes in the Ushiyet lattice are stuffed with bonfire footage,” Kiza told him.

“You watch that stuff?”

“You don't?”

“It's animated rumor. Stories without roots.”

Kiza stilled his hands. “There's a brand new story about setting bus tires on fire, Sani. What were you going to do? Wait for the warrant complaint?”

“I was going to send you!” Emenev spoke in haste, and then repeated, with more care, “I am sending you.”

Emenev was not a stranger to arranging people's lives. But usually the key term was arrangement. He took scores on the proficiency exams or arrays of past performance metrics and combined them, bringing people together or apart the way his windows brightened or darkened against the flow of sunlight. He was sending Kiza to a city overrun by soldiers. There was no projection he could run, to evaluate this choice. Emenev saw moss-gray uniforms in his mind's eye, rows of rifles. He watched the loose shirt fall away from Kiza's wrists, and thought of those hands holding a pistol steady. Emenev was responsible. If Kiza died, or if Kiza shot someone—a situation could change that quickly, a wall of glass crumbling into razor-sparkling dust.

“Keep an eye on the nodes, Sani. I'll go fishing on the pier.” Kiza pressed a charm into Emenev's hand: a cheap thing, mass-produced for a mass-venerated saint, a bead and tassel stamped with curving thorns. It felt too light; Emenev had to focus, not to drop it. When he pried the bead apart, there would be a code inside.

Meanwhile, Kiza had produced a long, light scarf. He held one end in his mouth as he wrapped the turban round his head, rapidly and neatly. You would never know his hair was unbraided underneath. He shrugged into a jacket sewn with many pockets, ducked his head, and seemed, for a moment, ordinary and unremarkable.

“Be careful,” Emenev told him. That was easier than asking, “Is the wave about to break?”

Kiza left, laughing.

\* \* \*

At the end of the week, Emenev took the bus to visit his mother. There was a stop a block from the judicial chambers, and no transfers. The bus chose its routes based on demand; Emenev wondered whether he had made this trip often enough to shift the route all by himself.

Emenev's mother still lived in the same two-room flat that he had grown up in. He had offered to find her a house: diffidently, when he was first enrolled as an advocate, then more strenuously, when he became a judge and she began to complain that her knees crackled on the stairs. But she insisted that she was too old to change

her ways, that the noodle-shop on the corner and the grocer round the block would be lost without her patronage, and no number of forceful representations would shift her. Instead, the family clustered around her. There were no longer five of them packed into the apartment—it had been six, while the contract for his youngest sister's parentage lasted—but Emenev's brother took the flat above, and his middle sister found a flat next door. The youngest sister had made it all the way to a block with a different noodle-shop and a different bus line. Emenev was the only one who had left the neighborhood, and the only one without children. He bought ice cream and raspberry-whiteplum sauce at the grocer as a distraction.

Emenev needn't have worried. He opened the door and walked straight into an argument. His niece was shouting and his brother was holding a glass of vodka and pontificating right in the middle of the arch between Emenev and the kitchenette. He waded gingerly through the fray, managing not to swing the bags into a lamp or a child, glared his brother out of the archway, kissed his mother, and embarked on making space in the cold storage with the dedication of a man who could have been an architect.

The fight raged on. Emenev's sister-in-law offered to find spoons for the fruit sauce. In the main room, his niece shouted, "The grader isn't even alive!"

Emenev and his sister-in-law despaired of finding metal spoons that matched, and settled on the compostable sorghum kind. As she passed him the box, his sister-in-law told him quietly, "Simet failed the literature practical."

"But she's a good writer."

Emenev had misjudged the ambient roar, or else grown too used to projecting through a courtroom, because his niece spun toward the kitchenette, child's braid swinging. "I am an incredible writer! That's the problem. I had an original idea!"

Emenev sighed, grabbed a piece of flatbread with extra onions, and committed himself to the investigation.

Simet had taken a classic poem of two centuries past, where an incarnation of the Divine was seen feeding pigeons in a park, and reinterpreted it as political allegory. As the Divine flickered between old and young and middle-aged, between wrinkled cheeks and springing black beard, she (and he, and they) represented three enduring power groups: the judges, the army, and the Companies. "The judge is the old woman, Uncle Nalek, because she remembers everything."

"Thank you," Emenev said, dryly. "Who are the ordinary people, in your analysis?"

"That's the best part. They're the student who watches the transformation. Because a student can become anything!"

Simet actually believed it. She thought that if she studied hard and chose the right advanced exams, she could win an officer's commission or a Company apprenticeship or become a judge. The proof of the third option's validity stood beside her, balancing a piece of flatbread on a napkin.

But Emenev had never trusted that preparedness would be enough. It must be a marvelous thing, he mused, to reach adolescence with two parents in a permanent contract and a bedroom to yourself. You could reduce an entire incarnation to a metaphor, rather than begging the Divine for luck. He asked, "What was your counterthesis?"

"I didn't have one."

"Every essay has a counterthesis," Emenev's brother intoned, surely not for the first time.

"Not in the same essay! If I was an advocate in Uncle Nalek's courtroom, someone else would give the counterthesis and then he would synthesize. I kept writing my thesis because it was *good*!"

"The grader didn't think so," snapped her father.

"The grader is a machine."

“It’s a machine intelligence, guided by the practice of an expert teacher,” Emenev interposed. “It has to be that way, for consistent grading. Every fourteen-year-old on this continent takes the literature exam.”

“Every fourteen-year-old everywhere has been taking a literature exam since before I was born. For all I know, the teacher is dead. They’re a ghost. I was marked unsatisfactory by a ghost.”

A “Fair” mark was a graceful failure. This was worse: one unsatisfactory exam could wreck a lyceum admission. “In some cases, exams can be retaken,” Emenev suggested.

“But it’s not my fault! It’s the ghost’s fault, for not seeing a good essay.”

“How would the new exam be arranged?” Simet’s father asked.

Emenev’s instinct was to fold his hands and project thoughtfulness, but the flatbread was in the way. “The most usual justification is illness. I don’t know all the contingencies. I might chat with the head of the lyceum.”

“What about the others?” Simet demanded. She swayed with the intensity of her emphasis like a birch tree by the river. She had the family height.

“What others?”

“Every fourteen-year-old on this continent takes the exam, Uncle Nalek.” Simet matched his intonation precisely. “How many failed because the ghost hates a good thesis?”

“Machine intelligences are not supernatural.” Emenev was letting her set the terms of the discussion. The whole situation felt like a tea glass about to slide over the edge of the tray.

He should not have been glad when the comm folded into the brim of his hat started buzzing. Only a few people could force the physical alert.

Emenev took the phone call on the balcony, wedging himself between a swaddled umbrella and a planter full of bedraggled stewfruit vines. The caller was his clerk, Notary-General Umirvayet. Her voice was rougher than usual, her apologies perfunctory.

“What has the fourth judge done?” Emenev asked.

“Judge Rustamov is calling on the second judge for a curfew. You’ve seen the news?”

“A Fourthday evening curfew? What resin have they smoked?” Half of the city would be visiting family; the rest were in the tea-shops, or resting up for Fifthday.

“We need visuals, Judge.”

Emenev pulled his tablet from his pocket and unfolded it, balancing the screen on the balcony railing. He felt like a teenager sneaking outside to read radical newspapers.

Umirvayet was still in her office. The light cast cold blue shadows, hollowing her cheeks and sharpening her chin. She flicked her fingers, and the view changed to a railway station somewhere in the mountains: ticket kiosks with conical roofs, an empty platform, the rails, a stretch of gravel filmed with early snow, and then the cliffs beyond. “It’s Yashmu Pass,” Umirvayet told him.

The film had the silver border and second-by-second timestamp of judicial footage. Emenev watched the platform, waiting for a suspect, trying to ignore the black bird pecking at something on the tracks. He overlooked the first slipping in the cliff face, the shift that could have been the camera swerving, if it hadn’t been set into the station roof. A few moments later the entire cliff was moving, sliding down like overheated butter. Dust and smoke foamed up. The camera did shake now, along with the building holding it.

The view resolved to a mess of boulders and flashing lights—amber, red, and one insistent white pulse at the peak of the remaining kiosk that Emenev recognized as *Approaching train*. “Luck?” he asked.

"The Gentian freight was running three minutes late."

The footage couldn't show the frantic whistle of a train trying to slow. At least gravity was on its side. Emenev realized he was breathing in time with the flashing light, and forced his chest out, then in. The snub-nosed engine pushed into sight at last, coasting, coasting, but with thousands of tons behind it. There was a big round eye painted on its side, the hallmark of an expert system, with a gentian flower in the center.

The train finally paused, perhaps a meter from the closest scattered boulder. Emenev imagined its eye closing in relief. But a figure in mud-and-pine camouflage was approaching. Here the footage ended.

The figure had been wearing a uniform designed for the side of the mountains where rain fell steadily, so Emenev's first question was, "Has the Western Army made a statement?"

"They recommend civilians and Company employees avoid Yashmu Pass for the next two weeks, due to ongoing operations."

Next was a plain statement of a huge fact. Society was an awning supported by four poles: the law-courts, the armies, the Companies, and the people. But the Western Army was challenging the Companies and the cities simultaneously. A collapsing tent; dust like sea-foam; mountains breaking like waves. Emenev ran his thumb along the edge of his tablet, as if he could draw up a message from Kiza. Inside the flat, his brother was declaiming.

Umirvayet was silent. "Go home," Emenev told her. "Before the second judge approves this curfew. I'll call her next."

The call ended. Emenev let the screen of his tablet darken and stood for a moment, watching the reflected lights: white dots from the apartment across the way, where they knew nothing, and golden oblongs from his mother's lamps. He should warn his mother he would need a bed, before he called the judge. He folded his screen and dove into the noise.

\* \* \*

The eight judges of Junpalto met the next morning. They sat at an octagonal table in their accustomed places, their wigs freshly combed, with their clerks behind them to provide necessary documents, and sipped espresso from tiny cups. There should have been breakfast, but none of the kitchen staff worked on Fifthday. Emenev had acquired a box of fried pastries on the way from his mother's flat to the meeting. The sixth judge took a small one, which showered her napkin with powdered sugar. At least the wigs were already white.

They began by discussing the city's reaction to the news. Grumbling; fear; as yet no outright panic. The second judge, Nurlanevet, suggested an extension of the curfew as a precautionary measure. The sixth judge set aside her pastry and concurred.

"Out of an excess of caution," Judge Rustamov proposed, "shall we shift the curfew's beginning up to seven?"

"It's still light outside at that hour," Emenev protested.

"All the more reason to discourage gatherings." Rustamov, the fourth judge, was classically handsome: brow high like an icy moon, lips full beneath a neatly curled mustache. He pressed his fingers together as if posing for his municipal portrait.

Emenev set his espresso cup down with a click. "What does my esteemed colleague imagine people will eat?"

"Healthful food, that they prepare themselves, in the kitchens of their homes?"

Emenev could not jump down the fourth judge's throat. He wiped his mouth with his napkin instead, envying his colleague's deftness, his economy of motion. "The average citizen of Junpalto has eight square meters of living space. They have no room for a pantry and cold storage. They barely have room for a double bed."

"I delight in my colleague's command of demographic statistics."

Emenev nodded, projecting false collegial amusement. In truth, he knew the number because he had reveled in exceeding it, when as a newly minted advocate he rented an apartment by himself.

“But surely,” Rustamov continued, “our citizens can purchase bread and salad, as they wend home from work? Assembly of a meal is not beyond their skills?”

Emenev had been to formal dinners at the fourth judge’s house. They all had. The man had a live-in cook.

“I believe Seventh Judge Emenev is concerned for the grocers?” the sixth judge interposed. “We cannot ask them to live in their places of business! We will also wish to make provisions for restaurateurs, and to consider the impact on tourism more broadly.”

They were back in the realm of reasonable plans and contingencies: rules to make, policies to apply, and strategies to redirect supply chains, now that freight from the western coast was unavailable. It was a frustrating task for a Fifthday morning, and Emenev could have used some of his book’s wisdom, but they managed it.

They managed with all the more vigor because they were avoiding a bigger question, one Judge Nurlanvet finally raised several hours into the meeting, after they had broken for tea and an odd collection of crisps: “How will we respond when the Western Army arrives on our doorstep?”

In this group, Emenev was the brash one, the one who spoke difficult truths out loud, so he squared his shoulders and said, “We must summon the Lake Army first.”

Rustamov smiled. Perhaps he thought summoning an army was like hiring an expert in unclogging drains. The eighth judge laughed in shock, then tried to squash it, shaking their head till their long earrings vibrated like springs.

Nurlanvet was square and sure. All of her leisure activities had solidity: splitting wood for the fire at lakefront cottages, or crafting earthenware vases. She looked now as if she had been awake all night, guarding some small and precious creature through a desperate illness. “Will the Lake Army protect our citizens? Will they seek justice?”

“Second Judge, I apologize for making a statement of consummate baldness,” said the third judge, who never did anything of the sort. “But I must attempt a response to your cogent question. It seems, from my perspective, after considering the multitude of factors, that it is imperative we contemplate whether, in the alternative, we are prepared, ourselves, to fight a war.”

“We don’t know how,” said Emenev.

All of the other judges had to have their say, but that, in the end, was that.

The afternoon was consumed by crafting the text of the invitation and adorning it with flourishes. Emenev signed with his gaudiest stylus, the one whose cap was starred with artificial diamond. Umirvayet contacted the florist outside the Lake Army base and ordered a massive arrangement, full of sword lilies and tulips opening like suns. The first judge’s clerk, who was as experienced as that judge was new, set up a meeting with a general.

They channeled the general’s image into a globe at the center of the table. She stood in a well-lit room, the sword lilies behind her. Her uniform was the color of dried grass. Her graying hair was pulled back from her face and braided with ribbons of sky blue, for officers swore a single oath and a single devotion, and hers was to the army of the lakes.

The judges read their invitation, the clauses rolling off their tongues. Even the third judge’s voice was firm and sonorous. It fell to Emenev to ask, “Will you, having considered all these factors, come to the aid of the city of Junpalto?”

It took skill for the general to look him in the eye, with a full globe of faces stretched across her screen, but she managed it. She smiled the smile one makes at a cat boldly capturing a beetle, and answered, “We will come.”

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The sun was sinking behind the Company financiers' towers by the time Emenev approached his house. He was the only person on his street; lights brightened and darkened at the top of the compound walls, tracing his movements. He passed through his wooden gates with their linked octagonal carvings, changed his sharp-toed shoes for slippers, and was at last in his own home. He stretched, feeling the welcoming emptiness: no extra chairs to trip on, no nicked tables swathed in machine-embroidered tablecloths, and for that matter no subordinates juggling styluses or shelves filled with unread legal tomes. He patted his couch like an old friend, drawing his fingertips along the linen grain, then went upstairs to find the book.

The book gave him a fable about a widow, a goat, a mountain lion, a box of eggs packed in tissue, and a river crossing. The moral was that the ferryman was the only one to profit.

"Friend," Emenev told it, "I am doing my best."

The columns of text shivered like rain, then re-formed. The new text began with a litany: an electron's internal spin, the electron dancing around a nucleus, the shiver of atoms within a rock, all the way up to the slow rotation of the galaxy's arms and the slide of entire galaxies. Twisted behind and within and around all of these things was the deep, that other space where starships cut between stars. At every shift in scale, the book said, we experience a loss. But at every shift in scale there is the deep; thus at every shift in scale we find eternity; at every shift in scale there is the beloved, who has always been beloved.

Emenev felt both too large and too small. He shook himself all over, thanked the book, and allowed himself to open his everyday tablet and run through the sequence that would check for messages from Kiza, on some anonymous node. A message was there, wrapped tight, with the sparkling and obvious encryption used for letters to lovers. Emenev fed in the code from Kiza's bead.

The recording opened on Kiza, balancing on a railing by the harbor. He had found a tourist's windbreaker somewhere, the kind with too many zippers. Sunlight made the fabric into mirrors and shadows, like the water behind him. "You won't believe it here!" he told the hovering camera, his smile as sharp as fresh-cut sheets of paper.

Kiza cupped the camera in both hands and drew it toward him; it buzzed against his fingers like a fortunate bee. "It's not just the army. It's the army and the citizens together. They've found philosophy. Humans as shepherds. Every one of us, the Divine Guide in miniature. No machine intelligence without human direction."

Kiza released the camera and it spun upward in a lazy spiral. "No more saints! Nothing between us and the Divine!" Behind him there were yachts, pedal-boats, and a stacked three-level water-bus. It had eyes on its prow for the navigation system, but someone had sprayed them with a shining *X*, too bright for blood.

"I think you should stop working. I'm serious. Go on a long vacation." Just a flicker, there, of the bone-deep emptiness of a city lost. Then Kiza laughed and told the camera, "When I see you again, I'm going to hug you so hard, you'll think the ocean hit you."

The message broke into soap-bubble fragments. Emenev was too wise to have saved it anyway; or so he told himself.

He did not consider heeding his friend's warning. He did not know where he could go, beyond Junpalto. Emenev swallowed his worry like a string of tourmaline beads, suppressing all the questions about Kiza's stylized lies, and occupied himself in crafting a reply. He drew a rotating model of a sky-blue ribbon, the Lake Army's color, woven and knotted with the translucent gold of his own personal contracts.

Kiza had been a Lake Army soldier, before he set allegiances aside. Twelve years and out. But Kiza did not make promises, so he had no ribbon color.

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The next few weeks were too long, and their days were too short. The Companies



canceled conferences; the price of tea shot up anyway. The municipal soup kitchens doubled their capacity. Shops sold out of cured cheese and winter coats.

Emenev talked panicked administrators through rescheduling four major court cases, sponsored an emergency budget addendum for the kitchens, and organized an audit of the city's water supply. He made lists on his tablet and lists of lists by hand. He felt as crumbly as overstirred cement.

He rode the bus in the morning, and home again at night. He could have crushed himself into a velokab and been there faster. But there were wild hares living in the square near his house, chewing on the ornamental bushes, their patchy fur shading from gravel-flecked to white. The bus gave him scraps of time to notice these things, to wonder why this woman always carried an umbrella or that shop was painted in concentric squares, without having to create a policy or render a judgment.

He had more time to wonder because the buses were running more and more slowly, as if they too were overwhelmed by expectations. Sometimes they approached the square and then veered off. Waiting people traced the dots on their tablets and cursed. Emenev preferred to watch the hares.

A morning came when Emenev thought the bus would not arrive at all. Other riders summoned velokabs, cursing, or jogged toward distant trams. At last, only Emenev and the woman with the umbrella remained. The bus, when it finally appeared, seemed ordinary: a bright oblong, its curving windows overlaid with advertisements for healthy habits, like an overpriced vitamin pill. It leaned toward the curb and opened the center hatch. The woman moved forward, using the point of her umbrella for balance, and collapsed into the nearest seat. Emenev sat near her. There were clusters of teenagers in the front and back of the bus, laughing and pointing at the time on the overhead clock. A person in a pin-dotted turban was having a vociferous argument with their tablet.

"Rerouting," the bus said, in a confident tenor.

The back-of-bus teenagers waved their arms, palms turned toward the ground and thumbs outstretched in the universal symbol for "Next stop!" The front-of-bus teenagers cheered. The turbaned person made a noise like a stalling helicopter.

"Bus, explain the route change," Emenev said, with the forced calm that evaded pre-programmed requests for patience.

"Rerouting to Broad Avenue to mitigate demand," the bus told him, its own patience inexhaustible. It took a sharp left toward the city center, ignoring the teenagers' pleas; their noises rose in pitch.

Emenev pulled his tablet out and checked the bus map. The only purple dots he could find were on Broad Avenue, crawling back and forth. "Bus, make immediate stop as requested."

"Next stop Broad and Third," the bus announced.

That was a good half-hour away. Even the front-of-bus teenagers were glancing at the bright-orange Emergency Stop switch and murmuring. The penalty for non-emergency use was dire.

Emenev was the seventh judge of Junpalto. He refused to be kidnapped by a bus. He rose to his feet, balancing easily against the bus's movement, and yanked the switch down.

"Emergency stop requested. All systems nominal. Seeking safe egress." Pulsing lights lit up around the bus as it swung toward the curb. All the hatches lifted; the teenagers spilled onto the street; the turbaned person stomped away.

"And you, khaniet?" Emenev asked the woman with the umbrella, offering her the old-fashioned honorific.

"I'm not walking home," she informed him, with all the decision of the ancient khans. Pain pulled the lines beneath her eyes at a diagonal.

"Khaniet, I would be delighted to summon a velokab on your behalf—"

"I don't want favors. I want my due. Barley porridge at the city kitchen, and a ride home on the city bus."

"But khaniet, you can see that there is a malfunction."

"Then fix it! Aren't you a city worker?" She gestured at his coat. Its wide trim and shining buttons echoed the city insignia.

"Resuming service," the bus announced. "Next stop, Broad and Third."

In booming courtroom voice, Emenev declaimed, "Bus, as seventh judge and representative of the city of Junpalto, I order you to proceed to the nearest municipal kitchen with dispatch."

"That's a fine attempt," the woman told him, "and your beard is thick enough. But judges don't ride the bus."

The title only went so far, without the wig and the bundle of official ribbons. Emenev wondered whether he should bleach extra silver in his beard.

The bus was moving again, trundling back into the road as if this was an ordinary day in an ordinary year. "Next stop, Broad and Third." Emenev felt the traffic as pressure on his chest, the weight of a river. He might flail and flail and never emerge.

But that would entail ceasing to work, and Emenev would not permit himself to cease. A technician should understand this route deviation. Emenev was not a technician, so he messaged his clerk, "Who holds the support contract for the city buses?"

Umirvayet answered, "Zato. They're a Fountain Company subsidiary, out of Tengiz-Ushiyet."

A dead end, then. Tengiz-Ushiyet might have created the problem; it would not solve it. Emenev pondered whom else he might know who would understand the mind of a machine and reached the obvious and unsettling conclusion. He contacted his house system and asked to speak to the book.

"I apologize for contacting you in this manner," he began. The book had preferences, and one of them was to behave like a book, not a shadow of a human architect.

"You would not disturb us without need," the book said briskly. "But state your business. Don't delay for earthly ceremony."

Emenev told his tale. After a whirring pause, like the flicker of thousands of pages, the book replied, "Where are the ships that roam the deep no longer? Where are the stars that fall from the long dance?"

Emenev thanked the book, ended the call, and pondered what it meant.

"I'm sorry, khaniet. This will be loud." He rose to his full height, bellowing for power, and slammed against the back of the seat before him. It didn't budge. Emenev was tall and strong, but compared to a late-night crowd of tourists he was a gently floating petal. He punched a window; he hurt nothing but his wrists.

"Please respect the comfort of other citizens," said the bus. "Next stop, Broad and Third!"

Kiza would have produced a pistol, or a knife, or a piece of metal that expanded to a lever. He would have a mental catalog of ways to break buses. Emenev had a tablet and a pen.

This was not entirely correct: Emenev had a tablet and a stylus. The stylus cap shone with plasma-deposited diamond. He scrubbed it against the glass. It left a white line and a trail of grit. That would work, then. Steadying himself, Emenev wrote a message above several seats, in three well-spaced columns. The hatched and shaded letters embraced in flourishes: "Sani loves Kiza." It was a stupid message, a doomed adolescent promise—the classic style, for some strategic vandalism.

"If it pleases you, will you complain, khaniet?" Emenev asked. "I hope to find some answers at the station."

The woman rapped her umbrella's handle on the seat and declared, "Bus! This

window has been vandalized!”

Lights trailed across the ceiling as the bus’s internal cameras assessed the damage. A jet of water sprayed over the window. Kiza’s name gleamed.

“Leaving service for necessary repairs,” the bus announced at last. “Please exit at your earliest convenience. This is the last scheduled stop.” But Emenev remained, as did the woman with the umbrella.

The ride to the bus depot was long, long enough for Emenev to wonder what would happen if he simply disappeared, swept out of place like a game-piece caught on a sleeve. He could ask the same question, on a grander scale, about his entire city: if the Lake Army never arrived, if Junpalto was overrun, who would know? It was one city, on one plain, on one less-than-populated continent, on one world.

It was dangerous, these days, for thoughts to pause—like a short rest in a midwinter snowdrift. Emenev set himself, instead, to learn his companion’s life story. She had been an aide to an elderly scholar, until her joints rebelled and she could no longer manage the necessary lifting, even with mechanical assist; her pension had gone to pay her first child’s gambling debts. Her second child led snowshoe treks from a mountain town so isolated it lost lattice access when the snowpack grew. In return, Emenev gave the woman profiles of all his siblings’ children.

“But you have none yourself?” she demanded, with the authority of the old.

Ordinarily Emenev pled the exigencies of running a city. This time he offered a different slice of truth: “I’d hoped for a long-term contract. Not a temporary marriage.”

“That’s a luxury for folks who come from money. Your Kiza doesn’t need you to buy eternal love. Enjoy the days you have with him, as they come.”

There were so many assumptions bundled into that remark—who Emenev’s family was, what his relationships might be—that Emenev despaired of sorting them. He gave her the real answer as a joke: “Kiza is a glamorous corporate spy. I don’t think he’ll ever settle, even temporarily.”

She sensed the edge in his reply, if not its source, and turned to looking out the windows, commenting on the long rows of warehouses that marked the transition from city into prairie. “There’s a bus,” she said, after a while.

There was a bus behind them, and another bus parked by the side of the road, the solar panels along its roof-spine gleaming in the sun. Then there were two buses at the edge of the road, then six. Then it became impossible to remark on a single bus. They lined the roadside in a single shimmering line, not quite still, but edging softly forward like accumulating snow.

The depot gate slid open, and the depot was before them. It was tiled with octagons and squares, like any municipal building, but these octagons were almost as tall as Emenev. Only the tacked-on side office was human scale. Emenev pulled the emergency stop lever one more time and escorted his companion inside. They found a single day attendant, a young man with wide-set eyes and fluffy beard.

The municipal system gave the attendant Emenev’s name and titles, in a scrolling stripe at the left edge of his screen. He found the woman a chair, failed to take her umbrella, offered tea, and panicked.

“Tea!” said Emenev. “Tea is ideal.” The depot’s cupboards were sadly lacking in amenities—it seemed that managerial meetings took place in the city—so he used his sundries account to liberate puffed chickpeas and a selection of wafers from the vending machine, and they sat down to an impromptu meeting.

After stumbling through the pleasantries, the attendant admitted he had expected a follow-up from the fourth judge’s office, which monitored physical infrastructure, not a visit from the seventh judge. The woman with the umbrella was simply watching, brows angled together: if Emenev was a real judge, her manner implied, then anything was possible.

"What have you reported to Judge Rustamov?"

The attendant spoke in bursts of nouns: "night," "ice," "pallet." He had not personally reported anything, Emenev deduced: that was the night manager's duty. But the meteorological projection said winter storms would arrive early this year, and a shipment the depot needed had been delayed. "Won't go. Esteemed judge. The buses, they won't go."

"Can you show me?" Emenev asked.

He expected some report, perhaps a map. Instead, the attendant said, "Authorize equipment? Esteemed judge?" and tossed him a helmet, earmuffs, and a neon bracelet. "For safety."

"Is there a standard safety training?"

There was. Emenev listened to the full quarter-hour with attention, tightened the helmet straps under his chin, flipped the bracelet's "This is a human" marker to "present," and was at last ready to enter the machines' part of the building.

The light on that side was bright and flat, the ceiling high. Robots swarmed the bus, scooting back and forth on dozens of swiveling wheels. They seemed independent, almost alive, though that was an illusion: the true intelligence was built into the building, watching from the girders with linked camera-eyes.

"Tires," said the attendant. Emenev heard the word through his earmuffs, the human voice high and sharp against the background roar. He looked, obediently. A robot took each tire, balancing it on evenly spaced claws. The back tires slid away to the far end of the vast room. Two free-standing axes shot forward, and the robots mounted the front tires upon them. They proceeded to peel the tires, as one slips cherry skin from stewed and sugared fruit.

Robots peered over the inner toruses, prodding them and strengthening patches with bursts of sparks. Then they transferred them to a new station and drew out strips of tough and corrugated rubber, wrapping the tires as they turned. A sliding knife cut the new ridges even deeper. These were tires built for a Junpalto winter, meant to grip pavement in temperatures a West Continent manufacturer couldn't even imagine.

More robots wrapped the tires, clad in their new armor, in a rubbery bag, sucking the air from it. They transferred them to a vast tank and shut the door. A display began counting down from an hour; the facility was not above a bit of showmanship for human visitors.

"Where did the back tires go?" Emenev asked.

"Back tires recycled. Front tires to the back. New on the front. Esteemed judge."

"Where are the new tires?"

The attendant ducked his head as far as he could manage while wearing a helmet and earmuffs. "Tengiz-Ushiyet."

Emenev, who customarily strove not to invoke powers he could not know or placate, swore with false gentleness, "Eyes of the Divine." It was the most foolish, basic logistics problem, the kind of thing his niece learned in games at school. The depot system expected tires to be delivered, and humans expected the system to winter-proof the buses. With freight stuck at the pass, all the buses in the city were waiting, waiting, shifting back and forth in line for a refit that never came. "Can we remount the old tires, while we reroute from the south?"

"Fourth judge. Not authorized. Esteemed judge."

What good was a judgeship, if one could not arrange things? "If you will both excuse me, I will place a call."

Emenev went outside to speak to Umirvayet. She contacted the fourth judge's office, almond cookies and tea changed hands, and in only half an hour, Emenev was speaking to Rustamov directly.

“My dear colleague, where *are* you?” Rustamov began.

“At the municipal bus repair facility. I apologize for the noise.” Buses were still creeping toward the building, shifting forward in their long, weird line.

“I know you enjoy the role of the ordinary townsman, but this is pure excess. Wasn’t one bus enough?”

Emenev smiled wide and wished he had a cookie to bite into. “That’s the problem, you see. All of the city buses are stuck here.”

The fourth judge’s mouth curved in gentle, forbearing amusement. It was the expression he would use to revoke a professional license, or to sentence a thief. “You called me out of a Pellona Company arbitration to play bus conductor?”

“City transit has come to a stop. The expert system can’t handle the supply disruptions, with the pass closed.”

“Emenev, my good friend. We are all working on the troubles caused by the pass closure. If the Companies start rerouting investments because they don’t trust our authority, we will have more trouble than a few late shopkeepers.”

“Forgive me, Rustamov. This need not be a major operation. I simply need an authorization from your office. A single seal.”

“I see. These little difficulties are so irksome, are they not? My wife’s child has been having all sorts of trouble with his lyceum entrance—I believe his physics scores aren’t where they should be, which is a ridiculous quibble, when he plans to study law—and if I try to say something, well, there’s no harm in it, but one doesn’t like to look particular. Of course your staff is in and out of the schools all the time.”

Emenev could speak to the lyceum’s head. He had said as much to Simet. But he heard her in his mind, declaring, “Every fourteen-year-old on this continent takes the exam,” standing straight as a tree in springtime. What kind of a judge was he, if he didn’t listen?

What kind of a judge was he, if he promoted Rustamov’s stepson?

“I’m afraid we have had less time for collaboration with the schools, given the ongoing disruptions,” he told the fourth judge, with all the cordiality he could muster.

“I understand completely. I won’t detain you any longer.”

They ended the call, still smiling, and then Emenev growled at the line of buses until he sounded like a one-man traffic jam. The fourth judge’s sheer, undiluted entitlement was incredible. He hadn’t even touched the tea that Umirvayet had sent over. Perhaps the Companies gave better gifts.

But the buses were still out there, oozing, waiting.

Emenev refused to go back into the depot without a solution. He was the judge who fixed things.

He outlined the problem in his mind, running it backward and forward like a legal brief. The expert system needed an authorization from the presiding judge; the fourth judge was presiding; the fourth judge did not care.

What gave the fourth judge this role? The Junpalto judicial division of authority, as represented by the contract all eight judges had negotiated between their offices and signed again when the first judge was sworn in.

But that wasn’t the primary contract. The overarching rule was the emergency declaration, the one the fourth judge had insisted upon, that set the curfew and repurposed city supplies.

Bus tires were city supplies. Emenev wanted to repurpose them. All he needed was a writ. Nothing prevented him from issuing it immediately. Nothing, that is, save his utter lack of ribbons, authentication chips, or any of the other elements of an official document.

Emenev swept back into the depot office with the force of a prairie storm. It was close and dim after the courtyard with the buses. Emenev needed text, fabric shades,

and scraps of code. A robot cut fabric into strips for him; another printed the official chips; the attendant unlocked the cabinet of expensive paper, fingers clattering against the metal door. In less than an hour, Emenev was reading the judicial ruling that created an override to his two human witnesses. They signed, the attendant's writing boxy and neat, the woman's brushed with horizontal trails that had been fashionable sixty years before. Just as important, each witness threaded a hastily painted ribbon through the hole punched for that purpose. Emenev tied the ribbons round the authorization chips and reasserted his ruling: "As seventh judge of the city of Junpalto, I set in abeyance the requirement for new winter tires, returning the buses to the streets."

His voice activated the chips and made the new rule official. The attendant bowed and took the document outside, putting it right back into the mailslot. But the expert system only needed the codes. Emenev geared up again to watch the robots restore his bus to working order, replacing the upgraded tires on the front and the old ones on the back. Then he used his tablet to request a ride back into the city. Since he and the woman with the umbrella represented the entirety of local bus demand, the bus was swiftly out front, waiting for them.

"Well, esteemed Mr. Judge!" the woman said. "You knocked some sense into that system. Thank you."

"This is the role of a judge. I do the work before me."

"We needed a person who cared. A person who could see how the machines were running wild, and make them stop. You did that all by yourself: you faced that system down and showed some human kindness. Take credit for it."

But Emenev had not acted by himself. He had followed the advice of a machine, the expert intelligence wrapped up inside his book. Kindness was crafted into it: that was the substrate shaping circuits into wisdom. "I rely on the insight of my friends, khaniet."

"That's right! Humans working together."

But not all of Emenev's friends were human.

\* \* \*

The weeks stretched on; there was a day of flurries and a day of hail; the nights grew longer. There was a rumor that the Western Army was at the pass, and would arrive by Fifthday. There were better-substantiated rumors that the Lake Army was approaching; they were coming up the river; they were traveling by barge. Those rumors were confirmed by reports from the towns along the river, and then by a message from the general herself.

Emenev and the other judges went to the riverport to greet the army. The city's gold and silver banner rippled behind them; the breeze off the water drove strands of their wigs into their faces. The sixth judge had a heavy coat, with handwarmers stuffed in the sleeves. She still shivered.

Emenev wasn't cold. He felt the sharpness of hope, all the way down to the tips of his booted toes. The arrival of the Lake Army meant a return to ordinary problems, to Company lawsuits and requests from schools. When freight was flowing again, Kiza might return. He smiled at the late-flying geese on the river; he grinned at the shadow of an approaching barge.

As the barges came closer, he saw they were festooned with Lake blue. They had the round eyes of expert systems. But somebody had gashed those eyes, leaving a bold slash and artistic black droplets that might be tears, or blood. Emenev felt the drops like cold, cold water, weighing him down.

"This army. They're fanatics," he said aloud.

"In what sense?" asked the second judge. Everything the judges did was, ultimately, based upon divine harmonies, but she had no patience for religious enthusiasms.

"They believe humans must dominate, and expert systems be discarded."

“We could use more common, human sense,” the fourth judge declared.

“It’s our duty to chart the path for our fellow citizens,” the eighth judge added. The sixth judge nodded vigorously.

Emenev had hoped for more sympathy—and more caution—from them both. “We must take care to preserve our rights and privileges,” he said, hoping self-interest would protect where moral intuition failed.

“A fourfold balance has subsisted between the substantive components of society since the days our people roamed the deep,” the third judge began.

Before Emenev could guide him, gently, to his point, the first barge was at the dock. The general strode toward them. Her pistol was at her waist; her guards held theirs in their hands. She and the judges traded bows.

They negotiated the surrender in a building made for wedding receptions and graduation parties, overlooking the river. Of course, they did not call it a surrender: it was an agreement for temporary disposition of forces. Emenev fought his customary battles. Curfew would not apply to delivery or retrieval of necessary food. The city kitchens would stay open. And the buses? They would still run, each with a soldier “supervising.” Emenev shuddered, to think the general had a thousand spare people to ride buses; he hoped his response was hidden behind his beard and his customary judicial frown.

At last the substance of the agreement was complete. The colonels and the clerks were granted three hours to turn it into a physical document, complete with chips and ribbons. Emenev tucked an extra sky-blue ribbon in his pocket.

“And after the document is complete,” the general said, “we will celebrate at the seventh judge’s house. For you were the first to invite us, were you not?”

“This is a signal and unexpected honor, for this poor bachelor.”

“I’ll send a team ahead,” the general said, her smile beneficent and unyielding.

Emenev took the bus back to his house: an odd episode of ordinariness, in an impossible day. He spent the ride messaging Umirvayet about caterers and portable heaters. His house was large, even luxurious, for a single person, but the judges and the general and her aides would have to spill into the courtyard. He reached home three quarters of an hour before the cleaning team.

He went upstairs at once and found the book. There was no disguising its importance, and not even silk and enamel could hide the fact that it was a machine. This was only a problem if the soldiers entered his bedroom—but of course they would check.

Emenev folded the book’s silk beneath his pillow and pried its lock off with a table knife and a curse. He rubbed the rough edge with a bit of shoe polish to hide the glint, and ran his thumb around the other edges in apology. The book would understand. It strove for understanding, in a way Emenev only hoped to imitate.

He set his tablet to wipe itself and stuffed it in the kitchen junk basket: certain batteries and plastics needed special treatment. The book went into the breast pocket of his robes. They were thick enough to take the extra weight.

He still had time. His mother would have tidied, sweeping clutter into cupboards and behind curtains. But Emenev loved his house for its emptiness, the long bright spaces where he could stretch out alone, or sit with one particular friend. He had nothing else to hide. He went instead to the bathroom and trimmed his beard, letting the curls fall to the counter in heaps. The style made him feel like a singer, or a student working at a teashop over the holidays. There was more silver underneath the curls than he expected.

As his guests arrived, Emenev gathered their outer coats, carrying armfuls upstairs to lay across his bed. He swiftly ran out of guest slippers. The soldiers kept their boots on. That bothered him more than it ought, more than the cool directions

of the cleaning team or the pistols at their belts. He set the feeling aside, on a high shelf in his mind that only he could reach, and dove into the duties of a host, proposing toast after toast. He had learned in his student days to pace himself, so he toasted with water and with cherry juice as well as vodka, and did not neglect the rolled sandwiches or the pistachio cakes. But he still felt warmth growing in the palms of his hands and the soles of his feet. He offered "Restful holidays!" to the second judge and "Smooth transit!" to the fourth. He drank to collaboration with a broadly smiling sergeant who had cake-crumbs in his mustache.

Emenev realized, as he set his empty glass down, that the sergeant's smile was forced. The man was staring at the broad sweep of his staircase with a questioning look Emenev recognized. He had worn the expression himself, staring into the fourth judge's rosewood-polished eyes and wondering, *How could something so beautiful belong to a person so spoiled?*

One had to know one's adversaries, as well as one's friends—perhaps better than one's friends—so Emenev asked, "Are you fond of architecture?"

The sergeant's false smile twisted into honest rue. "I thought I'd be an architect, once. Right up until a computer told me I was too piss-poor at poetry for a university student."

The toasts were affecting Emenev after all, because he asked the question in his head: "Your poetry scores were too low for the Faculty of *Architecture*? You didn't appeal?"

"Scraping by wasn't enough. My family needed my scholarship money—or I needed to join the army and plant wheat."

Emenev remembered that feeling—waiting for the scholarship funds to appear in his account, so he could buy his little brother a new tablet or find his sister a graduation scarf. The funds' arrival had always been approximate, give or take a week, for reasons he never understood. The university term always started on time.

But the situations were not parallel. A graduation scarf was hardly a necessity. "I see. You are a credit to your family."

"My kids will do whatever they want. Of their own choice. No exam-writing systems spinning out of some funeral pyre."

"Let's toast to your children. The next generation!"

The sergeant was still muttering about smoke and expert ghosts as Emenev slipped away, the book warm in its pocket against his chest.

Umirvayet and the general were in the courtyard, sharing a tray of vegetables. They had mushrooms roasted on skewers, radishes cut like flowers, and a stewfruit salsa. Emenev was struck by how similar the two women looked: hands all vein and bone, eyes softened by shadow. They were discussing enhancements to the municipal water purification system. "You must designate a clerk for the final review," the general said.

"But do you not use expert systems in your own strategic planning?" Umirvayet asked.

"Notary-General Umirvayet, I am a different sort of general. The strategies I choose might mean war or famine. Those decisions must be made by the living."

"Because they know what is at stake?"

The general jerked her chin up and down. "Because they know what it means to die." Umirvayet mirrored the nod, more slowly.

Emenev let the ebb and flow of the party carry him back toward the living room. He was not entirely inside before he heard the third judge suggesting, "Does it not happen, from time to time, that somebody continues to rely on the will of the algorithms, be it from sentiment, or customary procedure and habit, or even, though it pains me to include this possibility, simple laziness?"



“It’s very simple,” said his interlocutor. This soldier was built like a stack of rectangles. Her hair ribbon was new and crisp. “If somebody does not comply, then we take them outdoors, and we shoot them.”

The third judge was already beginning to ask about due process. He was thorough, despite his prolixness: he would find the loophole, if there was one. Emenev was suddenly certain there was not. He slid back the sliding doors and went to find a glass of water.

In one of his least successful love affairs, Emenev had known a man whose family owned a cluster of cabins by a lake. They kept a collection of rifles in the largest cabin, ostensibly for hunting. In reality they were for sheer display, as impractical as an antelope’s curving horns. Emenev’s lover showed him how to grip the rifle, how to balance the weight and fire. It was heavy; it was lighter than he expected; it was too easy to curl his fingers round the trigger and hear the crack, its sound lessened by the earmuffs his lover wrapped around his head.

The pistol at the soldier’s belt was not for display. She could lift it in one hand, wrap her fingers round it, pull the trigger back.

Terror rose in Emenev like the vodka’s warmth, picking out the Lake-blue ribbons and obscuring his colleagues’ robes. He had worried so much over Kiza, Kiza traveling, Kiza transformed. He had fretted and planned for the people of his city. But it had not occurred to him that he might, personally, be threatened.

He knew the threat would come. His book was not a secret: it was merely private. He could play the jovial host for now. But sooner or later the capsule description of him would dissolve, tincturing the army’s knowledge of him: “devout but stubborn” would become “obsessed with the saints” and then “obsessed with the memories in the circuits of a book.”

He could not protect the city if he left. But he could not protect the city if the soldiers walked him outside and shot him. It would happen in a single crack, like snapping a tablet screen in half. One learned very quickly, as a judge, that it was not difficult for a human to kill another human, if circumstance aligned.

Umirvayet had a rapport with the general. It would be possible for her to carry on the city’s work. But if Emenev disappeared, he would not see Kiza again.

As Emenev came to this realization, the current of the party caught hold of him. There were latecomers to greet, some of the sixth judge’s staff. He took their coats and toasted to their welcome. He did not choke on the vodka, though he was thinking of Kiza lost to him. He would be like a tidally locked moon-face, never reflecting the sun.

Emenev and Kiza had sworn no oaths and exchanged no ribbons. It was ridiculous, to stick upon this detail. It was ridiculous to have assumed that only Kiza could be lost.

Emenev took the newfound coats upstairs, and regarded the coats already there. Some of them were soldiers’ overcoats. One or two were big enough to fit across his shoulders and button over his chest. He took the largest one and rolled it into the vacuum bag he kept for traveling. With the air sucked out, it curled like an immense centipede. He stuffed it into the top of his own voluminous sleeve, narrowly avoiding observation by a lieutenant who was hunting for the upstairs bathroom.

Emenev spent a while in the clump of people by the downstairs bathroom, smiling indiscriminately and humming under his breath: “The goat shits in the mountains, the goat shits in the mountains, she leaves the seeds that grow the weeds that someday babies eat.” His niece had loved that song, when she was a baby herself. He hoped she would still sing it when she was grown.

Emenev hummed the song twice through, then shrugged in vast frustration, tugged on his boots unlaced, and stomped to a half-lit patch of the outside wall. He pissed upon it for verisimilitude, wondering if the neighbors would object. None did.

He wandered idly down the block and around the corner to the unlit spot the neighbors always griped about. He stood a few minutes, looking up and down the street and letting the evening chill creep over him. He ran his fingers through his wig, feeling the strands part smoothly. Then he pulled it off, wrapping it into a package with the cap he wore beneath and the cords he'd braided for his professional associations and his siblings' children. There was no way to say goodbye, to explain why he had to shred the weaving. It might take decades for Simet to forgive him.

Emenev swapped his robes for the stolen coat and plaited his souvenir Lake ribbon into a single braid, as tight as he could make it. He shivered as the night wind found his scalp. But that could be solved by walking briskly. He caught a bus, stopped at a cash kiosk, caught another bus, and stopped at another kiosk, repeating until his pockets clinked with strings of chits and he stood before the arched doors of the intercity bus station.

Inside the station, an old man ate fried fava beans, letting a cleaning robot catch the crumbs, and a tiny person in an ankle-length coat napped on top of their luggage: that was all the passengers in the huge and echoing room. Emenev dropped chits into the chute of a machine till it spat out a ticket on the next route southwest. The destination was named Four Sheep Waiting. Fine print on the back of the ticket warned that in case of inclement weather, travel might be delayed for multiple days: Four Sheep was high in the mountains. But the night was cold and fair.

"Are you on leave, sir?" the old man asked, folding his snack packet and pressing it neatly.

"The first in a long time, khanik," he said, imitating the sergeant's hearty growl. "Forgive me, that's my bus."

Emenev sat in the high-backed seats, trying to maintain a soldier's posture. The lights were dim, the windows mirrored. The stops and turns of city streets ended; they began to climb. His eyes were gritty with exhaustion, but he wasn't ready to close them. He opened the book instead. It offered him verse:

\* \* \*

The prairie is guarded by windmills.  
 Their blades revolve as slowly as the motion of the stars.  
 Beloved, I ask, where are you?  
 You are the warmth that turns the world.

\* \* \*

That was strange comfort, Emenev thought, for a journey away from everyone he had ever known. But the turning of the bus wheels and the turning of the windmill blades overlapped in his mind, and then he was asleep.

He woke when someone took the seat beside him: a small man, with a fussy trailing headwrap, who balanced a huge orange rucksack on his lap. "You could place that in the rack above," Emenev began to say. It was the softest version of, "Take any seat but that one."

The man hugged the backpack and turned toward him. Something unfurled in Emenev. He hugged them both, the man and the pack, gripping, gripping, as if that water-sloughing orange fabric was the sun, drawing him in. The book's corner made a bruise above his heart. The man was Kiza.

"How?" Emenev asked, when they pulled apart enough for him to breathe.

"Your friend sent word," Kiza told him, with a nod toward the pocket where the book rested.

Emenev had spent so long wishing he knew the measure of Kiza's affection. Now all their braids were lies, yet Kiza's fingers were strong at the back of his neck, as if they could hold each other forever, crammed into two seats that made a world. He tried to kiss Kiza lightly, to give space, to allow for time, but Kiza bit his lip and he

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laughed and they curled tongues against tongues, wrapped up, pulled tight. The book had spoken to his friend who was beloved. Emenev knew, then, that the warmth of his friends was infinite.