

o-okun

LE BRUIT D'À CÔTÉ

Those we hear without seeing



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There are times when a presence becomes familiar long before it has a face.

You recognize their footsteps.

The rhythm of their voice.

The hours they come home, the hours they leave.

You know nothing about them.

Yet somehow, even their silence has started to stand out.

Then one day, the wall is no longer enough.

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Prologue

The cursor had been blinking in the middle of the screen for almost thirty seconds.

The client wanted “something more alive.”

Which, in the strange language of people who commissioned corporate illustrations online, could mean absolutely anything.

More alive how??

More color?

More contrast?

More smiles on the vegetables?

Yes...

Vegetables.

I’d spent the past two days working on a series of illustrations for an organic grocery delivery app.

Smiling carrots. Happy tomatoes. An eggplant that, according to the brief, was supposed to “convey a sense of modern trust.”

I stared at the screen.

The eggplant already looked like it paid taxes.

I let out a quiet sigh and picked up my stylus again.

The silence in the studio breathed slowly around me. The silence of lived-in apartments. The soft hum of the fridge. Cars muffled five floors below. Pipes knocking inside the walls every now and then, like an old building talking in its sleep.

And Eugène, obviously.

He crossed the living room with the serenity of a landlord inspecting an investment property.

Tail held high like a question mark.

Calm expression.

Entirely unaware of the bills and building fees he contributed absolutely nothing toward.

He jumped onto the desk without permission, then settled directly in front of my screen.

Perfect.

“Are you doing this on purpose?”

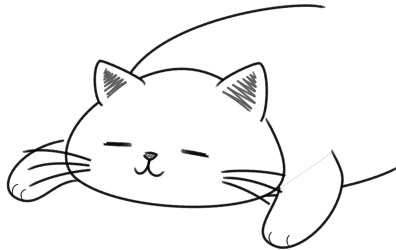
Eugène blinked slowly.

That cat had the unbearable confidence of creatures who had never once doubted they were loved.

I gently pushed his head aside to regain the bare minimum of visibility over my document.

Mistake.

He immediately stretched out across my drawing tablet.



Fine.

I had officially been evicted from my own workspace by eighteen and a half pounds of gray fur.

I checked the time in the corner of the screen.

9:47 p.m.

Freelancing had this strange advantage: no one stopped me from working at night.

Freelancing also had this other strange advantage: no one stopped me from working at night.

Important distinction.

I saved the file before rolling my chair back. The rabbit immediately lifted his head from the little space I'd set up for him beside the bookcase.

Unlike Eugène, he always looked as though he was apologizing for existing.

A small, cautious twitch of the ears.

An uncertain look.

"It's okay."

He kept staring at me.

"Yes, you're allowed to live here too."

The rabbit seemed to consider this information carefully.

Then went back to eating his hay.

The studio wasn't big, but I knew every inch of it by heart. The couch near the window. The small open kitchen. The plants surviving against all odds. The stacks of sketchbooks. The guitar cables in one corner. The mugs abandoned on the coffee table.

Over time, everything had found its place perfectly.

Or rather, I had shrunk the world down to a size I knew how to handle.

That was the more honest way of putting it.

I ran a hand through my hair before opening the client's email again.

"We would like a more organic, warm, and engaging visual identity."

I looked at the eggplant.

It looked like a therapist now.

Progress.

A dull thud came through the wall on my right.

Quick footsteps.

Then a woman's voice.

Far too energetic for almost ten at night.

I couldn't make out the words. Only the rhythm. Fast. Lively. A way of speaking that made it sound as though the sentences were trying to get out faster than the thoughts behind them.

I knew that voice.

Not the person. Just the voice.

The apartment next door had been occupied for several months now. A family, probably. Or at least several people. I'd started recognizing certain sounds.

The front door slamming too hard.

Late returns.

Muffled conversations in the hallway.

Music, sometimes.

The quick footsteps.

Especially the quick footsteps.

Then the deep voice joined in.

Slower.

More measured.

Definitely the father.

Even through the wall, he spoke with the dramatic authority of a man convinced that every family discussion could turn into a parliamentary debate.

I still couldn't make out the words.

Just the energy.

Something about forgotten keys.

Or a bag.

Or practice.

Then the woman's voice started up again immediately.

Fast. Defensive. Lively. Very lively.

Eugène vaguely lifted one ear before deciding the matter fell outside his jurisdiction.

I listened despite myself.

Not out of unhealthy curiosity.

Well...

Not only.

It had simply become a habit.

I'd been living alone for almost two years. After a while, you learned the presence of the people around you without ever really meeting them. Some neighbors existed only as sounds.

The couple downstairs who always argued on Sunday mornings.

The neighbor on the fourth floor who sneezed like he was trying to expel his soul.

And the apartment next door.

I lowered my headphones around my neck without putting on any music.

Complete silence sometimes made me more uncomfortable than the ordinary sound of other people.

A fairly irritating contradiction when you spent your life pretending you liked peace and quiet.

I worked for another ten minutes before abandoning the eggplant to its tragic fate.

My eyes were starting to ache.

I saved everything.

Three times.

Financial anxiety could turn any freelancer into a paranoid archivist.

I stood up to stretch my back while Eugène finally climbed down from the desk with the insulting slowness of a king leaving a reception.

The rabbit, meanwhile, quietly hopped over to me.

I crouched down and stroked the top of his head.

Little nose twitching quickly.

Warm fur.

I wasn't sure exactly when my life had become: living alone in a studio apartment with a tyrannical cat and an anxious rabbit while drawing emotionally approachable vegetables.

Honestly, though, things could be worse.

I refilled their water before opening the balcony door slightly.

The evening air immediately entered the studio, carrying the cold smell of the city.

Sirens in the distance.

Cars.

Normal life.

Eugène appeared behind my legs at once.

Obviously.

"No."

He looked at me.

"You're not going outside."

He continued looking at me.

The problem with cats was that they treated rules like philosophical suggestions.

I closed the balcony door before he could attempt physical negotiations.

Then I picked up my guitar.

The wood felt slightly cold beneath my fingers.

I sat on the couch without turning on the main light. Just the lamp beside the bookcase.

A small, soft glow.

I rarely played for long.

A few chords.

I think...

The guitar had nothing to do with the rest of it.
Drawing had become work. Even when I still loved it, there were clients behind it.
Deadlines. Files called:
“V2_final_definitive_5.”
The guitar didn’t ask anything from me.
I just played whenever my brain got too loud.
A sequence of chords returned beneath my fingers almost automatically. A melody I’d started several weeks earlier.
Still unfinished.
Something was missing in the middle.
A transition.
Or a line.
Or...
Talent.
I played the passage a second time.
Then a third.
The same gap.
Like a missing step.
On the other side of the wall, the neighbors carried on with their lives.
Quick footsteps crossed the apartment.
A drawer opened too hard.
The father’s deep voice.
Then the daughter’s.
Closer this time.
I stopped for a few seconds without realizing it.
It was strange how certain people could occupy a space without even being physically present.
I knew nothing about her.
Not even her name.
But I knew she spoke quickly when she was running late.
That her footsteps were heavier after certain nights out.
That she rarely laughed quietly.
That she sometimes came home very late, only to leave again early the next morning.
And that she seemed incapable of closing a door normally.
The glass door vibrated when something slammed in their apartment.
I looked up.
“One day they’re going to bring down the entire wall.”
Eugène opened one eye from his place on the rug.
No concern whatsoever.
He had already accepted that humans were generally incompetent.
I started playing again, quietly.
This time, the melody went a little farther before getting stuck again.
Always the same place.
Always the same moment when my brain refused to move forward.
I let the final notes slowly die inside the studio.
Then nothing.
The calm returned.
Well.
Almost.
Because a few seconds later, I heard the footsteps on the other side again.
Faster.
Then a brief laugh.
I stayed still for no particular reason.

As though my brain were unconsciously waiting to hear whatever came next.
Ridiculous.

I placed the guitar back on its stand and got up to go to the kitchen area.

Eugène followed me immediately.

Of course.

The studio's true owner had come to supervise my nighttime activities.

I made some tea while he circled my legs.

"You've already eaten."

He meowed.

Obvious lie.

I gave him a few pieces of kibble anyway.

The water was heating when a louder noise suddenly sounded behind the wall.

Something being dropped.

Then hurried movement.

A window.

Or a balcony door.

I turned my head slightly.

Silence.

Then the woman's voice, closer than usual.

Very close.

As though she were out on the balcony.

I frowned slightly before taking a sip of tea that was much too hot.

It didn't matter.

The neighbors were living their lives.

People made noise.

That was what buildings were for.

Eugène, however, had already left the kitchen area.

I found him a few seconds later in front of the glass door.

Motionless.

Deeply focused.

Staring at the neighboring balcony.

As though he had spotted something interesting.

Or a very bad idea in the making.

I walked over and stopped vaguely behind him.

Outside, the night wrapped the adjoining balconies in bluish light.

Nothing unusual...

Probably.

Eugène slowly moved his tail without taking his eyes off the view.

I suddenly had the strange feeling that something was about to change.

Chapter 1

Trespassing

I was finishing up a commission when I noticed the silence.

Not real silence. The building was never truly silent.

There was always something.

A pipe knocking.

A door slamming two floors below.

A chair scraping across the neighbors' floor.

A scooter outside.

The hum of the fridge.

And the apartment next door.

Quick footsteps. A girl's voice. Things being set down harder than intended.

An entire life conducted with roughly forty percent more energy than necessary.

I already knew their habits without ever having properly spoken to anyone over there.

It was difficult not to.

I took off my headphones and stretched slowly. My back protested immediately. Three in the morning had a way of turning a perfectly decent chair into a medieval torture device.

The screen of my drawing tablet still lit the studio with a bluish glow that felt slightly too sad. Sketches open everywhere. An empty mug beside the keyboard. Another mug that was marginally less empty, but had become scientifically concerning at least two hours ago.

I blinked.

Then looked toward the cushion beside the bookcase.

Empty.

I didn't react right away.

Eugène moved around regularly. He had developed a very personal fondness for places no one could possibly anticipate. Once, I'd searched for him for twenty minutes before discovering him asleep inside a cardboard box I had closed myself.

I turned my head slightly.

"Eugène?"

Nothing.

The rabbit merely lifted one ear from his territory before returning to his main activity, which probably consisted of judging my cognitive abilities.

I stood up.

Not worried.

Not yet.

I checked behind the chair.

Under the table.

By the window.

Nothing.

Okay.

Fine.

I crossed the studio.

Under the couch.

Behind the TV stand.

In the bathroom.

Nothing.

I stopped in the middle of the room.

Then...

My brain immediately decided to become a disaster documentary.

Eugène falling from the balcony.

Eugène trapped in a gutter.

Eugène crushed in the courtyard while the neighbors said:

“That’s terrible. He looked so sweet.”

And someone else replied:

“Yes, but some people really shouldn’t own pets.”

Perfect.

I ran a hand over my face.

“No, no, no.”

Calm down.

He was probably hiding somewhere.

Cats did that.

They disappeared for an hour just to watch a human psychological breakdown unfold in real time.

I checked the mezzanine bedroom.

Well, the half-mezzanine. The developer had apparently decided that adding six square feet at ceiling height was enough to create an entire room.

The bed was empty.

So was the drawer.

I crouched to look beneath the dresser.

Nothing.

My stomach tightened a little more.

This time, the panic began organizing itself.

I went back into the living room.

The balcony door was slightly open.

I stood perfectly still for two seconds.

Then three.

Ah.

Obviously.

I approached it slowly, as though the door might suddenly announce another piece of bad news.

Cool night air drifted into the studio. The curtain moved gently.

And more importantly:

The balcony.

The adjoining balconies.

This had never been a problem before, because Eugène had shown no particular territorial ambitions until now.

Apparently, that phase was over.

I stepped outside.

The railing separating the two apartments was low. Not dangerously low for an ordinary human. Easily low enough for an agile, irresponsible cat who probably believed himself immortal.

I looked down.

Bad idea.

Four floors.

Fine.

I might have just murdered my own cat.

Exactly what my life needed.

I leaned a little farther over the railing.

“Eugène?”

My voice stayed low despite me. As though speaking too loudly might turn the situation into an official reality.

Nothing.

Then a sound.

To the right.

The neighbors’ apartment.

A sneeze.
I slowly turned my head.
A girl's voice followed immediately.
"I swear I'm fine."
Then another sneeze.
Then:
"Oh my God, he's gorgeous."
I blinked.
Silence.
Then a man's voice, deeper.
Much deeper.
The kind of voice that sounded as though it had signed several important administrative documents in its lifetime.
"Liora."
"What?"
"Do not touch that cat."
"I'm already touching him!"
Another silence.
I stood frozen on my balcony in a T-shirt at three in the morning, listening to a cat cause a domestic crisis next door.
The man spoke again.
"You're allergic."
"Technically, yes."
"There is no such thing as 'technically' allergic."
"Dad, don't shout. You'll scare him."
I closed my eyes for a second.
Eugène?
Almost immediate relief.
Then another thought arrived.
What if my cat had walked into a stranger's apartment in the middle of the night?
Strangers with an allergic daughter?
And a father who spoke like a senior government official formally objecting to a ministerial decision.
Great.
I went back inside, running both hands through my hair.
Fine.
I just had to go and check whether it was Eugène.
Simple.
One brief human interaction.
Civilized.
I could do that.
I grabbed a sweatshirt from the back of a chair.
Then stopped in the middle of the room.
Because it was three in the morning.
Maybe four.
Socially speaking, there was no acceptable time to announce:
"Good evening, sorry to bother you. My cat may have committed a home invasion."
I looked at my door.
Then the balcony.
Then the door again.
My brain immediately started up once more.
What if the father thought I was irresponsible?
No. He already thought that.

What if the girl had a severe allergic reaction?
What if Eugène had knocked something over?
What if Eugène was hurt?
What if the father decided I was a public menace to the entire building?
There was probably a residents' group chat somewhere.
I could already picture the message.
"Hello, please keep your animals under control!!!"
With three passive-aggressive exclamation marks.
I let out a long breath.
The rabbit was still watching me.
Offering no particular emotional support.
"Thank you for your involvement."
No response.
I adjusted my glasses and walked toward the door.
Then stopped again.
Because now that I thought about it, I already knew this girl.
Not really. Not her face.
Her voice.
Sounds traveled easily through the wall between our apartments. Not clearly enough to understand entire conversations. Just fragments.
Rushed departures.
Laughter.
Calls of "I'm coming."
Bags dropped on the floor.
Late returns.
She lived like someone moving through each day at a slightly faster pace than the rest of the world.
And now my cat was probably asleep in her apartment as though he paid rent there.
I ran a hand over my forehead.
The problem with Eugène was that he looked profoundly innocent.
Thick white-and-gray fur. Calm eyes. Unhurried walk.
A complete scam.
That animal had the moral compass of an experienced burglar.
I finally approached the front door.
Another voice came through the wall.
"Dad, look. He's coming toward me."
"Don't encourage him."
"Too late."
I stared at the handle.
My motivation for social interaction had just dropped to absolute zero.
But I couldn't leave Eugène over there.
First, because he was my cat.
Second, because there was probably a legal limit on how long you could wait before retrieving an infiltrated feline.
I put my hand on the handle.
Then the image of Eugène falling from the balcony immediately came back.
I reopened the glass door and stepped outside one more time to check below.
Still nothing.
No flattened cat.
No stopped cars.
No tragic gathering of onlookers.
Fine.
I could stop mentally planning his funeral.

The night wind was cool. The city seemed quieter at that hour. More spread out. As though even the buildings were breathing less loudly.
And yet the apartment next door was still alive.
I could hear quick movements.
A piece of furniture.
A muffled laugh.
Then that voice again.
Clear. Bright. Impossible to ignore.
“He likes me.”
“He’s a cat, Liora.”
“Exactly. That makes it important.”
I slowly lowered my head.
This conversation made no sense.
The worst part was that Eugène probably was staring at her with the placid expression he reserved for humans he had temporarily decided to adopt.
Traitor.
I went back into the studio again.
Then I noticed something else.
The silence his absence had left behind.
The empty cushion.
His place by the window.
The habit of him.
It was ridiculous how much space an animal could occupy without making a sound.
I looked around the studio for a few seconds.
The drawings open on my desk.
The guitar against the wall.
The rabbit settled in his corner.
My space.
My quiet.
Normally.
Because at that exact moment, my cat was probably causing an allergic reaction in the home of neighbors I had never met.
I finally made my decision.
I was going to knock.
Retrieve Eugène.
Apologize.
Say something normal.
Then immediately return to the comfortable anonymity of my apartment.
Simple plan.
Fine.
I went to open my door.
And someone knocked at that exact moment.
I startled so violently that I slammed my shoulder into the doorframe.
Perfect.
The problem was officially coming to me.

Chapter 2

The father, the cat, and me

I stood perfectly still.

One hand on the door handle.

My shoulder aching.

My heart mildly occupied with trying to escape my body through my throat.

Someone had just knocked on my door.

At three in the morning.

Or almost four.

Either way, at an hour when human interaction should have been legally prohibited, except in cases of fire, medical emergency, or food delivery you would regret the next day.

A second knock came.

Quieter.

Sharper.

The kind of knock made by someone who knew exactly why he was there.

I looked down at what I was wearing.

Wrinkled T-shirt.

Sweatpants.

Sweatshirt badly pulled on, one sleeve half inside out.

Hair probably in a condition suitable for forensic analysis.

Fine.

I was about to open the door to my neighbors for the first time in my life looking like a man who had just lost a fight with his own furniture.

The rabbit lifted his head from his corner.

This time, he was actually watching me.

As though he had finally realized the situation might become interesting.

“Don’t judge me.”

His nose twitched.

Judgment confirmed.

I unlocked the door.

Opened it.

And found myself facing a man.

Very upright.

Very dignified.

Very awake, which immediately struck me as suspicious.

He had a way of standing in an apartment hallway as though the hallway temporarily belonged to him. Straight shoulders. Steady chin. Composed expression. Not aggressive.

Worse.

Bureaucratic.

In his arms was Eugène.

My cat.

Resting against him with the obscene serenity of an animal who had just triggered a diplomatic crisis and intended to remain neutral.

I looked at Eugène.

Eugène looked at me.

Slow blink.

No remorse.

Obviously.

“Good evening,” the man said.

His voice sounded exactly the way it did through the wall.

Deep.

Measured.

With the natural authority of a man capable of saying “good evening” as though he were presenting a case before a committee.

I answered too quickly.

“Good evening.”

Then I realized that wasn’t enough.

“Sorry.”

Too soon.

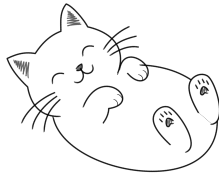
He hadn’t even said anything yet.

Excellent start.

The man glanced down at Eugène, then looked back at me.

“This cat belongs to you, I assume.”

I looked at Eugène.



Then the man.

Then Eugène again.

There was probably a more subtle answer than the one I was about to give.

“Yes.”

Fine.

Concise.

Perfect.

The man nodded slowly.

“He entered our apartment through the balcony.”

“Yes. Well, I think so. I mean... probably. I only just noticed.”

“He was in the living room.”

I closed my eyes for half a second.

The living room.

Of course.

Not the balcony.

Not just the ledge.

The living room.

Eugène hadn’t crossed a boundary.

He had immigrated.

“I’m really sorry.”

“My daughter is allergic to cats.”

“Yes, I heard.”

Silence.

Mistake.

I had just admitted to listening to my neighbors.

At three in the morning

In a hallway.

In front of a protective father holding my cat like a piece of evidence.

Perfect.

I immediately tried again.

“Well, not heard heard. The walls are thin. And I was on the balcony because I was looking for him. Eugène. The cat. Not... your daughter.”

The man stared at me.

For a long time.

Too long.

I felt my soul attempting to slip quietly toward the emergency stairs.

“I understand,” he said at last.

He understood absolutely nothing.
Or he understood far too much.
Movement appeared behind him, in the doorway of the neighboring apartment.

A silhouette.

Then a voice.

“Dad, you’re scaring him!”

I looked up.

And saw her.

For the first time as something other than fragments of sound.

Liora.

I knew it before anyone said her name, which was probably ridiculous. I already knew her voice, her rhythm, the way she occupied the air. Her face had simply arrived later than everything else.

She stood behind her father, leaning slightly to see over his shoulder.

Or rather, to work her way around the physical authority of him.

Hair tied up any old way, eyes slightly red, nose faintly irritated, long sleeves pulled over her wrists. She looked tired, allergic, and absolutely delighted.

A concerning combination.

She didn’t look like someone who had been woken up by a problem.

She looked like someone who had just discovered a secret passage inside a wall.

Her gaze moved from me to Eugène, then back to me with an immediate, direct curiosity that was almost unsettling.

Not rude.

Just completely straightforward.

As though she had opened a book halfway through and decided to understand the plot immediately.

“That’s Eugène?”

I blinked.

“Yes.”

“His name is actually Eugène?”

“Yes.”

“That’s incredible.”

I couldn’t tell whether she meant the name, the cat, or the situation in general.

Her father turned his head slightly toward her.

“Liora, step back.”

“I am back.”

“You’re twelve inches away from the cat.”

“That’s still better than zero.”

“You’ve been sneezing for ten minutes.”

“Eight.”

“Liora.”

She sighed, though she barely moved.

Her eyes returned to Eugène, who had placed one paw on her father’s forearm with the ease of a landlord requesting to be carried.

“He’s gorgeous,” she said.

I looked at my cat.

Eugène had indeed put on his best face.

The one from adoption photos.

The one that said: I am a gentle, composed creature made entirely of affection and fur.

A visual scam.

“He’s mostly very disobedient,” I said.

Liora smiled.

“No. He’s adventurous.”

"He entered your apartment without permission."

"Like heroes at the beginning of stories."

Her father inhaled slowly.

I recognized that breath.

I had heard it before, even through the wall.

The breath of a man discovering that logic would not be enough to save his evening.

"This is not a story, Liora. It's an intrusion."

"A small intrusion."

"A feline one."

"So less serious."

"Quite the opposite."

I remained in the doorway, unable to decide whether I should intervene, retrieve my cat, apologize, disappear, or move out before sunrise.

Every option seemed valid.

The man turned his attention back to me.

"You'll need to make sure this doesn't happen again."

"Yes. Of course. I'll... secure the balcony."

"Does your balcony connect to ours?"

"Not really. I mean, there's a divider. But it's low. It's fine for a human. For a determined cat..."

I looked at Eugène.

He blinked.

"...apparently, it isn't."

Liora gave a small laugh.

Brief.

Quick.

A laugh that seemed to travel through the hallway faster than the rest of her.

I didn't smile.

Not outwardly.

At least, I hoped not.

Because there was absolutely nothing funny about the situation.

Except perhaps my cat being carried by a father in the middle of a domestic security operation while his allergic daughter watched him as though he had performed a miracle.

Okay.

Slightly funny.

"Do you live alone?" her father asked.

The question landed with unsettling precision.

"Yes."

"For long?"

"Two years. Almost."

"And you have several animals?"

I froze.

How did he know?

Then I turned my head slightly toward my apartment.

The rabbit had moved forward a few inches.

He was visible behind me.

Sitting in the middle of the studio, perfectly still in the bluish light of the screen I had left on.

Traitor number two.

Liora spotted him immediately.

Her eyes widened.

"Oh my God."

I mentally sealed every exit.

Too late.

"Is that a rabbit?!"

“Yes.”

“You have a rabbit?!”

The sudden jump into casual familiarity hit me with wildly disproportionate force.

I had known her for forty seconds.

She had already demolished an entire layer of social formality.

“Yes.”

“What’s his name?”

I glanced at her father, who seemed to feel that this question was not a priority within the current incident.

I agreed with his assessment.

Unfortunately, Liora was looking at me as though the answer mattered immensely.

“Demitrius.”

Silence.

Even Eugène seemed to recognize that something had just happened.

Liora stared at me.

Then burst out laughing.

Not loudly.

Not unkindly.

With such spontaneity that the hallway seemed to wake up around her.

“Sorry,” she said immediately, lifting a hand to her nose. “Sorry. It’s just... Eugène and Demitrius?”

“Yes.”

“Your pets have the names of old men who play chess in the park.”

I kept a straight face.

“They have complex inner lives.”

Her smile grew wider.

Her father didn’t smile.

Or barely.

Or perhaps he had an extremely discreet way of acknowledging humor.

“Liora, go take your antihistamine.”

“I already took one.”

“Then move away.”

“But I’m fine.”

She sneezed.

Once.

Then twice.

Then three times.

Her father looked at her.

She raised one finger.

“That proves nothing.”

“That proves exactly what I said.”

I took a step forward despite myself.

“Would you like me to take him?”

The man looked down at Eugène.

Eugène didn’t move.

He was comfortably settled in the man’s arms.

Comfortably.

In the arms of the man who had just condemned his behavior.

That cat had no moral consistency.

“Yes,” he said.

He held Eugène out to me.

I stepped forward to take him.

There was something strangely solemn about the exchange.

Like handing over a child after family mediation.

Or returning a stolen work of art.

Eugène moved from his arms to mine with a heavy, deliberately cumbersome slowness. He stretched one paw against my sweatshirt, rested his head near my shoulder, then began to purr.

Loudly.

I looked down at him.

"Now you're purring?"

He closed his eyes.

Of course.

Liora pressed both hands to her chest.

"He purrs like an engine."

"Yes. Usually when he's gotten what he wanted."

"He wanted to come to our place?"

"Apparently."

"See, Dad."

"I don't see anything."

"He chose us."

"He broke into our apartment."

"That's one way of choosing."

Her father slowly turned toward her.

"Liora."

She fell silent.

Not because she seemed intimidated.

More because she knew the precise limit before the full parental speech began.

I recognized that too.

Not from any particularly memorable personal experience.

More from survival instinct.

A father like him probably didn't raise his voice often. He didn't need to. He could produce one complete, calm, carefully structured sentence, and everyone understood that the fragile objects should probably be put back where they belonged.

He looked at me again.

"You understand that I cannot allow a cat to enter our apartment."

"Yes. Completely. I'm sorry."

"My daughter has always had allergies."

"Dad..."

"It isn't harmless."

"I know."

"You're saying that like I'm made of sugar."

"I'm saying it because you start sneezing whenever a cat exists within thirty feet of you."

"Not this one."

Another silence.

I looked down at Eugène.

So did Liora.

So did her father.

Eugène continued purring.

Thunderously.

Contentedly.

Completely useless to the scientific debate.

"Well, not much," Liora added.

She sniffed discreetly.

Not discreetly enough.

Her father raised his eyebrows.

She rolled her eyes.

"Fine, a little. Much less than usual, though."

"Liora."

"What? It's true. Usually I die."

I stiffened.

"You... die?"

"No," her father said.

"Metaphorically," Liora said.

"There is nothing metaphorical about an asthma attack."

"I didn't have an asthma attack."

"Because I removed the cat."

"You picked him up, Dad. Don't act like you conducted a public health operation."

Her father straightened slightly.

"I isolated him."

"You petted him."

"I was checking whether he was calm."

"With your hand on his head?"

"It's a method."

I looked at the man.

Then Eugène.

Then Liora.

A strange exhaustion passed through me.

Not a bad one.

Just the exhaustion of someone who had worked until three in the morning, searched for his cat while imagining his death, then discovered that the apartment next door was inhabited by a girl capable of negotiating an allergy like an international treaty.

I tightened my hold on Eugène.

"I'll be careful," I said. "Really. I'll block access to the balcony. He's never done this before."

"Cats are repeat offenders," her father said.

Definitive tone.

I wanted to point out that freelancers were too, but it wasn't clear or useful.

"Yes. Probably."

"You'll need a serious solution."

"I'll find one."

"A real solution."

"Yes."

"Not a chair in front of the balcony door."

I froze.

Because that had been precisely my first idea.

One chair.

Maybe two.

With a cardboard box.

A temporary solution, though morally reassuring.

Liora looked at me.

Her smile appeared immediately.

She knew.

Obviously.

"You were going to use a chair."

"No."

Too fast.

"Yes, you were."

"Not only a chair."

"Two chairs?"

I looked away.
She laughed again.
“Dad, he has exactly the same approach to repairs as you.”
“My approach to repairs is perfectly functional.”
“You fixed the cupboard door with a cookbook.”
“Temporarily.”
“That was in November.”
“It’s still holding.”
I didn’t want to enjoy this conversation.
I also didn’t want to notice the way Liora spoke, fast and direct, with her entire face. Not only her mouth. Her eyes, hands, shoulders. She seemed incapable of keeping an emotion in one place.
I had spent months hearing her through a wall.
In person, it was worse.
Not louder.
More present.
She made it feel as though the hallway had acquired an additional light source. Badly adjusted, probably energy-intensive, impossible to ignore.
I looked down at Eugène.
“You created this.”
He purred more loudly.
Liora leaned forward slightly.
Her father immediately raised one hand in front of her without actually touching her.
A simple barrier.
“No.”
“I only wanted to say goodbye.”
“You can say it from there.”
She sighed, then looked at Eugène with absurd solemnity.
“Goodbye, Eugène...”
Eugène didn’t respond.
Not even an ear twitch.
Liora seemed fascinated.
“He’s very rude.”
“Yes,” I said.
“I like him.”
“Yes, that’s concerning too.”
She looked at me.
This time, her smile was less radiant.
More precise.
As though she had just noticed that I had spoken without completely panicking.
Which wasn’t true.
I was still panicking.
My panic had simply found a chair somewhere inside me and sat down.
“What’s your name?” she asked.
The question came naturally.
Directly.
Like everything else.
“Aurèl.”
“Aurèl,” she repeated.
She pronounced my name as though she were testing its sound.
I had no idea what to do with that information.
No internal procedure available.
“I’m Liora.”

"I know."

Silence.

Mistake.

Again.

She tilted her head.

Her father looked at me too.

Great.

I really needed to stop voluntarily admitting unsettling things.

"Your father called you that," I explained. "Earlier. When... the cat."

"Oh."

She smiled.

"Right. Makes sense."

Her father seemed less convinced by the innocent nature of my knowledge.

I continued, because apparently my mouth had decided to finish the descent on its own.

"And the walls are thin."

Another silence.

Why?

Why had I added that?

Liora stared at me for a second.

Then her face lit up.

"You can hear us?"

"No."

"You literally just said the walls were thin."

"I hear sounds. Not conversations. Well, not always. I mean, rarely. I mean..."

I stopped.

Too late.

There was no coming back from "not always."

Her father crossed his arms.

Slowly.

Very slowly.

I suddenly felt like a teenager again, except I hadn't done anything remotely teenage in years, other than eating cereal for dinner whenever a bill arrived at the wrong time.

"The walls are really thin," Liora said, turning to her father. "I told you!"

"That is not the issue."

"It is a little. If he can hear us, we're too loud."

"We are not too loud."

She looked at me.

"Are we too loud?"

Trap question.

Absolute.

Lethal.

I looked at her father.

Her father looked at me.

I looked at Eugène.

Eugène had closed his eyes.

Coward.

"It's an apartment building," I said carefully. "People live in it."

Liora narrowed her eyes.

"Diplomatic answer."

"Survival answer."

She laughed.

Again.

I couldn't stop the corner of my mouth from moving.

Barely.
A muscular accident.
Probably.
Her father noticed.
I saw it in his expression.
He didn't look hostile. More like he was adding another piece of information to a mental file that was already open.
Aurèl.
Neighbor.
Young.
Lives alone.
Two animals with suspicious names.
Runaway cat.
Dry sense of humor.
Potential noise liability.
Monitor.
I could almost hear the stamp.
"Well," he said at last. "We are not continuing this conversation in the hallway at this hour."
Relief.
"Yes. Of course."
"Make sure your cat doesn't come back."
"Yes."
Liora opened her mouth.
Her father raised one finger without even looking at her.
"No."
"I didn't say anything."
"You were about to."
"You don't know that."
"I'm your father."
"That isn't scientific proof."
He ignored her with impressive discipline.
Then he held out something I hadn't noticed in his left hand.
A sock.
Gray.
Chewed.
I looked at it.
I looked at Eugène.
I looked at the sock again.
"He had that?"
"In the kitchen," her father said.
"It isn't mine."
"It's mine," Liora said.
She held out her hand.
Her father gave her a look.
"It's covered in fur."
"It was already a sports sock, Dad. It's been through worse."
I didn't know where to look.
At the sock?
At Liora?
At Eugène?
At the floor?
The floor seemed reasonable.
I chose the floor.

"He steals things sometimes," I said.
"So he's a repeat offender," her father said.
"I prefer to say he collects."
"He collects my things?" Liora asked.
"Apparently."
"That's cute."
"No," her father and I said at the same time.
We looked at each other.
A brief alliance.
Unexpected.
Unpleasant in its implications.
Liora looked between us, then smiled as though she had just witnessed a promising scene.
I didn't like that smile.
It seemed to contain a future.
I didn't need a future at this hour.
I needed water, sleep, and a cat-proof barrier compliant with European safety standards.
"Well," she said, retrieving her sock despite her father's expression. "Eugène, you officially have permission to keep it if you come back."
"Liora."
"What?"
"He is not coming back."
She turned toward me.
"He can come back whenever he wants."
Her father answered immediately.
"No."
Perfect answer.
Instantaneous.
Final.
I lowered my eyes to hide a smile.
Partial failure.
Liora saw it.
Of course.
She seemed to notice a great many things for someone who claimed not to think much before acting.
"You're smiling," she said.
"No."
"Yes."
"It's exhaustion."
"Exhaustion makes you smile?"
"Rarely. But this situation is medically strange."
She burst into a slightly louder laugh, then immediately coughed.
Her father placed a hand against her back.
A simple gesture.
Familiar.
She looked up.
"I'm fine."
He didn't answer.
He only looked at her.
And for a second, something changed.
Not much.
Just enough for me to see that his seriousness wasn't only about control. It was concern.
Real. Precise. Maybe tired too.
Liora looked away first.

"I'm going to get some water."

"Good idea."

She finally stepped back into the apartment, though not before giving Eugène one last look.

Then me.

"Good night, Aurèl."

My name again.

In her voice.

Through the wall, she had always been a presence. A sound. An energy without a shape.

Now she had a face.

Eyes reddened because of my cat.

A stolen sock.

And the unsettling ability to say my name as though we weren't two strangers standing in a hallway at an indefensible hour.

"Good night," I answered.

Too quietly.

She heard me anyway.

Then she disappeared into the apartment.

Not completely.

Her movement remained.

The sound of quick footsteps.

A drawer.

A cough.

Then her voice from farther away.

"Mom, are you asleep?"

Another voice replied with something I couldn't make out.

A mother.

Of course.

The apartment next door kept gaining dimensions.

Her father stayed in front of me for another second.

I tightened my arms around Eugène.

"Sorry again."

He nodded.

"I believe you."

Surprising.

"Thank you."

"But I'm warning you. If it happens again, we'll need to discuss it more seriously."

"Yes."

"Not at three in the morning."

"No."

"At a reasonable hour."

"Of course."

"And without a cat in my living room."

"Ideally."

He looked at me.

Then, this time, I thought I saw the shadow of a smile.

Very faint.

"Good night, Aurèl."

He knew my name now too.

I should have expected that.

I had literally answered his daughter two minutes earlier.

But hearing it in his voice had a different effect.

Like a summons.

"Good night, sir."

I didn't know his name.
"Sir" seemed safe enough.
He inclined his head slightly, then returned to his apartment.
The door closed.
Not violently.
Normally.
Which, in that family, almost qualified as an event.
I remained in the hallway with Eugène in my arms.
One second.
Two.
Three.
Then I went back inside.
I carefully closed the door behind me.
The studio welcomed me immediately.
The bluish light of the screen.
The cluttered desk.
The abandoned mug.
The guitar against the wall.
The rabbit in the middle of the rug, still frozen in a position of intense observation.
Everything was in its place.
Well.
Almost.
Because something had changed.
I set Eugène on the floor.
He stretched at length, as though returning from an exhausting stay at a very pleasant second home.
Then he walked to his cushion and settled down.
Without hurry.
Without guilt.
Without understanding that he had just altered the entire social balance of my life.
I looked at him.
"You're banned from the balcony."
He closed his eyes.
"Permanently."
No reaction.
"I'm putting a chair in front of it."
Silence.
"Two chairs."
The rabbit moved one ear.
I turned toward him.
"Don't start."
I ran a hand over my face.
The exhaustion hit me all at once.
Heavily.
My brain, however, refused to sleep.
It replayed the scene.
The father in the hallway.
Eugène in his arms.
Liora behind him.
Her red eyes.
Her laugh.
The way she said "adventurous" instead of "disobedient."
The way she spoke to my cat as though he had entered her life with a particular mission.

Ridiculous.
She was ridiculous.
The situation was ridiculous.
So was I, probably.
I went back to the balcony door and checked that it was properly closed.
Then I placed a chair in front of it.
Then stood there, looking at the arrangement.
It was objectively ugly.
Unreliable.
Entirely incompatible with the phrase “serious solution.”
I sighed.
On the other side of the wall, I heard more sounds.
Quieter now.
Footsteps.
A low voice.
Then Liora.
Slightly muffled.
“His name is Eugène, Mom.”
Silence.
Then she added from farther away:
“And he has a rabbit named Demitrius.”
I closed my eyes.
Fine.
My anonymity in the building was dead.
Officially.
I returned to the couch and sat down without turning on any more lights.
The studio had regained its quiet, but it wasn’t quite the same anymore.
There was now, inside the wall to my right, a person I had seen.
Not only heard.
A girl allergic to cats who defended feline intrusions.
A girl who laughed too easily.
A girl who took up too much space in a doorway.
Dangerous.
Not in the dramatic sense.
Not in the romantic sense either.
No.
Dangerous in the very practical sense that certain people could walk into an evening that was already badly arranged and suddenly make it seem as though everything you had organized until then could be moved.
I looked at Eugène sleeping.
He looked peaceful.
Of course.
He had already chosen.
I lay down on the couch without bothering to climb up to the mezzanine.
Just for a few minutes.
Long enough to come back down.
Long enough for my heart to stop commenting on every second of the encounter.
On the other side of the wall, a door closed.
Then one last sound.
Softer.
Like a stifled laugh.
I stared at the ceiling.
Fine.

Chapter 3

Selective allergy

The next morning, I secured the balcony.

Well.

I attempted to secure the balcony.

Important distinction.

At ten past nine, after four and a half hours of approximate sleep and two coffees consumed far too quickly, I found myself standing in front of the glass door with my arms crossed, examining the scene of the crime.

The balcony hadn't changed.

Obviously.

Twenty square feet of cold tile. A folding chair. A plant surviving out of pure spite. The railing. The divider between my apartment and the one next door.

Low.

Far too low.

Until the night before, it had seemed perfectly normal. A clear boundary between two living spaces. A simple line any reasonable living creature could understand.

Eugène had interpreted it as an invitation.

I examined the ledge, the gaps between the bars, the angle where it met the wall.

A medium-sized cat could have made it across with a little flexibility.

Eugène was not a medium-sized cat.

Eugène was a substantial, self-assured creature built like a diplomatic cushion.

And yet.

He had made it across.

I turned toward him.

He was sitting in a patch of sunlight, licking one paw with the peaceful concentration of someone who had crossed an international border without being detained.

"Do you realize what you've done?"

He barely looked up.

No remorse.

I picked up a sketchbook and wrote:

"Balcony. Risk of repeat offense."

I stopped.

I had actually written that.

About a cat.

I added anyway:

"Jumping capacity exceeds projections."

It was important to remain scientific.

I went outside with a tape measure, two cardboard boxes, a chair, and a crate full of old sketchbooks. A level of determination that probably would have been better spent on my tax return.

I measured the divider, the height of the railing, and the width of the ledge.

Then I drew a diagram.

A real one.

With arrows.

Eugène's probable route.

Launch zone.

Landing point.

Angle of infiltration.

It looked like a prisoner's escape plan in a movie taking itself far too seriously.

I added a question mark beside the plant.

Botanical accomplice.

I brought it inside immediately.
Then I tested the chair.
Bad idea.
It created a step.
The boxes formed a staircase.
The crate attracted Eugène, who walked out onto the balcony with calculated slowness.
“No.”
He stopped.
Looked at the crate.
Then the divider.
Calculation.
Intent.
Disaster in development.
“You are not doing that again.”
I placed my foot in front of him.
He examined the obstacle with obvious intellectual disappointment.
Then sat down.
Perfectly upright.
Perfectly calm.
The kind of calm that was never reassuring in a cat.
Human barrier effective in the short term.
Professionally unsustainable.
I couldn't spend my life standing on the balcony as a barricade while a client asked whether an eggplant could look more inclusive.
I brought the crate inside.
Then the chair.
Then the boxes.
The balcony returned to its original state, except now I had written proof of its inadequacy.
Eugène remained outside, sitting in front of the divider.
He was staring at the neighboring balcony.
Not the railing.
Not the street.
The neighboring balcony.
“Are you looking for her?”
One ear turned toward me.
“No. Bad question.”
I picked him up beneath the stomach and carried him inside. He allowed it with the offensively limp surrender of an animal capable of turning every forced relocation into a moral accusation.
I locked the glass door.
Eugène placed one paw against it.
On the other side, the neighboring balcony was empty.
Curtains drawn.
No voices.
No father.
No delighted allergic girl.
I stood there looking for a few seconds.
Just long enough to confirm that the previous night had really happened.
Eugène had actually disappeared.
Liora had actually said he could come back whenever he wanted.
Her father had actually clarified that he could not.
And I had actually mentioned the thin walls.

I closed my eyes.
Why had I said that?
I spent the morning working in short bursts.
Client revision.

Save.
Look at Eugène.
Move a stool.
Revision.
Look at the balcony.
Email.
Mild panic.
Save again.

The client wanted the illustrated eggplant to look “more welcoming, without becoming childish.”

I stared at it for a long time.
It already had arms.
I didn’t know what more humanity could possibly demand.
I changed its eyebrows.
Then changed them back.
Work accomplished.

The rabbit observed the activity cautiously. He had received his hay, his water, and a promise that no major architectural changes would affect his territory.

He didn’t believe me.
At noon, I decided to check the mail.
A simple decision.
Ordinary.
Socially risk-free.
Normally.

I picked up my keys and stopped in front of the glass door.
Eugène was asleep on the couch.
Or pretending to be.

One ear remained pointed in my direction.
Simulation.

“I’ll be back in three minutes. If you open a window by yourself, I’m moving.”
No reaction.

I stepped outside.

The hallway smelled as it always did, of warm dust, laundry detergent, and meals cooking behind closed doors.

The landing.
Two doors.
Mine.

Theirs.
I didn’t look.

Well, not directly.
A little.

Liora’s door was closed. Calm. Normal. No chewed socks on display.

I went downstairs and collected a bill, an advertisement for a pizza place, and a letter addressed to the previous tenant, who was apparently continuing to live in my apartment despite having moved out.

I was heading back upstairs when the building’s front door opened below.

Quick footsteps.
Very quick.
I didn’t need to see her.

Steps.

Rhythm.

Slightly excessive impact against the stairs.

Liora.

She appeared around the turn of the staircase with a sports bag over one shoulder, her jacket open, her hair tied back, and a water bottle tucked under one arm. She climbed as though the stairs were a personally insulting obstacle.

She looked up.

Saw me.

Slowed down.

For her, stopping seemed to be a local variation of slowing down.

“Aurè!”

My name bounced through the stairwell.

She had remembered it.

Normal.

I had told her.

People remembered names every day without requiring a creative brief.

“Hi.”

Brilliant response.

She reached me slightly out of breath, carrying the warmth of outdoors, movement, and cold air with her.

“How’s Eugène?”

No hello.

No “how are you?”

Eugène.

Obviously.

“He’s fine.”

“Did he sleep well?”

“I think so.”

“You think?”

“I didn’t question him.”

She smiled as though that were exactly the answer she had expected.

“Shame. I’m sure he would’ve had things to say.”

“Probably against the advice of his lawyer.”

“He has a lawyer?”

“Himself.”

“Makes sense.”

She adjusted her bag while searching through one of its pockets. She managed to talk, breathe, look for something, and remain attentive all at once.

Concerning.

I sometimes lost track of a conversation because a notification appeared.

Keys jingled.

A packet of tissues fell to the floor.

I bent down automatically.

So did she.

We nearly hit our foreheads.

A brief pause.

Very brief.

Too close.

I caught the scent of her shampoo, or her laundry detergent, or simply the cold air clinging to her jacket.

I straightened immediately.

She took the tissues from my hand.

"Thanks."

"You're welcome."

Silence.

One second.

Maybe two.

Then she continued, as though her body rejected extended silences.

"I thought about him this morning," she said.

"Eugène?"

"Yes. I think it was an important meeting."

I blinked.

"Important."

"Yes."

"With my cat."

"Yes."

I looked around the stairwell.

The sad fluorescent light.

The worn tile.

The mailboxes.

Nothing in the setting seemed prepared to support a declaration like that.

"He broke into your apartment."

"My apartment."

"Your family's apartment."

"It's my apartment too, technically."

"Fine. Your apartment."

She smiled.

I immediately regretted giving in.

"That's the point," she continued. "He could've gone anywhere. He chose our balcony.

Our living room. My sock."

"The sock may have been his primary objective."

"You think?"

"I'd rather not underestimate his criminal motives."

She laughed, then brought one hand to her nose.

I stiffened.

"Are you okay?"

"Yes."

She sniffed.

"I mean, I'm allergic, so 'okay' has a slightly flexible definition."

Fine.

The medical file.

I straightened, as though my body could become more responsible through posture.

"I'm sorry about last night. I'm going to secure the balcony. I've started. Well, I tried. I need to buy something sturdier."

"What, did you put a chair in front of it?"

I didn't answer quickly enough.

Her face lit up.

"You put a chair in front of it."

"Temporarily."

"And some boxes?"

I looked away.

She burst out laughing, then sneezed.

"Unrelated," she said, raising one finger. "That was dust."

"Of course."

"And maybe a little bit of Eugène lingering in my immune memory."

"Your immune memory?"

"No idea. It sounds medical, though."

Perfect.

I could already picture her father opening the door.

His daughter in sports clothes explaining to her neighbor that her immune system had retained an emotional memory of his cat.

Me beside her.

Owner of the cat.

Health hazard.

"Seriously, though," she said, "I really am allergic. But last night wasn't as bad as usual."

"Not as bad doesn't mean safe."

"You sound like my father."

"Sorry."

"No, it's funny."

She explained that she had sneezed and her eyes had become irritated, but she hadn't felt any tightness in her chest or had an attack.

"Usually, when I touch a cat, my eyes sting, I start coughing, and my father acts like I've licked asbestos."

I stood perfectly still.

"You probably shouldn't lick asbestos."

"Thank you for clarifying."

"You're welcome."

"But with Eugène, it was different. My face didn't try to leave my skull."

"Is that a common sensation?"

"With cats, yes."

"And you still wanted one?"

"Obviously."

I stared at her.

She stared back as though I were the one who had said something strange.

"You've always wanted an animal you're allergic to."

"Not an animal. A cat."

"That you're allergic to."

"It's an inconvenient detail."

"It's a respiratory detail."

She smiled.

"My father says exactly that."

Excellent.

I was mentally merging with my neighbor's father after less than twelve hours of knowing them.

A troubling development.

"So," she continued, "I think Eugène is special."

"He's mostly very furry."

"No. Special."

"Medically?"

"Destiny-wise."

I remained silent.

My brain placed the word on an internal table, examined it from several angles, then concluded that no reasonable response was available.

Destiny.

For a cat who had entered through a balcony carrying a stolen sock.

"You don't believe in destiny?"

"I believe in poorly secured windows."

She laughed.

"That's sad."

"That's cautious."

"That's very you."

I looked up.

"You don't know me."

"Not yet."

The answer came quickly.

Too quickly.

She didn't seem to give it any weight herself. She continued adjusting her water bottle and existing through several movements at once.

I remained stuck on the two words.

Not yet.

As though there were already meant to be a next part.

As though getting to know me wasn't an abstract possibility, but an activity that had already begun.

A very bad way to interpret what was probably an ordinary sentence.

"I'm heading to practice," she said, finally pulling her keys out of a pocket. "Otherwise I'm going to be late."

"Sports?"

Stupid question.

Sports bag.

Sports shoes.

Water bottle.

"Track."

"Oh."

"You look surprised."

"I was thinking."

"About what?"

About how she seemed too fast even when she was standing still.

About the strangeness of discovering that the sounds from next door had a direction, a track, a structure I had never imagined from my couch.

"Nothing in particular."

"Diplomatic answer."

"Survival answer."

Her smile returned.

"I've been doing track for years. Far too much, according to my father. Not enough, according to me."

From the way she said it, I understood that it wasn't simply an activity slotted between two classes.

There was structure to it.

Schedules.

Something that perhaps explained why her footsteps sometimes crossed the apartment with such precise urgency.

The sounds next door had somewhere to go.

A track.

A practice.

She stepped down one stair.

"Where do you train?" I asked before approving the question.

She looked far too pleased.

"At the stadium. It's not far. Well, if you walk quickly. For you, it might be far."

"Why for me?"

"You look like someone who considers going out to buy bread an expedition."

"That's occasionally true. I work from home."

"The classic excuse."

"It isn't an excuse. It's a tax status."

She laughed, then sneezed again.

I gestured vaguely toward her face.

"You should avoid thinking too hard about Eugène."

"Impossible."

"Concerning."

"No. Beautiful."

"Allergic."

"Selective."

"I don't think allergies work that way."

"You don't know that."

"Neither do you."

"I have firsthand experience."

"Your field of experience is your nose."

"Exactly."

I had no answer to that.

She went down one stair, then immediately came back up.

"And your balcony? Are you really going to secure it?"

"Yes."

"With something other than a chair?"

"Yes."

"Really?"

The word made the question less light.

Maybe she wasn't asking only because of her father.

Maybe she was asking because of Eugène too.

Or because of herself.

Or I was overanalyzing a conversation with an allergic girl who was late for practice.

Likely option.

"I promise."

She nodded, satisfied.

"Good. Because my father already has a very firm opinion about you."

Ah.

There it was.

The trial.

I tightened my grip on the mail, as though the pizza advertisement could serve as legal representation.

"Already?"

She straightened her shoulders and lowered her voice.

"The young man seems polite, but we'll need to make sure he understands the responsibilities involved in communal living."

The impression was accurate.

Far too accurate.

I closed my eyes.

Wonderful.

I was officially a subject of domestic concern.

"He said that?"

"Almost."

"How almost?"

"He mostly said we needed to keep an eye on the cat."

"You're interpreting freely."

"Always."

She checked her watch.

Her face changed.

The lightness remained, but something tightened. She was already somewhere else. On the street. At the stadium. Inside the next movement.

“Damn. Now I’m actually late.”

She hurried down the stairs, then turned around.

“Well, not late late. Just not early.”

“Is there a difference?”

“Psychologically, yes.”

Then she left.

I remained where I was with my useless mail, watching her disappear one floor at a time. Her bag struck against her hip. Her keys jingled. Her footsteps filled the stairwell as though they had always been there.

On the landing below, she stopped abruptly.

Looked up at me.

“By the way!”

“Yes?”

“What’s your cat’s name again?”

I frowned.

“You already know.”

“I want to hear it officially.”

I didn’t understand.

Obviously.

I answered anyway.

“Eugène.”

She smiled.

A real smile.

Immediate.

As though the name had confirmed a theory.

“Perfect.”

I remained still.

“Far too perfect,” she added.

Then she disappeared outside, almost running.

The building’s front door closed.

The silence returned.

Well.

Not entirely.

The sound of her footsteps remained in my head.

I looked down at my mail.

Bill.

Pizza place.

Previous tenant.

Nothing that explained why my apartment, my cat, my balcony, and now my name all seemed to have slipped into a part of reality I understood less well.

I slowly climbed the rest of the stairs.

On the landing, the two doors faced each other.

Mine.

Hers.

I looked at the invisible divide between the two apartments.

The wall.

The balcony.

The hallway.

All those places that, until the night before, had functioned properly.

They were still the same size.

I was the one who no longer knew exactly where each one ended.
I went inside.
Eugène was waiting behind the door.
Sitting.
Calm.
As though he knew.
“Don’t look at me like that.”
He blinked slowly.
I placed the mail on the table and checked the glass door.
Closed.
Locked.
The neighboring balcony was empty.
For now.
I picked up my sketchbook and added beneath the diagram:
“Buy proper barrier. Urgent.”
Then, after a moment’s hesitation:
“Selective allergy?”
I looked at the words.
Absurd.
I didn’t cross them out.
Eugène jumped onto the table and placed one paw beside the sketchbook.
“Don’t take that as scientific validation.”
He sniffed the page.
Then sat on it.
Fine.
Study interrupted by the subject himself.
I looked at the glass door again.
Still closed.
Still locked.
And yet, since the night before, the balcony no longer looked like a possible exit for Eugène.
It looked like a passage.
A much more dangerous distinction.

Chapter 4

Repeat offense

I bought proper supplies to secure the balcony.

Actually.

No chair.

No cardboard boxes.

No crate of sketchbooks that even a rabbit could have worked around with a minimum of motivation.

Real protection.

Well, what the nearest hardware store called real protection, which meant a roll of flexible mesh, plastic ties, two tension cords, and a set of instructions that appeared to have been translated by someone who had never seen a balcony.

I came home with everything tucked under one arm, looking like a responsible man.

Eugène was waiting beside the door.

Sitting.

Upright.

Silent.

As though he had already been informed of my intentions.

“Don’t start.”

He blinked.

Too slowly.

I placed the bag on the coffee table, took off my coat, and unpacked everything with excessive concentration. The mesh sprang open without warning and nearly knocked over my mug.

The rabbit startled in his corner.

So did I.

Eugène didn’t move.

He had the emotional stability of antique furniture.

“Everything’s fine,” I said to no one in particular.

The rabbit looked at me.

I couldn’t tell whether he believed me.

I spent the next hour turning my balcony into a feline prevention system.

I attached the mesh to the divider.

Then removed it.

Then attached it again, higher up.

Then realized it was sagging.

Then tightened it.

Then one of the ties snapped.

So I used two.

Then three.

At one point, I found myself crouched on the balcony with a plastic tie between my teeth, the roll of mesh trapped beneath one knee, negotiating with the wind.

Very dignified.

Very professional.

A neighbor downstairs stepped outside briefly to smoke.

He looked up.

I pretended not to see him.

He pretended he hadn’t seen me.

Mutual respect between apartment residents.

When I was finished, I stepped back to inspect the result.

The balcony now looked like a small improvised enclosure for a delinquent animal.

Which was technically accurate.

I pulled on the mesh.
Solid.
I pushed against the divider.
Stable.
I checked the gap between the floor and the bottom of the netting.
Too narrow.
I looked at the whole thing.
Then at Eugène, who was watching me through the glass door from inside.
“There.”
He stared at me.
“You can try, but it’s over.”
He stood up.
Stretched.
Then walked back toward the couch.
Fine.
Message received.
Or ignored.
With cats, the difference was often theoretical.
I spent the rest of the afternoon working on a set of illustrated book covers for a small publishing house. Three mood concepts. A forest. An isolated house. A warm light in the window.
I preferred it to emotionally available vegetables.
It paid less.
Obviously.
I worked almost properly.
Meaning I stayed focused for periods of twelve minutes before glancing toward the balcony.
Glass door closed.
Eugène visible.
Mesh in place.
Everything was fine.
I saved.
Once.
Twice.
Three times.
Then I received an email from a client that began with:
“Just one quick note.”
A lie.
There was no such thing as one quick note in a professional email.
I opened it anyway.
By the fourth line, they were suggesting we “completely revisit the spiritual direction of the visual.”
I closed my eyes.
Spiritual direction?
For a promotional banner?
I began writing a reply with a level of politeness that cost me several years of life expectancy.
That was when I heard something.
Not a loud sound.
A faint scrape.
Then a small thud.
Then nothing.
My body froze before my brain did.

I slowly turned my head.
The couch was empty.
So was the cushion beside the bookcase.
My gaze moved toward the glass door.
Open. Not wide open.
Just enough.
A breach.
I remained still.
No.
Impossible.
Hadn't I closed it?
I was almost certain I had.
Almost certain was not an acceptable concept when you lived with Eugène.
I stood too quickly, struck my knee against the desk, ignored the pain through sheer dramatic priority, and crossed the studio.
"Eugène?"
Nothing.
I stepped out onto the balcony.
The mesh was still there.
In place.
Solid.
Well.
Solid except for one spot.
The lower corner beside the wall.
Where the tension had created a slight gap.
Not large.
Just enough for a very determined cat who could become remarkably liquid when he chose to and suffered from a total moral deficiency.
I stared at the opening.
Then at the neighboring balcony.
Silence.
One second.
Two.
Then laughter.
Not quiet.
Not entirely loud either.
A muffled laugh, like someone trying not to be heard and failing with a great deal of personality.
Liora.
Obviously.
Then a sneeze.
Then her voice.
"No, you're unbelievable."
I slowly placed one hand over my face.
Fine.
Repeat offense.
The phrase was perfect.
Eugène had done it again.
After reinforcement of the security system.
With premeditation.
I moved closer to the divider.

I couldn't see inside their apartment yet. Only part of the neighboring balcony, the ledge, a plant much better cared for than mine, and the curtain beside their glass door, slightly open.

"Eugène," I called quietly.

A gray-and-white shape appeared.

Not on my side.

Of course.

On theirs.

Eugène strolled onto their balcony, tail held high, looking like someone returning from a highly successful official visit.

Liora appeared behind him.

She was wearing an oversized sweatshirt, athletic shorts, and mismatched socks. Her hair was tied on top of her head in a way that seemed to be holding together through optimism alone. She had a tissue in one hand.

And she was smiling.

Far too much.

"Oh," she said. "Hi."

I looked at Eugène.

Then her.

Then the mesh.

Then Eugène again.

"Hi."

She tried to arrange her face into something serious.

Immediate failure.

"I think your system has a slight weakness."

"I noticed."

"A very small one."

"Not small enough."

"No."

She looked down at Eugène.

"He found it immediately, though."

Eugène sat in front of her glass door.

At her apartment.

As though waiting to be served something.

I felt a very precise mixture rise inside me.

Relief, because he was alive.

Irritation, because he was alive in someone else's apartment.

Discomfort, because that someone else was Liora.

And because she looked genuinely happy about it.

Which complicated everything.

"I'm sorry," I said.

"You apologize a lot."

"My cat keeps entering your apartment."

"My apartment, yes."

"Uninvited."

"That part is debatable."

I looked at her.

"You invited him?"

She gently stroked the top of Eugène's head.

Eugène closed his eyes.

Absolute traitor.

"Not officially."

"So no."

"But I think he felt expected."

"You can't encourage him."

"It's difficult. His face is encouraging all by itself."

I couldn't really argue with that.

It was his main weapon.

Eugène had the face of an innocent animal even while methodically dismantling your social life.

I leaned carefully against the railing. The mesh now separated our balconies in an absurd way. Like a border installed too late between two countries already in negotiations.

Liora stood on the other side.

Not too close.

Not in my hallway.

Not directly in front of me inside a stairwell that was much too narrow.

The balcony created a strange distance.

Close enough to talk.

Far enough to breathe.

I could look at her without feeling as though she had stepped directly into my personal space with her keys, her bag, her voice, and her selective allergy.

It was easier.

A little.

"Did he come over quickly?" I asked.

"Very."

"How long has he been there?"

She looked toward the inside of her apartment.

"Three minutes."

"And you let him in?"

"He was already inside."

"Liora."

Her name came out before I could stop it.

She straightened slightly.

Not offended.

More amused.

"Yes?"

I regretted it immediately.

Saying her name gave the scene a familiarity I had not approved internally.

"I mean... you can't."

"I know."

"You're allergic."

"Yes."

"Your father is going to kill me."

"He won't kill you."

"He'll judge me."

"That, yes."

"For long?"

"Probably."

Fine.

Honest.

She suddenly sneezed.

Once.

Then raised her hand.

"I'm fine."

"You hadn't even heard my question."

"I anticipated it."

"That's concerning."

"No, it's efficient."

She quickly blew her nose, then leaned toward Eugène.

"See? He doesn't dramatize everything."

"He doesn't understand consequences."

"Or he understands them and doesn't care."

"That's worse."

"That's more feline."

I should have been angry, I thought.

Or at least firmer.

I should retrieve Eugène, seal the breach, apologize to her parents, install something worthy of a maximum-security prison, and return to my normal life.

Except Liora was standing on the other side of the mesh in mismatched socks, with my cat at her feet, speaking as though this repeated intrusion were simply an obvious fact of the world.

And I didn't know what to do with the strange relief that caused.

"Are you always this dramatic about him?" she asked.

"I'm not dramatic."

She looked down at the mesh.

Then at the gap Eugène had crawled through.

Then at me.

"Aurèl."

Again.

My name, used as a complete argument.

"I secured the balcony because my cat could have fallen four floors."

"He didn't almost fall. He changed apartments."

"Through a balcony."

"Successfully."

"Just because a catastrophe didn't happen doesn't mean the procedure deserves praise."

She stared at me for a second.

Then laughed.

Not mockingly.

I understood that before I could even analyze it.

She wasn't laughing at me as though I were ridiculous.

She laughed because she found my panic easy to read.

Maybe even logical, in its own way.

Funny.

Not pathetic.

The distinction was tiny.

It mattered enormously.

I looked away toward Eugène so she wouldn't notice that I had noticed.

"Also," I added, "he's already done it again. Which means he'll do it again. Again."

"Maybe he just needs to see me regularly."

"No."

"You say no very quickly."

"Because the sentence didn't deserve further analysis."

"Harsh."

"Realistic."

"You should let him decide."

"That is exactly what I should never do."

She smiled faintly.

"You don't like letting things decide for themselves, do you?"

The question came softly.

Too softly for her.
Or too precisely.
I felt something close slightly inside my chest.
A reaction.
Automatic defense.
“I like preventing my cat from dying or making my neighbor sick.”
“Your neighbor?”
“You live next door.”
“That’s true.”
She looked satisfied by a victory I didn’t understand.
Eugène chose that moment to stand, walk into her apartment, and disappear from view.
My body tensed.
“Eugène.”
“He’s only getting a drink,” Liora said.
“Drinking what?”
“Water.”
“Where?”
“From a bowl.”
“You gave him a bowl?”
She froze for half a second.
“No...”
Silence.
“Liora.”
“Maybe.”
I placed both hands on the railing.
“You shouldn’t serve animals that enter your home illegally.”
“I didn’t feed him.”
“You gave him water.”
“I didn’t feed him.”
“That still counts as hospitality.”
“You want me to let your cat die of thirst six feet away from your apartment?”
“He was inside my apartment five minutes ago.”
“We don’t know what he experienced during the journey.”
I stared at her.
She bit the inside of her cheek to stop herself from laughing.
Failed.
She laughed anyway.
And against all logic, I felt my mouth move.
A little. Very little.
An incomplete smile.
Probably invisible.
She saw it.
Obviously.
Her face lit up.
“Oh.”
“What?”
“Nothing.”
“That wasn’t a smile.”
“I didn’t say anything.”
“You were going to.”
“No.”
“Yes.”
“I was going to say you look less angry when you do that.”

"I'm not angry."
"No. You're worried, with sharp edges."
I stayed silent.
Scandalously accurate wording.
I didn't like it.
Or I liked too much that she had noticed.
"You have a very loose way of describing people," I said.
"And you have a very complicated way of not saying things."
"I say things."
"In three words or fewer."
"Efficiency."
"Protection."
This time, I didn't answer.
Because there was no answer that didn't open a door I hadn't properly looked at yet.
Something moved inside her apartment.
A deep voice crossed the air.
"Liora?"
I straightened immediately.
The father.
Obviously.
Every scene involving Liora seemed to come equipped with a paternal alarm system.
She turned toward the apartment.
"Yes?"
"Are you on the balcony?"
"Yes!"
"Why?"
She hesitated. Bad sign.
I could see it from behind.
Her shoulders lifted slightly.
"To get some air."
Silence.
I closed my eyes.
Catastrophic lie.
She was wearing shorts and a sweatshirt, holding a tissue, standing beside a bowl of water probably intended for my fugitive cat.
Getting some air.
Very solid.
Her father spoke again.
Closer this time.
"Is the cat there again?"
Liora turned toward me.
Her eyes widened.
As though I were responsible for the answer.
Which was technically true.
Socially unfair.
I shook my head very slightly.
She made a downward motion with one hand, probably telling me not to panic.
It was exactly the kind of gesture that caused panic.
"No," she said.
Silence.
Eugène chose that precise moment to step back onto the balcony.
He meowed.
Loudly.

Very loudly.
 I closed my eyes.
 So did Liora.
 A long silence followed.
 Her father's voice became deeper.
 "Liora."
 She inhaled.
 "So, depending on how we define 'there'..."
 I put a hand to my forehead.
 Accomplice.
 I had become an accomplice.
 Without even leaving my balcony.
 Her father appeared partly behind her inside the apartment. I couldn't see all of him,
 only his silhouette beyond the glass door, upright, solid, immediately concerned.
 His gaze moved from Liora to Eugène.
 Then from Eugène to me.
 Through the mesh.
 Me, standing on my balcony.
 Empty-handed.
 Face probably guilty.
 My cat inside his apartment.
 Second time.
 "Good afternoon, sir," I said.
 Why?
 Why had I spoken?
 He remained still for a second.
 Then answered with the calm gravity that made you want to present identification.
 "Good afternoon, Aurèl."
 He knew my name.
 Fine.
 The file was progressing.
 "I'm sorry," I continued. "I secured the balcony, but he found a way through."
 "I can see that."
 A simple sentence.
 A complete conviction.
 Liora moved slightly in front of Eugène.
 As though she could hide eighteen and a half pounds of cat behind her calves.
 "Dad, it's fine. He's only been here for two minutes."
 "Seven," I corrected automatically.
 She shot me a look.
 Betrayal.
 Her father turned toward me.
 Mistake.
 I should have lied.
 Or stayed quiet.
 Staying quiet was normally one of my strongest skills.
 Liora continued quickly.
 "And I've barely sneezed."
 Her father looked at her.
 She sneezed. Once.
 Perfect.
 Timing of extraordinary cruelty.
 "Barely," he repeated.

"It's the dust."

"On the balcony?"

"Urban air is very complex."

I lowered my head to hide a smile.

Failed.

I felt Liora looking at me.

She had won something.

I didn't know what.

She had won it anyway.

Her father sighed.

Not an exasperated sigh.

More the sigh of a man watching an absurd situation turn into legal precedent.

"The cat needs to go home."

"Yes," I answered immediately.

Too quickly.

"Good."

He stepped back, then pointed at Liora with calm authority.

"And you wash your hands afterward."

"Yes."

"And not that face."

"Dad."

"Liora."

"I know."

"You know, and you do it anyway."

She opened her mouth.

Then closed it.

Because for once, he had summarized the situation with a precision that was difficult to attack.

Her father disappeared inside.

Not entirely.

You could still feel his presence.

Like an administration in the next room.

Liora waited two seconds, then turned toward me.

"Well."

"Well."

"We should return the fugitive."

"Yes."

Eugène was sitting between us on Liora's side, looking perfectly satisfied with having mobilized three adult, or nearly adult, human beings around his person.

She crouched down.

"Eugène."

He looked at her.

"You have to go home."

He blinked.

"See?" she said. "He understands."

"He hasn't moved."

"He's thinking."

"He disobeys slowly."

She reached out toward him.

Eugène rubbed his head against her fingers.

I watched the gesture. Her hand was gentle.

Contrary to what I would have expected from her, she didn't pet him quickly.

Or too firmly.

She followed the cat's movement, let him come to her, then slowly ran her fingers between his ears.

Eugène closed his eyes.

I didn't know why the detail stopped me.

Maybe because she was always moving.

And there, for a few seconds, she slowed down for him.

For my cat.

The cat who forced her to blow her nose every three minutes.

"Can you send him through?" I asked.

"Over the top?"

I looked at the divider.

The mesh. The drop.

The fourth floor.

My stomach answered before I did.

"No."

She smiled.

"I'm joking."

"Don't joke about heights and cats."

"Noted."

She stood and widened the opening near the bottom of the mesh, where Eugène must have squeezed through. I leaned down on my side to hold the structure steady and prevent him from suddenly testing a third, more dramatic option.

We both ended up crouched on opposite sides of the divider.

The mesh between us.

Eugène in the middle.

Liora on one side.

Me on the other.

A perfectly normal scene.

"Come on, Eugène," she said softly. "Go home."

He didn't move.

"Eugène," I called.

He looked at me.

Very calmly.

"Come here."

He remained seated.

Liora tilted her head.

"Does he always listen to you like this?"

"Yes."

"Impressive."

"Thank you."

"You can really feel the authority."

"I'm going to carry him."

"Wait."

She reached into her apartment, grabbed something I couldn't see, then came back with a small piece of fabric.

A sock.

Probably hers.

The one from the original incident.

"You kept the evidence?" I asked.

"It's my sock."

"A piece of evidence."

"A relic."

"You're concerning."

"You're jealous because he likes it."

"Your sock?"

"Our bond."

"Your bond is textile-based."

She waved the sock gently in front of Eugène.

The cat followed it with his eyes.

Then, with arrogant slowness, stood up.

One step.

Two.

He pushed his nose through the opening.

I almost held my breath.

Liora spoke to him softly.

"There. Very good. We cooperate. We avoid drama. We return home like responsible citizens."

"He isn't a citizen."

"Not yet."

Eugène finally slipped beneath the mesh and onto my balcony with an offensively fluid grace considering his volume.

I caught him as soon as he was close enough.

He allowed it with the expression of a king temporarily relocated by his staff.

I held him against me.

Not too tightly.

Just enough to make sure he was there.

Warm.

Heavy.

Indifferent.

My heart slowed a little.

I looked up at Liora.

She was already watching me.

Not with her usual wide smile.

With something smaller.

More attentive.

It lasted for a second.

Then she sneezed.

Reality returned.

"Sorry," I said again.

She waved a hand.

"I'm fine."

"You always say that."

"And you're always apologizing."

"Because my cat is attacking you immunologically."

"He chose me."

"Your respiratory system disagrees."

"It'll adapt."

"That isn't how it works."

"Maybe it is."

"No."

"You're not a doctor."

"Neither are you."

"But I know Eugène."

I looked down at the cat in my arms.

"Since yesterday."

"Great stories start quickly."

“This isn’t a great story.”
She smiled.
“Not yet.”
That not yet again.
Of course.
She used it the way someone left a door slightly open.
I remained in front of it with a fire extinguisher, an evacuation plan, and doubts.
Inside her apartment, her father coughed.
Not a real cough.
A reminder cough.
Liora rolled her eyes.
“I have to go before he comes out here and reads us the building’s health regulations.”
“He has those?”
“No, but he could write them by this evening.”
I almost smiled.
This time, I didn’t hide it quickly enough.
She saw.
Again.
“See you later, Aurèl.”
“See you later.”
She stayed for one more second.
Then added:
“And reinforce the bottom.”
I looked at the opening.
“Yes.”
“Because he’s clever.”
“He’s stubborn.”
“Like you.”
“I don’t crawl beneath my neighbors’ fences.”
“Not yet.”
I stared at her.
She smiled, delighted by her own absurdity, then went back inside and closed the glass door behind her.
The curtain moved.
Her silhouette disappeared.
Then I heard her, more faintly:
“Yes, Dad, I’m going to wash my hands.”
A pause.
“No, I didn’t put my face in his fur.”
Another pause.
“That’s still a strange sentence, though.”
I remained on the balcony with Eugène in my arms, listening despite myself.
Not out of unhealthy curiosity.
Well.
Not only.
Her father replied with something I couldn’t make out. Liora protested. A drawer opened.
Water probably ran in the kitchen or bathroom.
Life resumed on the other side of the wall.
On the other side of the balcony.
I looked down at Eugène.
“You understand that you’re creating a problem?”
He rested his head against my forearm.
A gentle gesture.

Obvious manipulation.

I went back inside.

Closed the glass door.

Locked it.

Then, for good measure, pulled the curtain slightly closed.

Eugène jumped from my arms as soon as I placed him on the floor. He walked straight to his cushion, turned around twice, and settled down as though nothing worth mentioning had happened.

The rabbit watched him from his corner with an expression I chose to interpret as contempt.

"Yes," I said. "We agree."

I returned to the balcony with additional ties, repaired the bottom of the mesh, added two layers, then a third.

When I was done, the whole thing looked even less discreet.

Fine.

I was sacrificing aesthetics for survival.

I went back inside, washed my hands, and returned to my desk.

The client's email was still open.

"Completely revisit the emotional direction of the visual."

I stared at the screen.

Then looked at Eugène.

Then the glass door.

Then the wall to my right.

Behind it, I heard Liora laugh again.

A short laugh.

Followed by a comment from her father, lower and deeper.

Then her voice, quick, lively, impossible to ignore.

I placed my fingers on the keyboard.

Typed nothing.

This time, the silence of the studio wasn't quite the same.

There was a kind of passage inside it.

A new place through which the world could enter.

I wasn't sure I liked it.

I wasn't sure I didn't.

I looked at Eugène, already half asleep, perfectly innocent within the general lie of his existence.

"This situation isn't going to stay an accident, is it?"

He opened one eye.

Closed it again.

No answer.

Obviously.

Chapter 5

A feline excuse

For three days, Eugène didn't try anything.

Nothing.

No infiltration.

No prolonged staring toward the neighboring balcony.

No paw slipped beneath the reinforced mesh.

No suspicious behavior beyond his usual behavior, which remained suspicious on principle.

He slept.

Ate.

Occupied the couch with the confidence of an undeclared owner.

Sometimes he stared at the glass door the way one stared at a happy memory, but he never acted on it.

So I decided the problem was solved.

An optimistic decision.

Almost dangerous.

The mesh held. So did the ties. The bottom had been doubled, then tripled, with a precision I had so far refused to apply to any administrative procedure in my life.

Even Eugène seemed to have accepted the new border.

Or he was preparing something else.

With him, peace always looked slightly like an ambush.

I returned to work.

Well.

I tried.

The commissions hadn't disappeared just because my cat had discovered a calling as a neighborhood diplomat. Clients still wanted visuals that felt "more human," atmospheres that could "breathe more," covers that were "less cold without being too warm."

I spent an entire morning working on a forest that was supposed to feel unsettling without causing anxiety.

A fundamental distinction.

Apparently.

I drew trees.

Deleted them.

Added a light.

Removed it.

Saved.

Opened an email.

Closed it again.

On my desktop, behind the software window, a folder called "interiors_selection" had been open for two days.

I minimized it.

Not now.

Personal work had a deeply unpleasant habit of looking over the shoulder of the work that actually paid the bills.

I stood up to refill my glass.

On the other side of the wall, a door slammed.

Not loudly.

Well, loudly by normal standards.

Normal by Liora's.

I stood still, empty glass in hand.

Footsteps. Quick.

A voice. Hers.

I couldn't make out the words, only the rhythm. A sentence fired off too quickly, a deeper reply, probably her father, then the sound of keys.

I checked the time.

5:22 p.m.

Practice?

Maybe.

No.

I didn't know her schedule.

I wasn't tracking it.

I had simply noticed, by chance, that she often left between five and six with a bag. And came back later, sometimes speaking more quietly. Which could mean exhaustion. Or a bad mood. Or belated respect for the walls.

Neutral observation.

No implications.

I drank my water.

Then returned to my desk.

The next day, the same thing.

Five thirty.

Quick footsteps.

Keys. Voice. Door.

The following day, slightly earlier.

I also noticed that she sometimes came home dragging her feet a little.

Not much.

Just enough for the rhythm to change.

Less impact.

Less momentum.

As though the world weighed more after the stadium.

I didn't want to know that.

Well.

I wasn't trying to know that.

But the walls were thin. The acoustic reality of the building forced me to develop passive expertise.

It was beyond my control.

On the fourth day, at eleven in the morning, I was working on a sketch of a window when someone knocked on my door.

Two knocks.

Not her father's.

His were precise and measured, with the gravity of a notarized document.

These were quicker.

Almost impatient.

My stylus remained suspended above the tablet.

Eugène lifted his head from the couch.

The rabbit didn't react. Or did so in a way so internal that no one could legally prove it.

I looked at the door.

Then Eugène.

Then the door again.

A second set of knocks.

"Aurèl?"

I closed my eyes.

Obviously.

I stood up, vaguely checked my sweater, my pants, the general condition of the studio, then immediately understood there was no way to improve anything in under five seconds.

The studio was in its normal state.

Controlled disorder.

So, disorder.

Sketchbooks stacked on the coffee table. An empty mug beside the computer. Papers on the floor, though not randomly. Well, not entirely. The guitar in one corner near the lamp. A blanket badly folded on the couch. Eugène on the blanket. And beyond the edge of the bookcase, Demitrius's territory, discreet enough to exist without attracting attention.

An entire world organized according to a logic only I could defend in court.

I crossed the room and opened the door.

Liora stood on the landing.

Right in front of me.

One foot slightly behind the other, as though she had stopped just before leaving again. She wore jeans, sneakers, and a light jacket open over a sweatshirt. Her hair was tied back, again, though a few strands had escaped around her face. A small canvas bag hung from one shoulder, and she looked like someone who had prepared a request exactly two minutes earlier.

No more.

"Hi," she said.

"Hi."

She looked behind me.

Not discreetly.

"Is he here?"

I turned my head slightly, even though I already knew.

Eugène hadn't moved.

He was still on the couch in such a noble position that anyone could have assumed the visit had been scheduled by his staff.

"Yes."

"Good."

Silence.

I looked at her.

She looked at me.

Then she inhaled, as though deciding to fully accept the absurdity of her presence.

"Can I see him?"

I blinked.

"Eugène?"

"Yes."

"Now?"

"If you can."

"You want to see my cat."

"Yes."

She nodded with almost admirable seriousness.

"Officially."

"Officially?"

"Yes."

I placed one hand against the edge of the door.

The hallway was quiet around us. Too quiet for a conversation like this.

"Why?"

She opened her mouth.

Closed it.

Then shrugged.

"Because I want to."

A dangerously simple answer.

No apparent strategy.

No detour.
Just the desire itself, placed in the middle of the landing as though it were enough.
I immediately had twelve objections.
Allergy.
Father.
Open door.
Neighbor.
Cat.
Allergy again.
Studio not prepared.
The social implications of a girl entering my apartment to visit an animal that had already invaded hers twice.
Possible message in the building group chat.
"Hello, please be advised that the young man on the fifth floor is now hosting visits."
Very bad.
"You're allergic," I said.
"Moderately."
"That's still allergic."
"I took an antihistamine."
I stared at her.
"To come see my cat?"
"Maybe."
"Liora."
"What?"
She gave me a small smile.
She knew.
She knew it was strange.
She didn't seem inclined to apologize for it.
That was the entire difficulty.
"I know it's a little..." she said, searching for the word.
"Concerning?"
"No."
"Medically questionable?"
"No."
"Socially strange?"
"That's it."
She pointed one finger at me.
"Socially strange. Not serious."
"You're not the one your father will interrogate if you have a reaction."
"I am."
"Fine, but I'll be the one accused."
"He won't accuse you."
I raised my eyes.
She corrected herself.
"Not officially."
"Reassuring."
"He'll just ask why I was in your apartment."
"Exactly."
"And I'll tell him I came to see Eugène."
"That does not improve anything."
"Yes, it does. It's the truth."
I stayed silent.
In this particular case, the truth had catastrophic potential.

I looked behind me.
Eugène was watching us now.
He had lifted his head.
Very calm.
Very aware that he was the center of the problem.
Liora followed my gaze, and her expression changed. It softened, though in a lively sort of way.
“Oh, he’s looking at me.”
“He looks at everyone as though assessing the rental value of the premises.”
“He recognized me.”
“Probably.”
“See?”
“I don’t see anything.”
“You refuse to see.”
I sighed.
Mistake.
She took it as an opening.
“I can stay for two minutes,” she said. “Really. I’ll see him, say hello, and leave. I won’t touch everything. I won’t make myself comfortable. I won’t conduct an inspection.”
I looked at her bag.
Her face.
The hallway behind her.
Then my apartment.
I could say no.
Technically.
Politely.
Simply.
I could say, “Not today.”
I could say, “It’s better not to.”
I could say, “Your father is right.”
Nothing in my life required me to open the door any farther.
Except Eugène climbed down from the couch at that exact moment.
He stretched.
At length.
Then walked toward the entrance with dramatic slowness.
Liora straightened as though he had personally approved her request.
“See?” she whispered.
“No.”
“He’s coming.”
“He’s walking through his apartment.”
“Toward me.”
“Toward the door.”
“Where I’m standing.”
I lowered my head.
Fine.
I had just lost an argument to my neighbor and a cat.
Humiliating situation.
I opened the door wider.
“Two minutes.”
Her smile appeared immediately.
“Promise.”
“And you don’t pick him up.”
“Okay.”

"You don't put your face on him."

"I know."

"You wash your hands afterward."

"You really do sound like my father."

"That's because of you."

"That's touching."

"That isn't what I meant."

She stepped inside.

One step at first.

Then two.

And the studio changed.

Not physically.

Nothing really moved. The coffee table remained the coffee table. The sketchbooks remained sketchbooks. The guitar did not suddenly become anything other than a guitar resting in a corner.

Her presence did what the sounds next door did, only without the wall.

It filled the space immediately.

Not because she was shouting.

Not even because she was speaking.

Simply because she was there.

She looked around with direct curiosity, without excessive embarrassment, though not with cruel nosiness either. She wasn't snooping.

She simply took everything in too quickly.

The desk. The papers beside the tablet.

The minimized folder on the screen.

The couch. The plants. The lamp near the bookcase.

The guitar.

Too long on the guitar.

Or maybe only a second.

I noticed anyway.

Obviously.

"It's small," she said.

I froze.

She immediately turned toward me.

"Not in a bad way."

"There's a good way?"

"Yes. Small like... contained."

"Contained?"

"Yes. Everything's here."

I didn't answer.

I couldn't tell whether it was a compliment. Or an observation. Or a gentle violation of my internal organization.

She moved farther inside, then stopped beside the couch because Eugène had reached her feet.

He didn't rub himself against her.

Of course not.

He sat three feet away.

Facing her.

Perfectly upright.

Perfectly dignified.

Completely unavailable.

Liora pressed one hand to her chest.

"Is he ignoring me?!"

“Yes.”

“After everything we’ve been through?!”

“You’ve been through one sock and two intrusions.”

“That’s already a lot.”

“Not to him.”

She crouched slowly.

I tensed.

She raised one hand without taking her eyes off Eugène.

“I know. Not the face. Don’t pick him up. Don’t breathe him in like a pillow.”

“Thank you.”

“Can I say hello?”

“Verbally, yes.”

She smiled and lowered her voice.

“Hello, Eugène.”

Eugène turned his head toward the window.

Total rejection.

Liora remained crouched, her mouth slightly open.

“He’s snubbing me.”

“He’s at home.”

“He acted important at my place too.”

“That’s his personality.”

“I love him.”

“Bad news for your immune system.”

She held out one hand, palm upward, without touching him.

Eugène didn’t move.

Then he took half a step forward.

Stopped.

Stared at her.

And walked around her hand to rub against the foot of the couch.

Liora remained frozen.

“That was humiliating.”

“Yes.”

“Did you see that?”

“Yes.”

“You’re not going to do anything?”

“About my cat?”

“Tell him to be nice.”

“Eugène, be nice.”

Eugène lay down.

With his back to us.

Liora slowly turned toward me.

“He respects you enormously.”

“We have a complicated relationship.”

She laughed.

Then sniffed slightly.

My attention immediately locked onto her nose.

“You okay?”

“Yes.”

“Already?”

“It’s nothing.”

“You only just came in.”

“And?”

“Your allergy works quickly.”

"And you panic quickly."

"I'm gathering information."

"You panic methodically."

I had no answer.

She stood and looked around again. I watched her eyes move over the piles of sketchbooks. The papers beside the desk. The sketches turned facedown against the table, as though hiding their fronts were enough to make them invisible.

It wasn't.

She had seen them.

She saw my movement too, tiny, the movement of someone hesitating between stepping in front of them and pretending not to have noticed.

She didn't ask.

Not immediately.

Her gaze simply moved on, paused at a sheet pinned to the wall, then continued.

"Do you do everything here?" she asked.

I followed her gaze.

Desk. Tablet. Mugs.

Sketchbooks.

"Most of the time."

"You actually work in that chair?"

"Yes."

"Your back is going to die."

"It's already started."

"I knew it."

She pointed at the desk chair.

"That is not a real chair for sitting all day."

"It's a chair."

"Not a real one."

"It has the essential properties."

"You mean four legs and a seat?"

"That's a solid foundation."

"Your back hates you."

I almost answered, but Eugène chose that moment to roll slightly onto his side.

Liora turned toward him immediately.

"Finally."

She moved closer to the couch, then stopped at a reasonable distance.

"Can I?"

She was looking at me.

This time she was genuinely asking.

Not provocatively.

Not with her usual expression of turning every boundary into a negotiation.

A real question.

I looked down at Eugène.

He had settled on the blanket with his paws tucked beneath him, eyes half closed. Available.

Or preparing a more subtle humiliation.

"You can try."

Liora reached out.

Slowly.

She touched the top of his head with her fingertips.

Eugène didn't move.

Then closed his eyes.

Total victory.

Her face changed.

Not much.

Just enough.

The joy became quieter.

“Oh,” she whispered.

I watched her stroke my cat with unusual concentration. She seemed to be holding back her energy so she wouldn’t move too quickly. Her fingers passed between his ears, stopped, then started again.

A sneeze rose.

She turned her head at the last second.

“Sorry.”

“You should stop.”

“Thirty seconds.”

“Liora.”

“Twenty.”

“You’re negotiating with your allergy.”

“I usually win.”

“So does it.”

She smiled without looking up.

“He’s softer here.”

“He’s the same.”

“No.”

“Yes.”

“At my place, he was visiting. Here, he lives.”

I looked at Eugène.

Then the studio.

I had never considered the difference that way.

Visiting.

Living.

Another sentence she threw out without warning that remained caught somewhere.

She finally withdrew her hand and stood.

“There. I’m being responsible.”

She sneezed.

Twice.

“Relatively,” I added.

“Relatively responsible is still good.”

She pulled a small bottle of hand sanitizer from her bag.

I looked at her.

“You planned this.”

“Yes.”

“So it wasn’t impulsive.”

“It still was, a little.”

“You took an antihistamine and brought sanitizer for an impulse?”

“I’m spontaneous with preparation.”

I remained silent.

“That makes no sense,” I said.

“To you.”

She rubbed her hands together, then turned toward the studio one more time.

Her gaze moved everywhere, but more slowly now. As though she had begun to understand that things needed to be looked at differently in here.

More quietly.

More slowly.

That unsettled me more than her energy.

"This is strange," she said.
I tensed.
"What?"
"I imagined you differently."
"How?"
She thought.
Bad sign.
"I don't know. Emptyer."
I didn't answer.
"Not you. I mean, not you empty. Your apartment. From the hallway, you seem very... discreet."
"That's a positive quality."
"Yes. But in here, it's full."
I looked at the sketchbooks.
The plants. The papers.
The mugs. The guitar in its corner.
The couch.
Eugène, already pleased with himself.
"Full of clutter."
"No. Full of things that stay."
I swallowed.
Very discreetly.
She truly had no right to be that precise.
Not after being here for only a few minutes.
Well.
Far more than two.
I checked the time on my screen.
So did she.
"Oh," she said.
"Yes."
"That was longer than two minutes."
"Yes."
"I should go."
"Okay."
Neither of us moved immediately.
Eugène had fallen asleep again.
The studio seemed to have accepted her presence with irritating ease.
I hadn't.
Or not in the same way.
She took one step toward the door.
Then another.
I almost relaxed.
Mistake.
Liora stopped abruptly.
Not a slowdown.
A real stop.
Rare.
Her eyes had fallen on the corner beside the bookcase. Demetrius, betrayed by curiosity or a very poor grasp of discretion, had moved several inches outside his territory.
Ears upright. Nose twitching. Cautious gaze.
Liora almost stopped breathing.
"Wait."
I followed her gaze.

Ah. Fine.

“Is that...”

She narrowed her eyes slightly, as though the memory had arrived a few seconds late.

Then her face lit up.

“Of course. Demitrius!”

I closed my eyes for a second.

Obviously. She remembered.

Not vaguely.

Not the way people remembered a minor detail encountered at three in the morning during an absurd scene.

She actually remembered.

“He’s real,” she said.

“That’s generally what rabbits are.”

“No, I mean... I saw him, yes, but now...”

She stopped.

Something in her voice had lowered.

Not much.

Just enough that Demitrius didn’t retreat immediately.

So she could do that.

Slow down.

I hadn’t expected that information.

Liora took one step toward him.

I raised a hand.

“Slowly.”

She stopped immediately.

Immediately.

Which was almost more unsettling than if she had kept moving.

“I know,” she said.

And she was speaking more quietly.

Much more quietly.

Demitrius’s nose twitched.

From the couch, Eugène opened one eye with a complete lack of interest in the dramatic tension.

Liora looked at Demitrius, then at me.

Her eyes were shining.

Disaster.

“Aurèl.”

“Yes?”

“Can I stay a little longer?”

I looked at the open door. The hallway just beyond it. The available exit.

The original plan, perfectly simple, perfectly dead.

Two minutes.

She had said two minutes.

I looked at Demitrius, who still hadn’t fled.

Then at Liora, standing in the middle of my studio, her hands obediently still, as though all her energy had just learned to stand on tiptoe.

I understood immediately.

The visit was no longer going to be short.

It had only just begun.

“Technically,” I said, “you came to see my cat.”

She smiled.

Very softly this time.

“Technically, yes.”

Chapter 6

The rabbit, and other evidence

The rabbit was still halfway out of his territory beside the bookcase.

One paw on the rug.

The other still inside the area covered by his little open pen, as though he were hesitating between joining the scene and filing a complaint.

Liora had stopped moving altogether.

Which almost deserved to be written down somewhere.

Her eyes were fixed on him with a very different kind of attention from the one she had given Eugène. With the cat, she had turned it into a personal challenge. He ignored her, so she had to earn his attention.

Absurd logic.

Entirely consistent with Liora.

With Demitrius, it was something else.

She had gone quiet.

Actually quiet.

As though she had instinctively understood that some creatures couldn't be won over through persistence.

I hadn't expected that.

"Can I get closer?" she asked.

Her voice was lower.

Nothing dramatic.

Not transformed.

Simply adjusted.

I looked at her.

"Slowly."

She nodded.

No comment.

No negotiation.

No immediate joke.

Even more concerning.

She took one step.

Demitrius moved back an inch.

She stopped immediately.

"Here?"

I looked at Demitrius, then Liora.

"Here is fine."

She crouched very slowly, hands resting on her knees.

Eugène opened one eye from the couch. He observed the scene with the peaceful contempt of an animal who couldn't understand why something so small was suddenly receiving so much consideration.

"Is he more scared?" she asked.

"More cautious."

"Sorry. More cautious."

She corrected herself without arguing.

I felt something shift in my attention.

A detail.

A small one.

But details sometimes had the unbearable habit of changing the entire room.

"He doesn't like sudden movements," I said. "Or sharp noises. Or strangers standing over him. Or Eugène whenever Eugène decides there's a hierarchy in this apartment."

Liora glanced at the cat.

“Does he decide that often?”
“Every day.”
“And Demitrius accepts it?”
“Demitrius practices passive resistance.”
His nose twitched, as though confirming this.
Liora smiled without laughing too loudly.
Even her smile had changed volume.
She remained crouched and perfectly still.
And waited.
I didn’t know why that unsettled me so much.
Maybe because I had already placed her in a category that was far too simple.
Fast girl.
Voice too alive.
Slamming doors.
Impossible-to-ignore presence.
A hallway-and-balcony kind of energy, made of sentences thrown out before they had been weighed.
And now she was here, in the middle of my studio, capable of making herself almost disappear so she wouldn’t frighten a rabbit.
Demitrius moved half a step forward.
Then stopped.
Liora barely inhaled.
“Is he coming?”
“Maybe.”
“I’m not moving.”
“Good idea.”
“I’m very good at not moving.”
I looked at her.
She turned her eyes toward me.
“What?”
“Nothing.”
“You look doubtful.”
“I’ve heard your doors.”
She narrowed her eyes.
“Low blow.”
“Acoustic observation.”
“The walls are against me.”
“The walls are suffering.”
She smiled again, then returned her attention to Demitrius.
He made two cautious little hops toward the middle of the rug.
Not all the way to her.
Not yet.
But far enough that Liora seemed to straighten inwardly without moving on the outside.
I knew that reaction. People usually did the opposite. They leaned forward, held out a hand, called to him in an overly soft voice that immediately became suspicious.
They wanted to speed up trust.
Liora did nothing.
She let him decide.
Very bad.
Not for Demitrius.
For me.
“What does he eat?” she asked.

"Mostly hay. Vegetables. A few pellets. Not too many carrots, despite all the cultural propaganda."

"Cartoons lied to us?"

"About many things."

I walked over to the corner by the bookcase and picked up his small water bowl.

Demitrius backed away immediately.

So did Liora.

She moved backward while already crouching.

I didn't even know how that was possible.

"I'm allowed to move," I said. "It's my apartment."

"Yes, but I didn't want to block his escape route."

I stood there for a second with the bowl in my hand.

"Oh."

Brilliant response.

I refilled the water in the kitchen, then returned the bowl to its place. While I was there, I moved a cable lying near the power strip. Demitrius had a very personal fondness for anything that cost more than twenty euros to replace.

"Does he eat cables?" Liora asked.

"He negotiates with them."

"And does he win?"

"Often."

I pushed the power strip behind a crate, checked that the rug wasn't blocking the small barrier, then picked up a piece of cardboard Eugène had probably moved for political reasons.

Liora watched me.

Not like someone waiting for whatever came next.

Like someone taking notes.

"What?" I asked.

"Nothing."

"It's rarely nothing with you."

"I'm watching."

"That's worse."

She smiled.

"You pay attention to a lot of things."

I looked down at the cable.

"He's a rabbit. You have to pay attention."

"Yes."

She didn't add anything.

It was the lack of an addition that unsettled me. She could talk endlessly while defending the absurd idea that a cat had chosen her. Then, faced with something simple and fragile, she suddenly found the right amount of silence.

Demitrius came closer again.

This time, he reached a reasonable distance from her shoes.

He sniffed the air.

Liora stared at her own sneakers with dramatic concentration.

"They're clean," she whispered.

"He isn't checking your hygiene."

"We don't know that. He looks demanding."

"He is."

"More than Eugène?"

Eugène turned his head slightly on the couch.

As though he had just been mentioned in an unfavorable context.

"Differently," I said.

"That means yes."

"It means Eugène thinks he owns the world, and Demitrius thinks the world might fall on top of him at any moment."

Liora looked up at me.

Her expression changed again.

Less amused.

"Is that why you took him in?"

I didn't answer immediately.

Too direct a question.

Not aggressive.

I bent down to rearrange the hay in his large rack.

"I got him from someone who didn't have time to look after him anymore."

"Oh."

"He was already like this."

"Cautious?"

"Yes."

A silence passed.

Demitrius sniffed the end of Liora's shoelace.

She remained perfectly still.

Her eyes widened.

"Aurèl."

"Yes?"

"I've been chosen."

"You've been sniffed."

"It's a beginning."

"It's an investigation."

"He's investigating because he's interested."

I shook my head.

She had even lowered her voice for her nonsense.

Almost impressive.

Demitrius hopped sideways, then returned to his rug. He stopped beside the water bowl, as though that burst of courage required immediate rehydration.

Liora finally exhaled.

"He's incredible."

"He touched your shoelace."

"Exactly."

"The bar is low."

"Trust sometimes begins with a shoelace."

I looked at her.

She looked back.

Then she shrugged, slightly embarrassed this time.

"What? It's true."

I hadn't said otherwise.

That was the problem.

She slowly stood.

Too quickly for Demitrius, who jumped back into his space.

Liora froze.

"Damn."

"It's okay."

"I moved too fast."

"A little."

"Sorry, Demitrius."

She said it with absolute seriousness.

To Lapin.
Who obviously didn't answer.
Neither did I.
I never quite knew what to do with people's gentleness when it appeared without warning.
It took up space.
Even more space than noise.
Liora remained standing in the middle of the studio. Her gaze slowly returned to the rest of the room. Now that she had slowed down, she was seeing it differently. I could almost feel it physically.
Her eyes passed over the coffee table.
The sketchbooks.
The loose pages.
The drawings turned facedown.
A small stack of images I had moved beside the computer while promising myself I would sort them later.
Later usually meant never.
Or whenever an email forced me to name what I was doing.
I knew she would ask before she even opened her mouth.
"Can I see?"
No.
The answer arrived instantly inside my head.
Simple.
Clear.
Perfect.
My mouth took longer.
"See what?"
Liora gave me a look.
"Aurèl."
"There are a lot of things in this room."
"The drawings."
I slipped my hands into my pockets.
Bad choice.
It made me look like someone hiding evidence.
"They aren't very interesting."
"That's a protective sentence."
I looked at her.
"Do you always analyze the way people phrase things?"
"Only when it's obvious."
"Reassuring."
"You don't want to show me?"
A simple question.
Too simple.
She wasn't saying it like a challenge.
Not like she had with Eugène.
She was giving me a way out.
I could refuse.
She would accept it.
And that was precisely what made it more difficult.
I picked up the least exposed pages from the coffee table.
Not the sketchbooks.
Not the stack beside the computer.
Not the ones still beneath my keyboard because I sometimes looked at them for too long.

Just a few studies.
Interiors.
A stairwell.
A window opening onto a courtyard.
A hallway with a dead plant.
An empty kitchen in morning light.
I handed them to her.
“They’re studies.”
“Okay.”
She took the pages carefully.
Too carefully.
As though the paper mattered more than I was willing to admit.
She looked at them one by one.
I immediately hated every second of it.
Her silence became unbearable.
“They’re personal things, but not really,” I said. “Some are for projects. Others aren’t. I draw a lot of spaces. It’s practical. Spaces don’t email you asking for ridiculous revisions.”
She didn’t answer.
“And they’re mostly lighting tests.”
Still nothing.
“I mean, that one isn’t finished.”
“Aurèl.”
I stopped.
She was looking at the drawing of the kitchen.
The room was empty except for a chair pulled slightly back and a glass beside the sink.
Nothing special. Just a slant of light across the floor.
“What?”
“It looks like the rooms are breathing.”
I had nothing.
No words.
No internal joke.
No dry sentence to put some distance back between us.
Nothing.
She continued more softly.
“Not like sets. Like places where something happened just before. Or where something is about to happen, only quietly.”
I took a breath.
A short one.
Ridiculous.
“That’s a lot to get from an empty kitchen.”
“It isn’t empty.”
I looked at the drawing.
Then at her.
“There’s nobody there.”
“Yes, but that isn’t the same thing.”
She carefully placed the pages on the table.
Then she saw another sheet.
Obviously.
The one I had forgotten beside the lamp.
Not a drawing.
A page that had been folded in half, then opened again, covered in lines written too quickly. Crossed-out words. Pieces of sentences. Something vaguely resembling a musical structure that I should have put away weeks ago.

Liora looked down.
I reached for it too late.
“Not that.”
She stopped immediately.
Her fingers hadn’t touched the paper.
“Sorry.”
Her immediate respect made the situation worse.
“It’s nothing,” I said.
“You said no like it was something.”
“It’s a sheet of paper.”
“With words.”
“Many sheets of paper have words.”
“Not like that.”
I picked it up before she could see more.
Movement too quick.
Very subtle.
So completely obvious.
Liora didn’t smile.
She simply looked at the hand holding the page.
“You write too?”
“No.”
“Aurèl.”
“I put together sentences that don’t do anything.”
“That’s called writing.”
“No. That’s called avoiding sleep.”
She nodded slowly.
“Is it for the guitar?”
I looked at the instrument in the corner.
Wooden traitor.
“Sometimes.”
“So you play, sing, and write lyrics that you hide very badly.”
“You’re drawing a lot of conclusions.”
“They’re lined up in front of me.”
“This isn’t an investigation.”
“Everything is an investigation when the evidence is visible.”
I folded the page.
Then unfolded it, because folding it made it look as though I was trying to make it disappear.
Which was true.
There was no need to confirm it.
“I don’t play in front of people,” I said.
“I didn’t ask.”
“You were going to.”
“Yes.”
At least she was honest.
I sat on the arm of the couch. Eugène opened one eye, offended that my weight had altered the overall balance of his kingdom.
“It’s not...” I began.
I searched for the correct sentence.
Nothing.
Liora waited.
Again.
Apparently, that had become a technique.

"Drawing is my work," I finally said. "Even when it's personal, I know how to show it. I know what people can say about it. I can take an opinion, a request, some ridiculous criticism. It's part of the job."

I looked at the guitar.

"The guitar is older. And less useful."

"Less useful to whom?"

I turned toward her.

"You ask exhausting questions."

"Yes."

She didn't even apologize.

"To no one," I said. "It's just... for me."

She nodded.

This time, she didn't ask to hear me play.

Not yet.

She only looked at the guitar, then the page in my hand, then me.

And that look unsettled me more than all her questions.

Not because it was insistent.

Because she might have understood part of the door without trying to open it.

"I'm not going to force you," she said.

"Generous."

"I can be very civilized."

"Since when?"

"Since Demetrius. He raised me."

A small breath almost escaped through my nose.

A minimal laugh.

Accidental.

She saw it.

Of course.

"There," she said. "Progress."

"Don't start making assessments."

"I do what I want."

Demetrius chose that moment to emerge cautiously again.

Liora went silent immediately.

Again.

The contrast struck me directly in the chest.

She could fill an entire room, then withdraw her presence in a second to make space for a tiny animal.

I didn't know why I found that so fascinating.

Maybe because I knew too many people who confused gentleness with performance.

Here, she wasn't performing anything.

She watched Demetrius move toward the bowl. He drank a few mouthfuls, then picked up a strand of hay.

"Has he forgiven me?" she whispered.

"He doesn't keep an official record."

"You don't know that."

"I live with him."

"Exactly. You've lost all objectivity."

I shook my head.

She smiled.

Then her phone vibrated in her pocket.

Demetrius froze.

Liora immediately pressed a hand against it to stop the sound.

"Sorry."

She carefully took out the phone, checked the screen, and grimaced.
“My father.”
I straightened.
Bad.
Very bad.
“Does he know you’re here?”
“Not exactly.”
“Liora.”
“He knows I’m in the building.”
“That’s broad.”
“It’s a small building.”
“That does not make it better.”
She quickly typed a message.
Then stopped, looked at Demitrius, and slowed her thumbs, as though even her phone had to respect Lapin’s rhythm.
Absurd.
Touching.
Dangerous.
“I’ll tell him I’m stopping by a female neighbor’s.”
“I’m not a female neighbor.”
She looked up.
“Fine. A male neighbor’s.”
“That’s worse.”
“Why?”
“Because it’s me.”
“You are a male neighbor.”
“Technically.”
“So I’m not lying.”
“You’re practicing a dangerously incomplete version of the truth.”
“Like everyone.”
She sent the message.
I decided not to imagine her father’s reaction.
Or rather, I imagined it immediately.
Standing in their living room.
Phone in hand.
Eyebrows motionless.
Grave silence.
I probably had ten minutes before a diplomatic intervention.
Liora put her phone away.
“I have to go.”
The studio seemed to close in slightly around the sentence.
Nothing dramatic.
Just a change in pressure.
“Yes,” I said.
She picked up her bag, then looked once more at the drawings on the table.
“You should leave some of them where people can see them.”
“Why?”
“Because they look like they’re waiting to be seen.”
I didn’t answer.
She approached the door, then turned toward Demitrius.
“Goodbye, Demitrius.”
The rabbit ate his hay.
“Very dignified,” she said.

"He's learning from Eugène."

"Bad influence."

Eugène, who had been deeply asleep three seconds earlier, moved one ear.

Liora smiled, then raised a hand toward him.

"Goodbye, Eugène."

No reaction.

"Still rude."

"Consistent."

She placed her hand on the door handle but didn't open it immediately.

Her eyes returned to the guitar.

One last time.

"Someday," she said.

I frowned.

"Someday what?"

"Maybe you'll play."

"You're optimistic."

"No. Patient."

The sentence remained in the air with far too much calm.

Then she opened the door.

The hallway appeared behind her, brighter, colder, much more normal than my studio.

She stepped over the threshold and turned around.

"Thank you for showing me Demitrius."

"He showed himself."

"Yes, but you could have thrown me out."

"I considered it."

"I know."

She smiled.

"See you, Aurèl."

"See you."

She closed the door softly.

Softly.

I remained standing.

Perfectly still.

On the other side, her footsteps moved down the hallway, slower than usual. Maybe because she was still thinking about Lapin. Maybe because she was trying to be quieter. Maybe because my brain was beginning to invent reasons where there was only a walking rhythm.

The silence returned to the studio.

Not quite the same as before.

Obviously.

Eugène stretched on the couch, satisfied with having completed his social mission without moving for the past twenty minutes.

The rabbit returned to his corner, alive, whole, and untraumatized.

The pages were still on the table.

The page of lyrics was still in my hand.

The guitar was still beside the lamp.

Nothing had moved.

That was false.

Something had moved.

I didn't know what yet.

I placed the page facedown on the desk, then turned it over again almost immediately.

Bad idea.

I read the crossed-out words.

They looked more visible than before.
I looked at the door.
Then Demetrius.
Then Eugène.
“She’s coming back,” I said.
Eugène closed his eyes.
Demetrius’s nose twitched.
Neither of them seemed surprised.
The studio was quieter after her.
I didn’t particularly like noticing that.

Chapter 7

What she leaves behind

I stood in front of the closed door longer than necessary.

Not very long.

Well.

Long enough for the word necessary to lose some of its meaning.

Behind me, the studio was returning to its usual shape.

The couch. The lamp beside the bookcase. The papers on the coffee table. The guitar against the wall.

Eugène was sprawled out with the indecent satisfaction of someone who had just witnessed an important scene from the best cushion in the room.

The rabbit was eating.

That was how he dealt with events.

I wished I had a method that reliable.

I looked at the door handle.

Liora had closed it softly.

No slamming. No leaving the door trembling with the cheerful violence of the apartment next door.

Softly.

I didn't like that detail.

It gave the scene a weight it shouldn't have had.

I finally moved away and started putting things in order.

A simple activity.

Rational.

Necessary.

I needed to put away the papers, check Lapin's water, pick up the cardboard Eugène had moved.

Return to normal life.

Fine.

I picked up the drawings from the coffee table.

Then stopped.

Liora had touched them.

Not for long. She had looked at them with too much attention, then placed them back almost exactly where they had been.

The drawing of the kitchen was slightly crooked.

I straightened it.

Too straight.

I shifted it a little.

Then stood in front of the table with the unpleasant realization that I had become someone capable of thinking about the angle of a sheet of paper because a neighbor had looked at it.

Excellent.

Concerning personal development.

Eventually, I placed the kitchen drawing on top.

Facing upward.

Not because Liora had said my drawings looked as though they were waiting to be seen.

Obviously.

It simply needed to dry.

There was no paint on it.

Secondary detail.

I refilled Lapin's water.

"You okay?"

His nose twitched, and he went back to his hay.
No official complaint.
Demitrius had survived Liora.
She had entered with her bag, her energy, her cat allergy, and her habit of asking questions as though the answers already existed in the air.
She had seen Eugène, Demitrius, my drawings, the guitar, the page covered in crossed-out words.
Far too much.
And nothing had exploded.
It was almost insulting.
I had spent months building a space where every object had its place and its distance.
Not out of obsession.
Or at least an acceptable form of obsession.
The studio was small. A badly placed stack became a piece of furniture. A forgotten cable, a trap. An abandoned mug, evidence against myself.
Liora had come in.
She had looked.
And everything was still there.
That was precisely the problem.
Everything was still there.
But some things seemed to have been named.
The guitar was no longer simply the object I picked up when sentences refused to hold together. It was something she had noticed.
The drawings were no longer just personal files kept beside my desk. Someone had looked at them long enough to see them waiting.
Even the silence of the studio seemed slightly compromised.
Before, it hadn't needed a witness.
Now I knew it could be heard from outside without sounding empty.
An inconvenient piece of information.
I returned to my desk and woke the screen.
The client file was still open.
A children's book cover. Blue forest, glowing cabin, the silhouette of a child in the foreground.
The client wanted "a more intimate atmosphere, but less sadness."
Beautifully phrased.
The cabin looked like it had seasonal depression.
I picked up the stylus.
Work.
Right.
Work was a healthy structure. Clients were absurd, but within a budget. You could answer them, produce revisions, save, continue.
I changed the light in the window.
Too cold.
Too warm.
Undo.
My gaze drifted toward the page of lyrics beside the screen.
My own hand was working against me.
I folded it in half and slipped it inside a sketchbook.
Fine.
Gone.
Two minutes later, I reopened the sketchbook to see whether it was sticking out.
It was.
I pushed it farther in.

Pathetic.
Eugène jumped onto the desk and sat in front of the screen.
“I’m working.”
He blinked.
Then looked toward the door.
I turned my head despite myself.
Nothing.
“She’s gone.”
Eugène didn’t move.
“Don’t start.”
He continued staring at the door with perfect solemnity.
Fine.
Even the cat was participating in the creation of an atmosphere.
I gently pushed him aside. He resisted through sheer inertia, an extremely effective feline method, then climbed down with offended slowness.
I worked for half an hour.
I improved the window, made the cabin worse, saved three versions, and answered an email explaining that I understood perfectly how a leaf could look “more confident.”
Then I went to make tea.
The sound behind the wall came while the kettle was heating.
A drawer.
Footsteps.
A muffled voice.
Liora.
I couldn’t make out the words.
Only the rhythm.
I still recognized the end of a sentence, a slight lift, almost a laugh.
I poured the water too quickly and splashed my finger.
“Perfect.”
On the other side, a door closed.
Normally.
Not softly.
Not violently.
Which annoyed me more.
I returned to my desk with a very clear decision.
I wasn’t going to listen.
I started playing music through my headphones.
Without putting them on.
Technically, I wasn’t listening to the neighbors.
A questionable concept, but defensible if no one asked questions.
I picked up the stylus again.
The cabin was still there.
So was Liora, only in the form of a sentence.
It isn’t empty.
I looked at the drawn kitchen.
Then the real one behind me.
A sink. A mug. Two dish towels. A plant moved during the balcony crisis.
Nothing remarkable.
Except someone had looked at my spaces and said they breathed.
Difficult information to file away.
Later, while feeding the animals, I found a small black hair tie beside the foot of the coffee table.
Completely ordinary.

Probably slipped from Liora's wrist.
I picked it up.
The rabbit approached immediately.
"No."
He stopped.
"That isn't for you."
I placed the hair tie in the dish by the door.
Item to be returned.
Neutral category.
My keys.
A two-euro coin.
A crumpled receipt.
A black hair tie.
The studio was producing evidence now.
The afternoon moved forward in pieces.
Revisions.
Cold tea.
Emails.
Eugène meowing for no defensible reason.
The rabbit asleep beside his hay.
Me attempting to recover the silence from before.
It almost returned.
Then one sound behind the wall was enough to change it.
I wasn't waiting for Liora to come back.
That seemed like an important distinction.
I was simply unusually aware of the door, the hallway, and the hair tie.
Which was different.
Maybe.
At around six, I decided to take out the trash.
Sanitary motivation.
Not social.
I took the bag, my keys, and the hair tie.
It would be absurd not to return it if I happened to see her.
I slipped it into the pocket of my sweatshirt.
Eugène watched me from the middle of the studio.
"It's a lost item."
He blinked.
"I'm returning a lost item."
He wasn't making any expression.
That was the worst part.
The hallway was empty.
I went downstairs, threw away the bag, and came back up.
Action completed.
Mission accomplished.
No neighbors.
No interaction.
Almost disappointing.
No.
Not disappointing.
Simply efficient.
I reached the fifth floor just as the front door slammed below.
Footsteps came up the stairs.
Quick.

Tired too.
I could have gone inside.
I had plenty of time.
My hand searched for my keys with the slowness of a man who was lying badly to himself.
Liora appeared on the stairs with a sports bag over one shoulder, her sweatshirt open, her hair tied very high, and a water bottle beneath one arm.
She slowed when she saw me.
Enough for the rest of the world to call it stopping.
“Aurèl!”
“Hi.”
Brilliant.
She climbed the final steps and placed one hand against the wall.
For a second.
I noticed her breathing.
Not the breathing of someone who had only climbed five floors.
“You look like you’ve come back from a fight.”
“I did intervals.”
“An answer that explains everything and nothing.”
“That’s exactly what intervals are.”
She pulled the bag higher onto her shoulder.
“Have you seen Demetrius?”
“I live with him.”
“I mean since earlier.”
“He ate, drank, and probably drafted an internal review of my organizational skills.”
She smiled.
Not her usual immediate, wide smile.
A tired one.
Slower.
“So he’s forgiven me?”
“He hasn’t filed a complaint.”
“Excellent.”
I took out the hair tie.
“You left this behind.”
She looked at my hand.
Then the hair tie.
Then me.
“Oh. I was wondering where it went.”
She took it.
Her fingers brushed mine.
Barely.
My brain commented anyway.
Management failure.
Liora slipped the hair tie around her wrist.
“Thanks.”
“You’re welcome.”
The silence remained between us.
Not heavy.
Present.
The landing was lit by the yellow light of late afternoon. Someone was cooking downstairs. Tomato, garlic, onion. A television spoke behind a door.
The world continued.
Despite the hair tie.

Liora remained on the top step with the bag still high on her shoulder. Her cheeks were flushed, probably from the cold or the exertion, and there was a small dark mark near the knee of her pants.

I looked at her without being able to decide whether she seemed exhausted or simply more visible than usual.

Behind the wall, I always heard her moving.

On the landing, I could see what that movement cost.

"You're coming back from practice?"

A normal question.

Basic.

Socially acceptable.

She looked down at what she was wearing.

"Is it obvious?"

"You have a water bottle, a sports bag, and the expression of someone preparing to take legal action."

"That's my post-eight-hundred-meter face."

"Two laps, right?"

She looked at me with immediate intensity.

"Never say 'two laps' as though it's simple."

"Sorry."

"Two laps are a scam. Too long to sprint, too short to pretend you're being strategic, and painful enough to make you question every decision you've ever made."

"Sounds appealing."

"You should come watch one day. Just so you understand how terrible an idea running two laps is."

The sentence entered the landing.

Invitation.

Joke.

Athletic threat.

Probably all three.

"Watch what, exactly?"

"A practice."

"Do you often invite your neighbors to watch people suffer on a track?"

"Not yet. You'd be the first."

"A troubling honor."

She smiled, then ran a hand over her forehead.

She looked tired.

Actually tired.

Something denser than training seemed to be resting on her shoulders.

"Do you train every day?"

"Almost."

"On top of classes?"

"Yes."

"And everything else?"

"Everything else is a very broad phrase."

"That's why I chose it."

She gave a short laugh and leaned slightly against the wall.

Not enough to settle in.

Enough to admit that her legs had an opinion.

"Three track sessions a week. Two lighter sessions. Sometimes strength work, sometimes an easy run. Classes. And I work two evenings at the café near campus. Saturdays too, when they need me."

I looked at her.

The information piled up.
Not like her usual noise.
An organization.
A real system.
I had placed her too easily inside movement, as though moving quickly meant living at random.
Mistake.
Liora didn't overflow because she lacked structure.
She overflowed despite the structure.
Or through it.
"When do you sleep?"
She thought about it.
Bad sign.
"Sometimes."
"Concerning answer."
"I sleep efficiently."
"That isn't the same thing."
"You sound like someone who saves his files three times."
I froze.
"How do you know that?"
She pointed vaguely toward my door.
"You have the face of someone who saves his files three times."
Fine.
A serious attack.
Probably accurate.
She shifted her bag to the other shoulder and grimaced slightly.
The movement was quick.
Almost erased.
I saw it.
"Are you hurt?"
"No."
I looked at her.
"A little," she corrected. "My calf. Nothing serious."
I nodded, then realized I probably looked like her father.
Very bad development.
"Are you icing it?"
"Yes, Mr. Responsible Neighbor."
"I was asking a question."
"You had the tone."
"What tone?"
"The 'this will be entered into a medical file' tone."
I closed my mouth.
She smiled.
"See?"
A man's voice sounded behind her door.
Her father.
Bureaucratic even through wood.
Liora turned her head.
"I should go inside before he decides I've collapsed in the stairwell."
"He seems capable of checking."
"He's capable of writing a report."
She searched through her bag for her keys.

One pocket.

Then another.

Then the pocket of her sweatshirt.

She finally pulled them out with a disproportionately triumphant expression.

"Perfect organization."

"I have a lot of systems."

"Do they communicate with one another?"

"Rarely."

She put the key in the lock, then stopped.

That moment again.

The one where she could leave and chose to add something.

"Friday," she said.

"What about Friday?"

"Practice. Six o'clock. Municipal stadium."

I didn't answer.

She continued, probably because she had prepared the instructions.

"Tram B, Delorme stop. Walk five minutes. Entrance by the trees. There are some slightly ugly bleachers. You can sit there. No one will talk to you if you use your normal face."

"My normal face?"

She studied me.

Far too closely.

"The face that says, 'I'm here by mistake, but I'm assessing the emergency exits.'"

I didn't answer.

Because that was unacceptable.

And probably accurate.

"You don't have to come," she added.

"I didn't say I was coming."

"I know. I'm giving you information."

"Dated, located information with access instructions."

"The best kind."

Behind the door:

"Liora?"

She looked at the ceiling.

"I'm coming!"

Then, more quietly:

"He's going to think I recruit strangers in the hallway."

"Would he be wrong?"

"You're not a stranger."

I didn't find an answer quickly enough.

She didn't seem inclined to emphasize the sentence either.

Liora sometimes said things with a natural ease that left everyone else to deal with the consequences alone.

Me, in this case.

"I'll see."

"Okay."

She turned the key.

Then turned back again.

"And Eugène isn't invited."

"He'll be devastated."

"Tell him it's because of my respiratory system."

"He has very little respect for systems."

"Like me."

"You follow your own systems just fine."

The sentence came out before I checked it.

Liora remained still for a second.

Her smile changed.

Calmer.

"Not always."

"Enough to voluntarily run that two-lap scam."

She laughed softly.

Her father called her again.

"Yes, yes."

She opened the door.

The light from her apartment spilled onto the landing. Shoes approximately lined up, a coat on a hook, a bag against the wall.

A dense life.

Full.

"Friday, six o'clock," she repeated.

"I heard you."

"Good."

"I didn't say yes."

"You said you'd see."

"That isn't a commitment."

"Maybe not to you."

She smiled.

"See you, Aurèl."

"See you."

The door closed.

Softly.

I remained there for a second with my keys in my hand.

Inside her apartment, I immediately heard her father's voice. Too muffled to make out the words. Liora answered more quietly than usual.

Then the sound of a bag being placed on the floor.

A shoe being removed.

A life continuing on the other side without needing me to watch it.

The hallway immediately seemed emptier.

I didn't like that sentence.

I went inside.

Eugène was waiting in the middle of the studio, his tail curled around his paws, looking like a judge who had not received every document in the case.

"I returned a hair tie."

He looked at the door.

"And we talked."

No reaction.

I placed my keys in the dish.

It still contained the two-euro coin and the crumpled receipt.

No hair tie.

That detail bothered me more than expected.

I crossed the studio.

The kitchen drawing was still facing upward. So was the guitar.

The rabbit continued his ongoing food-related project, which existed outside human concepts of beginning and end.

Eugène climbed onto the couch and lay down in the exact spot where Liora had been sitting earlier.

Exactly.

I looked at him.
“You’re doing that on purpose.”
He rested his head on his paws.
No remorse.
Maybe Demitrius was already getting used to her.
Maybe Eugène had adopted her during the first allergic reaction.
Very bad signs.
I returned to my desk.
The cabin was still waiting to become more intimate and less sad.
Friday.
Six o’clock.
Municipal stadium.
Entrance by the trees.
Ugly bleachers.
I hadn’t agreed.
I had only left a possibility open with a girl who knew my rabbit, my drawings, my guitar,
and believed my normal expression could function as a social barrier.
That was not an acceptance.
It was a calendar incident.
I unlocked my phone.
Friday was free at six.
Obviously.
I created an event.
“Go out.”
Very vague.
Perfectly defensible.
I placed the phone facedown on the desk.
Then turned it over to check that the event really existed.
It did.
“Go out.”
No location.
No name.
No compromising evidence.
Perfectly neutral for an activity that had already rearranged half my evening.
I locked the screen.
For real this time.
There was no sound from the other side of the wall.
Liora was probably drinking water, answering her father, icing her calf, checking her
schedule, or moving on to another task at an indecent speed.
She had an entire life behind the noise.
I had already known that.
In theory.
Now I had seen part of it.
Enough to understand that her movement wasn’t only disorder.
Enough for the noise behind the wall to sound less like a disturbance and more like a
sentence whose words I was beginning to recognize.
I picked up the stylus again.
The cabin still looked sad.
I added a small light beside the door.
Nothing dramatic.
Just enough to suggest that someone might return.
I saved.
Twice.

Financial anxiety had its traditions.

Later, I fed Eugène, checked Lapin's water, and folded the blanket on the couch.

I left the kitchen drawing visible.

Mistake or decision, I couldn't tell.

Before turning off the main lamp, I looked at the door again.

Not because I was waiting.

Simply because it had become one of the places where something might happen.

Important distinction.

The studio was quiet.

Not like before.

I was beginning to understand that the quiet hadn't disappeared.

Its contents had changed.

It still contained the fridge, the pipes, the city, Lapin's quiet breathing, Eugène's weight on the couch.

And now, somewhere inside it, the possibility that Liora might come back.

Or that I, for reasons still poorly defined, might go out at six on Friday.

Part of my week had just been moved without asking my permission.

Chapter 8

Four hundred meters too far

On Friday, at 5:11 p.m., I was still at home.

Which, technically, meant nothing.

I wasn't late.

I wasn't even required to go.

An event called "Go Out" on my phone did not constitute a legally binding contract. At most, it was a vague intention created by a tired, impressionable man who had perhaps been slightly weakened by a conversation on the landing.

At 5:12, I looked at my phone.

"Go Out."

The event had not disappeared out of respect for my discomfort.

Fine.

I crossed the studio to Lapin's corner.

He was sitting beside his bowl, perfectly still.

"I'm going out."

His nose twitched.

"Not for long."

From the couch, Eugène opened one eye.

"You're staying here."

He closed it again.

No written commitment.

I checked the glass door.

Closed.

The balcony mesh.

Reinforced.

The chair.

Removed, because it had eventually revealed itself to be a disguised launchpad.

I pulled the curtain slightly, just enough to stop Eugène from treating the outside world as a personal suggestion.

Then I stood in the middle of the studio with my jacket over one arm.

I picked up my keys.

Put them down again to check that I had my phone.

Then picked up the keys once more.

5:16.

The stadium was twenty-five minutes away by tram.

So naturally, I would arrive early, because the only alternative would have been arriving exactly on time.

I finally left.

In the hallway, Liora's door was closed.

No sound.

She was probably already there.

Inside her world.

I was leaving mine.

I walked down the stairs with an excessive awareness of my own footsteps. Outside, the street had that cold late-afternoon light that made shop windows seem more awake than the people passing them.

I got off at Delorme with several people who looked as though they regretted their athletic choices. Two teenagers in tracksuits walked ahead of me with enormous bags on their backs. A girl drank from a water bottle as she walked. A man in shorts, despite the questionable temperature, jogged along the sidewalk as though walking were a form of defeat.

I followed them.
Discreetly.
Well, I tried.
After five minutes, the gates appeared.
Municipal stadium.
The entrance was open. Beyond it, the track surrounded the field like a broad red line divided into lanes. Bodies moved everywhere.
People talking.
Laughing.
Calling to one another from opposite ends of the track.
I stopped just inside the entrance.
Mistake.
There is nowhere more conspicuous than the place where someone hesitates.
A boy jogged past me.
Then another.
Then a girl in blue went around me with the ease of someone who had correctly identified me as a stationary obstacle.
Fine.
I had become furniture.
Eventually, I sat down in the second row of the bleachers.
A neutral position.
Perfect in theory.
In practice, I felt like an administrative error sitting on concrete.
I took out my sketchbook.
At least that gave me an excuse.
Drawing.
Or pretending to.
I traced a vague line across the page.
A barrier. A post.
Nothing brilliant.
In front of me, the stadium continued existing without showing any concern for my integration.
“Aurèl!”
I looked up too quickly.
Liora was standing beside the railing about thirty feet away.
I hadn’t seen her arrive, which was impressive considering she was wearing a red sweatshirt, black leggings, her hair tied high, and an expression that was far too satisfied.
She raised a hand.
I responded with a gesture that was too small.
She laughed.
Even from that distance, I saw it.
Then she grabbed her bag, set it down near a group, and crossed toward me at a quick walk. Not her hallway walk. Not her stairwell walk either. This one had direction. Economy. She was coming toward me without wasting movement.
“You came.”
“Apparently.”
“You say that like someone dropped you here against your will.”
“My calendar bears some responsibility.”
“The ‘Go Out’ event?”
I froze.
Her eyes widened.
“Wait. Was that really what you called it?”
“No.”

Too quick.
She burst out laughing.
“You called it ‘Go Out.’”
“Almost. It was a temporary title.”
“For coming to the stadium?”
“For going out.”
“Very precise.”
“Sufficient.”
She was still smiling, her cheeks already slightly red, probably from the cold or the warm-up she had begun before I saw her.
“You picked a good spot,” she said, looking at the bleachers.
I looked around.
“I have no idea what I’m doing.”
“It’s less obvious than you think.”
“Which means it’s obvious.”
“A little.”
Perfect.
Someone called her from the track.
“Liora, warm-up.”
“Coming!”
She looked at me again.
“I have to go. You can stay here. Unless you want to do drills with us.”
“I don’t know what that means, and the answer is already no.”
“Wise decision.”
She stepped back.
“If anyone asks, say you came to watch practice.”
“That’s true.”
“Exactly. Keep it simple.”
“I can try.”
She took two steps, then almost came back.
“And don’t make your ‘I’m here by accident, but I’m assessing the emergency exits’ face.”
“According to you, that’s my normal face.”
“Then vary it.”
She left.
I watched her despite myself.
She went quiet.
Not gradually.
Not after finishing one last sentence.
Immediately.
I noticed it before I understood why.
Her face changed too.
She was still herself.
Bright eyes, moving hands, that way of being present without apologizing for it.
But her attention had shifted somewhere else.
Like turning a lamp.
The coach pointed toward the track.
They set off on a slow jog around the field.
I settled back, my sketchbook open on my knees.
Liora ran in the middle of the group.
She spoke occasionally.
Less than expected.
She listened a lot.
I had expected her to run the way she talked.

Fast.

Too fast.

With the feeling that energy was escaping from every angle.

That wasn't it.

On the track, her movement had edges.

Once, Liora missed a step.

Not exactly missed.

She placed her foot slightly too close to the inside line.

She grimaced, corrected it immediately, and tried again.

No one commented.

Neither did she.

The coach approached, said something while pointing to her left arm. She nodded. Not with her hallway version, the one that meant, yes, yes, I heard you, but I already have an objection.

Here, she nodded to remember.

Then repeated the movement.

Better.

Without realizing it, I drew a small curve on the page.

A shoulder.

Maybe.

I partially closed the sketchbook.

Fine.

No need to get carried away.

The coach gathered everyone near the starting line.

I couldn't hear everything.

Only fragments carried by the wind.

"Three times four hundred... two-minute recovery... clean... no stupid starts..."

One of the boys muttered something.

The coach pointed his stopwatch at him.

"I'm watching everyone."

A few people laughed.

Then he turned toward Liora.

"You especially. Do not take off like the first turn personally insulted you."

Liora put a hand over her chest in mock outrage.

"I'm very calm."

The group laughed.

The coach barely did.

"You're many things, Liora. Calm is a theory."

She smiled.

But when he continued, she listened.

"First four hundred controlled. The goal isn't to prove you have legs after the first hundred meters. The eight is about pacing. Give everything too soon, and the second lap sends you the bill."

I sat a little straighter.

The eight.

The 800 meters.

Two laps.

A scam, according to the person most directly affected.

The coach continued.

"You have to feel the pace. Not let it control you. Wait for the right moment. Attack when it's useful."

I wasn't sure I understood the sport.

I understood the idea.

Don't spend everything at the beginning.
Stay at a speed you want to exceed.
Hold on long enough to have something left when the right moment comes.
I looked at Liora.

She was staring down at the white line. She shook one leg, then the other. Adjusted her hair tie. Pulled lightly at her sweatshirt sleeves, then pushed them up. Her fingers moved once, quickly, before closing.

The coach raised his hand.
The group took their places.
I held my breath.
Ridiculous.
I wasn't on the track.
The whistle blew.
They launched forward.
The sound changed immediately.

Denser.
Sharper.

Shoes struck the track with nervous regularity. I could make out Liora in the middle, slightly outside another girl. After a hundred meters, she seemed to want to move up.

I saw it in her torso.
In the way her shoulder went forward slightly before the rest of her.
Then she held back.
Almost nothing.
A tiny movement.
But her whole body looked as though it had received an irritating instruction.
The coach shouted:
"Yes, hold it! Not yet!"
Liora didn't answer.
Obviously.

She was running.
Still, I could almost imagine the sentence she wanted to throw back.
She stayed in position.

The group was already beginning to stretch out. The gaps between them widened by three feet, then six. Their breathing became audible when they passed the finish line.

Liora completed the four hundred with her stride still clean, but her face had changed.
Not dramatic suffering.
Not heroism.

Effort.
Sharp.
Concrete.

She slowed after the line, placed her hands on her hips, walked, and breathed in deeply.
The coach called out times.

I remembered none of them.
"Too fast through the first two hundred, Liora."

She raised one hand without arguing.
Acknowledgment.

Not submission.
She knew.

I saw that too.
The recovery was brief.
Far too brief, according to my expert seated opinion.
They started again.
Second four hundred.

This time, Liora looked almost different from the beginning. She let a boy move ahead. Stayed behind a dark-haired girl.

Hold.

Adjust.

Wait.

“That’s it. Yes. Stay there.”

She stayed.

I saw her frustration.

Nothing in her face shouted. She made no unnecessary movements. But there was tension in her jaw, restrained impatience in her shoulders. As though her body negotiated with the instruction on every stride.

In the final turn, the coach shouted:

“Now you can go.”

She accelerated.

Not an explosion.

A decision.

She passed the girl ahead of her in the final straight and crossed the line six feet in front.

Then she bent slightly, hands on her thighs.

“Better,” the coach said.

Liora raised her thumb.

She looked both satisfied and annoyed.

A familiar combination.

I looked down at my sketchbook.

I had drawn three lines.

A curve in the track.

A bent silhouette.

A foot touching the ground.

I didn’t remember starting them.

Fine.

My hand had also decided to make itself useful without permission.

The third repetition was harder.

Even I could see it, and I understood very little.

The group started with less lightness.

Shoulders rose sooner.

Breathing opened up.

The cold could no longer hide the heat in their faces.

Liora held the first two hundred meters in silence, then I saw her stride shorten slightly. The coach shouted something I couldn’t hear.

She clenched her teeth.

In the final hundred, she accelerated anyway.

Too early, perhaps.

Or too hard.

Or simply however she could.

She finished, walked two steps, then looked up at the sky with an expression I almost recognized.

The face of someone who wanted to insult an abstract concept.

The track.

Her body.

The idea of distance.

The coach approached.

She listened to him.

Actually listened.

Even tired.

Even irritated.
He made a gesture with his hand.
A line.
A brake.
Then a point farther ahead.
Wait.
Attack.
She nodded.
More slowly than before.
More seriously.
I thought the session was finished.
Mistake.
The coach announced something else.
“Six hundred to finish. Clean. Not heroic. I want rhythm, not theater.”
I wanted to object on their behalf.
No one objected.
Well, one boy said:
“Is that legal?”
The coach smiled.
“Obviously.”
Liora walked over to her bag, took a drink, shook out her arms, then returned to the line.
She passed close enough to the bleachers to see me.
Our eyes met.
She raised her eyebrows.
As though asking, See?
I lifted a hand vaguely.
As though answering, Unfortunately.
She smiled.
For a second.
Then the coach spoke, and she immediately turned away.
That switch again.
Hallway Liora would have added another sentence.
Track Liora took her position.
The six hundred began.
A lap and a half.
The group seemed to be searching for a speed.
Not simply moving forward.
Finding a place between too slow and too fast.
The coach shouted cues.
“Relax!”
“Breathe!”
“Not yet!”
“Hold there!”
“Another hundred before you move!”
Liora was third.
Then second.
Then third again, when a boy moved past her on the turn.
She didn’t respond immediately.
I saw what it cost her.
She wanted to answer.
To follow.
To prove herself.
To refuse to leave another body ahead of hers when her own body could pass it.

The coach shouted:
“Liora, wait!”
She waited.
I don’t know how you can see someone waiting while they’re running.
But I saw it.
She stayed behind.
On the inside, slightly boxed in, stride controlled, arms held tighter.
At four hundred meters, she passed in front of me. Her breathing was clear.
Loud.
Not panicked.
Her eyes were fixed somewhere beyond the line.
The coach shouted:
“Now!”
Liora moved.
This time, accelerated wasn’t enough.
She seemed to release a lock.
Her stride opened. Her arms took up more space. The fatigue remained, visible, but it wasn’t making the decision alone. The final hundred meters were less beautiful than the first.
More real, perhaps.
Hard.
Face strained.
Mouth open.
Shoulders trying to rise and being forced down again.
She crossed the line, continued for several yards before slowing, then walked with her hands on her head, then on her hips, then back on her head, as though no position suited the aftermath.
The coach called something out.
She grimaced.
He spoke to her.
She finally answered, too far away for me to understand.
But she was smiling slightly.
Not happy.
Not disappointed.
A mixture.
Alive, in a very concrete sense.
The group set off on a slow recovery jog.
I remained seated.
The concrete was cold beneath me.
I had barely noticed until then.
My sketchbook was open.
The lines on the page had taken shape without a plan.
A bend in the track.
A figure seen from behind.
Hair tied back.
An arm moving behind her.
I closed it gently.
Not too quickly.
There was no one beside me.
No witness.
Which didn’t improve the situation.
The practice continued for a little longer.
Stretching.

Conversations.

Water bottles.

Jackets pulled over shoulders.

The stadium gradually lost its tension. The bodies became people again. Voices took up more space. Someone complained about an assignment. A girl searched for her keys. A boy asked whether anyone wanted to get crêpes.

Normal life, exhausted edition.

No running.

Thankfully.

Liora climbed the two steps of the bleachers and stopped in front of me, still out of breath, her hair slightly loose, her face opened by the effort. Up close, she looked more tired than she had from a distance.

And happier.

And furious.

All at once.

“So,” she said.

I stood because staying seated while she stood felt strange.

Then I realized standing made me look too formal.

Too late.

“So,” I repeated.

“That was your first experience of municipal track and field.”

“I emerge from it changed.”

“That much?”

“The bleachers are indeed ugly.”

She narrowed her eyes.

“That’s your analysis?”

“I start with the environment.”

“Very professional.”

She caught her breath, drank from her bottle, then looked at me over it.

“And the rest?”

A simple question.

Not entirely.

She was trying to sound casual.

I was beginning to recognize that too.

I looked at the track.

Then her.

“I didn’t realize so much of it was about not running.”

She went still.

“What?”

I regretted it immediately.

Obscure sentence.

Excellent work.

“I mean,” I said, “you are running. Obviously.”

“Thank you for confirming.”

“I mean... I thought the point was just to go fast.”

She didn’t answer.

So I continued, because my mouth always chose the worst moments to become autonomous.

“But it looked like the hardest parts for you were the moments when you had to hold back. Especially during the six hundred. When that boy passed you on the turn. You wanted to follow him immediately.”

She lowered her bottle slightly.

“Oh.”

"I think."

"No."

I froze.

"No?"

"I mean, yes. Keep going."

Fine.

Order received.

Moderate panic.

"You looked more annoyed about having to wait than tired from running."

Silence.

Around us, the stadium continued. A bag zipped shut. Someone laughed near the railing. The coach shouted a name in the distance.

Liora was looking at me.

Not with her hallway smile.

Not with her expression of triumph after successfully delivering something absurd.

Something steadier.

Almost surprised.

I thought I had said something too personal.

Which was ridiculous.

We were talking about running.

A bend in the track.

A boy ahead of her.

Nothing intimate.

In theory.

She looked down at the track, then smiled.

Small.

"That is offensively accurate."

I breathed a little easier.

"Sorry."

"No. It's good."

She ran a hand over her forehead, then shook her head as though trying to dislodge the fatigue from her hair.

"That's exactly it. I hate waiting."

"I had gathered."

She gave me a look.

"In life, I mean."

"I had gathered that too."

"You haven't seen me in life for very long."

"I have thin walls."

She burst out laughing, then had to place one hand against her ribs.

"Don't make me laugh after practice."

"I'll remember."

"Are you actually taking notes?"

"Mentally."

"Worse."

She sat on the step beside my former seat with the caution of someone whose legs had just filed an official complaint. I remained standing for a second, then sat too, leaving a reasonable distance between us.

Neighbor distance.

Stadium distance.

The distance between two people who didn't know exactly what they were doing there.

She looked at the track.

"The eight is horrible because you can't just take off. Well, you can. Then you die on the second lap."

"Metaphorically?"

"Athletically."

"Is that worse?"

"At the time, yes."

She stretched one leg in front of her, rotated her ankle, then grimaced.

"The coach always says I sometimes run like I'm trying to settle a personal dispute with the distance."

"Is he wrong?"

"No."

"Oh."

"That's the problem."

She sighed, but her smile remained.

Slightly tired.

"You saw everything in one session."

"I didn't see everything."

"You saw the annoying part."

"Sorry."

"Stop apologizing when you pay attention properly."

I didn't answer.

Because the sentence had a strange shape.

And because she hadn't said it like a joke.

Or not only as a joke.

Someone called from beside the railing.

"Liora! We're leaving!"

She raised a hand.

"Two seconds!"

Then turned toward me.

"How are you getting home?"

"Tram."

"Me too, but I'm going to get a drink with them first. Something that isn't an energy gel or lukewarm water that tastes like plastic."

"Ambitious."

"You can come."

I looked at the group near the exit.

Several people.

Athletes.

People who knew how to exist inside a stadium, talk loudly, carry enormous bags, and laugh after running distances that should have justified a medical evacuation.

"I'm going home," I said.

She didn't seem offended.

Or surprised.

"Okay."

Then, after a second:

"It's already good that you came."

I shrugged slightly.

"I had an event."

"Go Out."

"Temporary."

"Historic."

She stood more slowly than she would have liked, I thought. Her hand brushed the metal railing to steady herself. I made a movement too small to count as offering help.

Ridiculous.

She didn't need it.

She saw anyway.

Obviously.

"I'm fine," she said.

"I didn't say anything."

"You thought loudly."

"That's a difficult accusation to prove."

"I know you."

I looked at her.

She seemed to realize what she had said only after saying it.

Or I imagined that.

She pulled her bag onto her shoulder.

"I mean, I know your normal face."

"The one assessing the exits."

"Exactly."

She took two steps backward.

"Next time, I'll put you closer to the turn. It's better for watching disasters."

"There's a next time?"

"Socially, when someone stays through an entire session without fleeing, yes."

"Maybe I simply have excellent seated endurance."

"It's a start."

She smiled.

"See you, Aurèl."

"See you."

I put my sketchbook in the inside pocket of my jacket and walked down from the bleachers.

As I left the track, I noticed that the soles of my shoes had picked up a little red dust.

Physical evidence.

I had actually come.

The sound remained in my head.

Not the voices.

Not the coach.

Not even the whistle.

The footsteps.

That sharp rhythm against the track.

Liora waiting.

Liora moving.

Liora holding something back before releasing it at the right moment.

I got off at my stop, walked to the building, and climbed the stairs.

On the landing, her door was closed.

No sound behind it.

I went inside.

Eugène was waiting behind the door.

Not in front of it.

Behind it.

Exactly close enough to create a scene of accusation.

"Good evening."

He sniffed my shoe.

For a long time.

Then looked up at me with an outraged expression.

"Yes, I saw other humans."

He sniffed again.

“And track surface, probably.”
He turned and walked toward the couch.
Judgment delivered.
Demitrius accepted a green leaf with the generous neutrality of a quiet sovereign.
The studio was calm.
Actually calm.
I placed my keys in the dish, removed my jacket, and turned on the lamp beside the bookcase.
My desk was waiting.
So was the cabin.
I opened the file.
The light I had added beside the door looked too obvious.
I softened it.
Then saved.
Once.
Twice.
The third time waited several seconds.
Spectacular progress.
I took out my sketchbook to check a perspective detail.
At least, that was the available explanation.
The sketchbook opened to the stadium page.
The figure was there.
Not very detailed.
A body in a turn.
One shoulder held back.
A leg driving into the ground.
Tied hair following the movement a fraction too late.
I remained still.
I didn’t remember drawing it.
Not really.
I remembered the track, the sound, the way she had waited before moving.
My hand had apparently taken notes differently.
I closed the sketchbook too quickly.
As though someone could accuse me.
No one was there.
Eugène was asleep on the couch.
Demitrius was eating.
The fridge hummed.
The city breathed beyond the windows.
It was almost worse.
I placed the sketchbook facedown on the desk.
Then, after a few seconds, opened it again.
Just enough to look at the figure one more time.
I picked up the pencil.
Added one line.
Only one.
The continuation of the arm.
Then I closed it.
More gently.
A sound finally came from the other side of the wall.
A door.
Footsteps.
Slower than usual.

Then Liora's voice, muffled, tired, alive anyway.
I couldn't make out the words.
I didn't need to.

Chapter 9

The things you hear without listening

The day after the stadium, I worked badly.

Not horribly badly.

Quietly badly.

A professional way of working badly.

I opened the file.

Corrected a detail.

Saved.

Looked at the correction.

Undid it.

Saved again, out of respect for my most concerning traditions.

The client still wanted the cabin to feel more intimate, less sad, and now “perhaps a little more breathable.”

I had almost replied that cabins did not have respiratory systems.

Then I remembered money was useful.

“Of course. I’ll explore that direction.”

Direction.

Very funny.

My brain had apparently decided to become unbearable.

I stared at the screen.

The blue forest. The cabin. The small light beside the door.

The child’s silhouette, which I had moved three millimeters to the left.

Three millimeters.

A decisive act in the grand history of children’s illustration.

Eugène was asleep on the couch, deeply enough to snore occasionally.

The rabbit was eating a leaf with great seriousness.

Everything was normal.

The studio had returned to its usual proportions.

The coffee table. The sketchbooks. The lamp. The rug.

The guitar in its corner.

The hum of the fridge. The city beyond the windows.

And despite all that, something continued circling the room.

A rhythm.

Not musical.

Well, maybe.

Footsteps on the track.

That sharp, regular, nervous sound. The way Liora had waited on the bend before accelerating. Not because she couldn’t go.

Because she wasn’t supposed to yet.

I didn’t particularly like that the idea could be applied to anything beyond a track practice.

I picked up the stylus again.

The cabin became slightly more breathable.

Or blurrier.

A difficult distinction to defend in front of a client.

A sound came from the other side of the wall late that afternoon.

A door. Footsteps.

Slower than usual again.

I recognized Liora before I heard her voice.

That wasn’t new.

But now it wasn’t simply “the neighbors.”

Before, the sounds had been background information.
The apartment next door was occupied.
The walls were thin.
Liora spoke quickly.
Her father had a deep voice.
Someone placed objects too forcefully on probably innocent pieces of furniture.
Now there was an image behind every sound.
Her sports bag.
Her shoes covered in red dust.
Her hand wrapped around her water bottle.
The coach telling her not to start too soon.
The way she listened in silence when everything about her seemed built to answer.
A drawer opened behind the wall.
Then her muffled voice.
Impossible to understand.
I took off my headphones anyway.
There was no music playing through them.
An aggravating detail.
I remained still for a second.
Then put them back on.
Still without playing anything.
Fine.
At this point, professional evaluation might be necessary.
I worked until the light had faded completely.
The sky shifted from gray to blue, then black. The windows reflected the studio with the unpleasant precision of evenings when you could see yourself living.
I made rice.
Simple.
Nutritional.
With no apparent emotional stakes.
Eugène immediately positioned himself in the middle of the open kitchen to supervise.
“It isn’t for you.”
He looked at me.
“It’s rice.”
He blinked slowly.
“You don’t like rice.”
He stayed.
Important feline principle: something did not need to please him in order to belong to him.
The rabbit received fresh hay. A leaf. Clean water and even an apple branch as a bonus.
The routine unfolded.
And it worked.
A little.
I ate in front of my computer, which was a bad habit, but at least a stable one.
At seven, the client replied that they liked “the intention,” but felt the cabin could be “less isolated.”
I looked at the cabin in the middle of its forest.
“It is literally in a forest.”
Eugène opened one eye.
“Thank you for your support.”
I saved the file.
Once.
Twice.

Then closed the program before I did something irreversible, like adding a welcoming patio to a cabin lost in the woods.

The studio became quieter again.

Not completely.

Never.

There were pipes. The street. A door somewhere in the building.

And fragments of life on the other side of the wall.

At one point, Liora's father's voice came through, low, calm, serious. Then Liora answered with something shorter than usual.

Fatigue, maybe.

Or dinner.

Or both.

I couldn't know.

That limit should have reassured me.

It didn't.

I put away my plate. Wiped down the counter. Returned a mug to the cupboard.

Then stood in the middle of the studio.

Too early to sleep.

Too late to start working intelligently again.

Too quiet for my brain to remain reasonable.

My gaze went to the guitar.

No.

I didn't need to play.

I could read.

I could do laundry.

I could answer the email from an old client requesting "one quick little adjustment," a phrase that had already destroyed several civilizations.

I picked up the guitar anyway.

The wood was slightly cold.

I sat on the couch without switching on the main light. Only the lamp beside the bookcase. A low light. Enough to see the strings, not enough to give the scene any significance.

Eugène, asleep at the other end of the couch, lifted his head with an offended expression.

"Sorry for living in your apartment."

He put it back down.

Approximate tuning.

The E was slightly off. I corrected it.

Then let my fingers search without deciding.

A few notes.

Not the melody.

Not yet.

I played things without shape. Simple chords. A progression I knew too well. Another that I abandoned after three seconds because it sounded like an insurance commercial.

Then a melody returned.

A sequence of chords I had begun several weeks earlier.

Still incomplete.

Still with that gap in the middle.

I played it quietly.

The beginning worked.

Not perfectly.

But it had a shape.

A line.

Something moving forward without hurrying.

Then came the place.
The missing step.
The hole.
I stopped.
As usual.
I began again.

The first notes cautiously filled the studio. They didn't travel far. They stayed close to the wood, my fingers, the couch, the rug, the plants surviving through stubbornness.

It wasn't meant to leave the room.
I played the passage a second time.
At the gap, I tried a different transition.
Too pretty.
I erased it immediately.
Another.
Too sad.
Another.
Too predictable.
I exhaled through my nose.
"Fine."

Eugène didn't react.
Neither did Lapin.
Ideal audience.
I tried again.

This time, without immediately trying to fill it. I left a longer silence between the two sections. An almost uncomfortable silence.

Then played the next chord.
It was better.
Not good.
Better.
I repeated it.
The silence in the middle felt a little like a breath.
I thought about the track.
Mistake.
Or not.
Liora waiting.
Liora not moving.
The coach shouting, Not yet.
I played the beginning again.
The gap.
Then the chord.
Maybe the problem wasn't the missing transition.
Maybe I was trying to reach the next part too quickly.
An irritating hypothesis.
I rejected it immediately.
Then played it exactly that way.
The beginning.
The pause.
Not too long.
Just enough.
The return.
This time, something passed through.
A small piece of continuity.
Nothing spectacular.

Nothing final.
A possible way through.
I remained still, my fingers resting on the strings.
The studio seemed to hold the moment one second longer than I did.
Then a sound came from the other side of the wall.
Very faint.
Movement.
I turned my head.
Nothing unusual.
The neighbors were moving around.
People were allowed to move inside their own apartments.
A fundamental concept.
Still, I began playing more quietly.
Almost without realizing it.
The melody continued.
The same passage.
Again.
Again.
The gap in the middle had changed shape.
It hadn't disappeared.
Maybe that was better.
Not everything missing needed to be corrected. Some things only needed you to stop rushing through them as though they were a mistake.
I placed my hand over the strings to silence them.
Quiet.
I didn't particularly like that thought either.
Far too available for personal interpretation.
I rested the guitar against the couch instead of returning it to its stand.
Bad sign.
It meant I might pick it up again.
I stood and opened the glass door slightly.
The balcony was secured.
Well, secured enough for an optimistic human and a temporarily supervised cat.
Cold air came in.
Eugène lifted his head.
"No."
He lowered it again.
Progress.
I stepped onto the balcony with my cup of tea.
The city had the low murmur of an ordinary evening. Cars. Voices in the street. The distant sigh of a bus. The windows of the buildings opposite formed squares of light, each containing its own small version of a life.
I leaned against the railing.
Not too far.
Four floors quickly reminded you of the limits of urban poetry.
Liora's balcony was dark.
Well, not completely.
A faint light came from inside.
The curtain was partly open.
I looked away.
Immediately.
Too immediately.
Very discreet, and therefore entirely obvious to myself.

I took a sip of tea.
Too hot.
Obviously.
A glass door slid open to my right.
I froze.
Liora appeared on her balcony.
Oversized sweatshirt. Hair tied up any old way. Thick socks. A mug held between her hands.
She stopped when she saw me.
So did I.
Even though I had already been standing still.
“Oh,” she said.
“Hi.”
“Hi!”
Silence.
The city continued.
Indifferent.
Liora approached her railing, then leaned against it carefully, as though her legs were still negotiating terms after the previous day.
“I didn’t know you were outside.”
“Neither did I.”
She narrowed her eyes.
“You didn’t know you were outside?”
“I mean... I’d only just come out.”
“Dangerous phrasing, Aurèl.”
“I know.”
She smiled into her mug.
Not loudly.
Not brightly.
An end-of-day smile.
I hadn’t known she had those.
“How are your legs?” I asked.
“They hate me.”
“Stable relationship?”
“For several years.”
“Consistency is good.”
A faint breath escaped through her nose, then she looked toward the street.
The silence returned.
Different from the one on the landing.
The balcony made us speak more quietly. Made us let the air carry what it could. We were close, but not in the same space. Separated by the railing, the drop, the night, that ridiculous boundary my cat had once regarded as a minor detail.
Liora turned her mug between her hands.
“Was that you?”
My body knew what she meant before I did.
It tensed.
Very slightly.
“What?”
“The guitar.”
I looked down at my mug.
Nothing in the tea could help me.
“Yes.”
One word.

Very small.
Very exposed.
She nodded.
Not triumphant.
Not surprised that she had caught me.
Simply as though one piece had found its place.
“I thought so.”
“You heard me?”
“Yes.”
I looked at the wall between our apartments.
Absurd.
As though the wall might justify itself.
“How much?”
She seemed to think about it.
Which was a mistake on her part.
Or an act of unintentional cruelty.
“Sometimes.”
“What does sometimes mean?”
“Sometimes when I come home late. Sometimes when I’m working in my room.
Sometimes when I’m trying to sleep and my father is watching political videos in the living
room at what he considers a ‘moderate’ volume.”
“I sometimes hear the political videos.”
“I’m sorry.”
“I haven’t found a way to vote against the sound.”
She smiled.
Then her gaze returned to me, calmer.
“At first, I didn’t know it was you.”
The sentence did something strange.
Not pleasant.
Not unpleasant either.
Like discovering a window that had been open for a long time.
“Who did you think it was?”
“I don’t know. Someone else in the building. Or a television. Or the neighbor downstairs
having a much richer inner life than his sneezing suggests.”
I smiled despite myself.
“He sneezes very loudly.”
“It sounds like he’s fighting a curse.”
“I thought I was the only one who heard him.”
“The walls are thin, Aurèl.”
She used my own words with far too much calm.
Fine.
I deserved that.
I took a sip to buy time.
Bad idea.
Still too hot.
I almost coughed.
She noticed.
Obviously.
“You okay?”
“Yes.”
“You drank too quickly.”
“Thank you.”
“That was an observation, not a criticism.”

“The two are often close with you.”
She smiled again.
Then looked toward my studio behind me.
The guitar was probably visible, resting against the couch in the light from the lamp.
Wooden traitor.
“There’s a passage you repeat a lot.”
I didn’t answer.
Impossible.
She had said it simply.
Like saying, You often leave your light on late, or, Your cat sometimes looks into our apartment.
Except it wasn’t the same.
Not at all.
“You always stop in the same place,” she added.
There.
That was worse.
Much worse.
I placed my mug on the inner ledge of the balcony so I wouldn’t hold it too tightly.
“Do you listen?”
The question came out too sharply.
Liora didn’t step back, but her expression changed slightly.
“Not like that.”
“Then like what?”
I heard myself.
I didn’t like my tone.
Not aggressive.
Tense.
The kind of tension that appeared when someone touched a drawer you thought was locked, only it had never had a lock at all.
Liora placed her mug on the railing too, between both hands.
“Like you hear whatever comes through a wall,” she said.
I didn’t answer.
She continued more softly.
“I’m not sitting against the wall with a glass pressed to it, if that’s what you’re asking.”
“I didn’t say that.”
“You almost thought it.”
“I think many absurd things.”
“I’m beginning to learn that.”
The silence returned.
I looked down at the street.
A car drove past too quickly. Someone laughed near the bus stop.
“I hear it because it’s there. The same way you hear me when I come home, or drop something, or close a door too hard.”
“I didn’t mean...”
I stopped.
Because I didn’t know what I meant.
Because she was right.
I had heard her.
For months.
Before her name. Before her face. Before Eugène on their balcony. Before Demitrius.
Before the stadium. Before the way she described the 800 meters as something that destroyed honest people.
I had heard her living.

And it had never felt like an intrusion on my part.
Only a consequence of the building.
But the guitar wasn't a sound like the others.
It didn't come from a door slamming or a bag falling.
It came from somewhere I didn't put outside myself.
At least, that was what I had believed.
"I thought you could barely hear it," I said.
"It isn't loud."
"But you can hear it."
"Yes."
"Perfect."
"Aurèl."
I closed my eyes for a second.
My name in her voice was becoming a deeply irritating mechanism.
"It isn't bad."
"I didn't ask for an opinion."
"I know."
"I don't play so that..."
I stopped.
Tried again.
"I don't play to be heard."
"I know."
I looked at her.
"You can't know that."
"Yes, I can."
"How?"
She lifted one shoulder.
"Because you stop as soon as it almost becomes something."
I remained still.
The sentence crossed the railing without effort.
It entered.
Settled.
I had nowhere appropriate to put it.
"That's a very elaborate analysis for someone who isn't listening."
"I said I wasn't listening like that."
"A convenient distinction."
"An important distinction."
She looked down at her mug.
"And then you begin again. Always the same passage. You aren't doing that to impress anyone."
"Maybe I'm simply very bad at impressing people."
"You are."
I looked at her.
She raised her eyes, a smile at the edge of her mouth.
"Sorry."
"No. I deserved that."
"A little."
The laugh escaped me despite myself.
Brief.
Almost nothing.
It got out before I could stop it.
Liora saw it.
Of course.

She looked pleased, but not victorious.

"It's pretty," she said.

I tensed again.

She immediately raised one hand.

"I'm not going to make a grand speech. I'm only saying it's pretty."

I didn't know what to say.

Thank you, probably.

A simple word.

Readily available.

Extremely difficult to use.

"It isn't finished," I said.

"I noticed."

"Obviously."

"Not in a bad way."

"Is there a good way for something to be unfinished?"

"Yes."

She looked out into the night.

"Some things look alive because they haven't been put in order yet."

I didn't move.

This time, she had crossed a line without realizing it.

Or while realizing it.

I didn't know which was worse.

The sentence sounded far too much like her standing inside my studio, looking at the drawings. Like what she had said about the pages waiting to be seen. About things that remained. That way she looked at objects as though they weren't simply evidence of disorder.

"Do you have a theory about everything?" I asked.

"No."

"I'm not convinced."

"I have impressions about many things. That's less serious."

"Not necessarily."

She turned toward me.

The balcony was dim, but I could see her eyes. The fatigue was still there. The track too, maybe.

Or perhaps I was putting the track everywhere now.

"I didn't mean to make you uncomfortable," she said.

The sentence was simple.

Direct.

It unsettled me more than a joke would have.

"It isn't..."

I searched.

Again.

Still nothing in the right place.

"Drawing is different," I finally said.

She didn't answer.

She waited.

That technique was becoming unacceptable.

"Even when drawing is personal, I can show it. I know what to do with someone looking at it. I can say it's a study, a project, an experiment, a commission. Anything. I can hide behind professional words."

I looked at the guitar through the glass door.

"With the guitar, I don't know."

The silence that followed didn't push me.

It only stayed there.
Calm enough that I continued despite myself.
“I don’t need it to be useful. Or good. Or something I can show. It’s just... for when there’s too much noise in my head.”
Liora didn’t smile.
She didn’t call it beautiful.
She didn’t put on the grave expression some people used when they wanted to prove they understood your inner depths after three sentences.
She only looked at the guitar.
Then at me.
“Okay.”
One word.
Dangerous, in the end.
Because it asked for nothing.
It didn’t force me to continue.
It left the thing intact.
I looked away first.
A scooter passed below.
Far too loud.
A mechanical blessing.
“What about you?”
“What about me?”
“Do you make noise when there’s too much in your head?”
She looked surprised.
Not for long.
Then smiled.
“I run.”
“Yes. Makes sense.”
“Or I talk.”
“I had evidence of that too.”
She gave me a look of false offense.
“I talk a normal amount.”
I looked at her.
She sighed.
“Fine. A lot.”
“With precision.”
“Thank you.”
“That wasn’t necessarily a compliment.”
“I take whatever works for me.”
Obviously.
She picked up her mug, took a sip, then grimaced.
“Cold.”
“You talk for too long.”
“You ask exhausting questions.”
“Isn’t that my line?”
I shook my head.
The balcony seemed to relax slightly.
So did I.
Not completely.
Enough to breathe normally.
Liora leaned on one forearm, turned toward me.
“Do you hear me a lot?”
An expected question.

Terrible anyway.

“No.”

She raised her eyebrows.

“Aurèl.”

“That depends on what you call a lot.”

“See?”

“The walls are thin.”

“Guilty answer.”

“Neighbor answer.”

She watched me with amusement.

I gave in.

A little.

“I hear things.”

“What kind of things?”

“Footsteps. Doors. Bags. Your father.”

“My father can be heard in apartments that don’t even share a wall with ours.”

“His voice is very... structured.”

She laughed.

“Structured?”

“Architectural.”

“He’ll love that.”

“Don’t tell him.”

“I’ll tell him our neighbor thinks his voice carries well.”

“I’ll move.”

“You can’t. Eugène is attached.”

Inside, Eugène chose that exact moment to jump onto the couch with a heavy thud.

We both turned our heads.

He settled in the light without looking at us.

“He knows we’re talking about him,” Liora said.

“He always thinks we’re talking about him.”

“He’s often right.”

“Unfortunately.”

She spent a few seconds looking at my cat through the glass.

Her expression softened in an almost comical way, because she was clearly trying to maintain her dignity despite her allergy and guilty admiration.

“And me?” she asked.

“What?”

“Do you hear me?”

I looked at my mug.

Empty.

No help.

“Yes.”

“Oh.”

“I mean, not the words. Not always.”

She smiled slowly.

“Not always?”

“Very rarely.”

“That’s already different.”

“I heard myself say it.”

“And?”

“Bad choice.”

She laughed, more softly than usual.

“What do you hear?”

I turned the mug between my hands.
The truth was delicate.
Not because it was shameful.
Because it was precise.
“Your rhythm,” I said.
She didn’t answer.
I already regretted it.
Too late.
“I mean, you start recognizing people. Even without words. The way you walk when you’re late isn’t the same as when you come home from practice.”
“I have a way of walking when I’m late?”
“You mostly have a way of being late.”
“Personal attack.”
“Observation.”
“That word is dangerous in your hands.”
“I know.”
She was smiling, but more quietly.
So I continued, very carefully.
“Before I met you, I already knew you spoke quickly when you were in a hurry. That you sometimes came home late. That you dropped things. That you rarely laughed quietly.”
She opened her mouth.
Then closed it.
“I don’t drop that many things.”
I looked at her.
“Okay.”
“Don’t make that face.”
“It’s my normal face.”
“No. That one says, ‘I possess evidence.’”
I lowered my eyes.
This time, I genuinely smiled.
Not for long.
But long enough.
So did Liora.
Then something calmed between us.
Not awkwardness.
Not exactly.
A realization, perhaps.
We hadn’t chosen this.
The building had done it for us, with its walls that were too thin, its pipes, its balconies too close together, its general inability to preserve anyone’s anonymity.
I thought about all the evenings when I had heard her footsteps without knowing her face.
Then all the evenings when she had heard the guitar without knowing it was me.
It was strange.
Like a construction defect that had turned into a kind of connection.
“This is strange,” she said.
I turned toward her.
“What?”
“We could hear each other before we spoke to each other.”
I didn’t answer.
Because yes.
Because she had said it before I could.
Because answering too quickly would turn it into something.

She didn't seem to expect any more.
"Well, mostly you heard me, apparently, because I drop things."
"And you heard me because I get stuck on four chords."
"It isn't four chords."
I tensed.
"You counted?"
"No."
"Liora."
"I have an auditory memory."
"Since when?"
"Since it became convenient."
I let out a laugh.
She smiled into her cold tea.
Then the silence returned.
Denser this time.
Not uncomfortable.
Or not only.
It contained too much information.
The footsteps.
The guitar.
The stadium.
The studio.
The drawings on the table.
Her forgotten hair tie.
The silhouette in my sketchbook.
Eugène crossing a diplomatic border.
The rabbit becoming a teacher of civility.
All of it, inside a few yards of air between two balconies.
Liora looked toward her apartment.
Someone called something from inside.
Her mother, perhaps. Softer than her father's voice, harder to distinguish.
"I have to go in," she said.
"Yes."
She picked up her mug and took one step toward the glass door.
Then stopped.
Obviously.
That moment was becoming recognizable too.
She could leave.
She added something.
"Will you play someday?"
I looked at her.
"I just played."
"You know what I mean."
Yes.
Unfortunately.
"No."
Immediate answer.
Solid.
Almost.
She nodded.
"Okay."
No pressure.
No sulking.

No dramatic disappointment.
She accepted it too easily.
Which, with her, was never quite proof that she had given up.
“It isn’t really meant to be listened to,” I added.
I didn’t know why I added that.
Maybe to make the no less harsh.
Maybe because it wasn’t entirely true and I needed to hear myself say it.
Liora looked at me.
Her smile appeared very slowly.
Not wide.
Not victorious.
The smile of someone who wasn’t filing the subject away despite her apparent agreement.
“Not now, then.”
I frowned.
“That isn’t what I said.”
“No.”
“Liora.”
“I heard you.”
The phrasing was obviously deliberate.
I stared at her.
Her smile grew slightly.
“Good night, Aurèl.”
“Good night.”
She went inside.
The glass door slid shut behind her.
The neighboring balcony became almost dark again.
I remained outside with my empty mug, in the cold, far longer than necessary.
Inside, Eugène climbed down from the couch and positioned himself in front of the glass door. He stared at me through it as though my presence on the balcony represented a waste of heated space.
I went inside.
Closed the door softly.
The studio welcomed me.
The lamp.
The couch.
The guitar resting against it.
The rabbit beside his corner, motionless.
I placed my mug in the sink.
Then looked at the guitar.
It looked exactly the same.
Pale wood.
Strings.
A small mark near the bridge.
The strap wrapped around the base of the stand.
An ordinary object.
An instrument.
Evidence.
I returned it to its stand.
More carefully than usual.
As though it had been moved without going anywhere.
I had thought the guitar remained inside my space.

I had thought its notes died against the walls, inside the rug, the cushions, Eugène's vaguely guilty fur.
But part of them passed through.
For weeks, perhaps.
They crossed the wall.
Went to the other side.
Not loudly.
Not clearly.
Enough for a girl who made too much noise to recognize the place where I stopped.
I sat on the couch.
Eugène immediately jumped up beside me, then placed one paw on my thigh.
A rare gesture.
Therefore suspicious.
"You want something."
He purred.
"Of course."
I petted him anyway.
Footsteps sounded on the other side of the wall.
Slower.
Then a voice.
Liora.
I couldn't make out the words.
I didn't try.
Not really.
The guitar was silent in its corner.
And yet the studio wasn't entirely silent anymore.
It now contained what I had refused.
Or hadn't accepted yet.
I hadn't played something for her.
Not directly.
Not for her.
I had even said no.
A real no.
Well.
A no with a crack in it.
I rested my head against the back of the couch and closed my eyes.
A brief laugh crossed through the wall.
I recognized it.
Without listening.

Chapter 10

The balcony doesn't count as an invitation

The problem with habits was that they rarely formed with any dignity.

At first, something happened once.

Then twice.

Then the brain, that absurdly overzealous little internal administration, opened a file.

Noise behind the wall.

Liora coming home. Quick footsteps. Key in the lock. Voice in the entryway. Door.

Silence.

I wasn't waiting for those sounds.

Obviously.

I was identifying them.

Important distinction.

On Saturday night, at 11:40, I was still at my desk.

Nothing unusual about that. Freelancers had the same relationship with schedules that Eugène had with balcony rules: theoretical, flexible, and negotiable only inside their own heads.

The screen lit the studio far too brightly.

I had three files open.

A commission for a children's publisher. An overdue invoice.

And a folder called "exhibition_interiors_selection," staring at me from the desktop like a question I didn't want to answer.

The group exhibition was approaching.

Three weeks away.

For a normal person, that was a comfortable margin.

For me, it was already emergency territory.

I had to send the final selection by Monday evening.

Five images. Three possible prints.

And a short artist statement that was, according to the organizer's email, "not too conceptual, but personal enough."

Beautiful.

Not too conceptual.

Personal enough.

I preferred it when clients asked for warm, approachable eggplants.

At least an eggplant didn't pretend to want to understand my relationship with domestic space.

I looked at the thumbnails open on the screen.

An empty kitchen with a chair out of place.

A hallway in late-afternoon light.

A window partly open onto a balcony.

A table after a meal.

The corner of a couch, a blanket, a low lamp.

Five rooms.

Five places without people.

Or almost without them.

A mug. An abandoned sweater. A mark left by water. Shoes beside a door.

Evidence.

Maybe they were too similar.

Or too quiet.

Or too much like me.

I ran a hand over my face.

"What do you think?"

Eugène was lying on the coffee table in a position that respected neither gravity nor decency.

He opened one eye.

“Yes, sorry. Demanding question.”

He closed it again.

The rabbit continued a delicate operation involving hay and total concentration.

I opened the artist statement document.

The cursor blinked.

I typed:

“These images explore...”

I deleted it.

No.

Too much like a group exhibition attended by people who wore turtlenecks on purpose.

I tried again.

“I draw interiors because...”

I stopped.

Because why?

Because people were too difficult to draw without lying.

Because rooms held traces better than faces did.

Because a chair out of place sometimes said more than a sentence.

I deleted everything.

Highly productive.

I saved the empty document.

As a precaution.

There was almost no sound from the other side of the wall.

Liora was working that evening.

I knew because she had told me the day before while hurrying down the stairs with a sports bag, a tote bag, and an apple held between her teeth.

Well, she hadn't spoken with the apple between her teeth.

She had said:

“I'm working tomorrow night, so if Eugène is planning an existential crisis, he'll need to make an appointment.”

I had replied:

“I'll inform the relevant department.”

She had given me a thumbs-up.

Then nearly tripped on the last step.

General dignity preserved by a narrow margin.

So I knew.

Saturday night.

Shift at the café.

Late return.

Neutral information.

No consequences.

I closed the artist statement.

Opened it again.

Closed it.

Then opened the children's commission so I could look like a serious professional.

The cabin was breathing better, but the client still wanted “something slightly more human.”

I looked at the child standing in front of it.

“There is literally a human.”

Eugène didn't move.

I zoomed in on the silhouette.

Maybe I needed to turn the head slightly toward the window. Make it look as though the child was hesitating before going inside.

I adjusted the angle.

Better.

Or worse.

I saved.

Once.

Twice.

Three times.

Midnight passed.

Then 12:15.

The street had grown quieter. Cars were less frequent. A few doors had slammed earlier inside the building, but everything had gradually settled.

I stood to stretch.

My back protested with the conviction of an old friend I had neglected.

I made tea.

Bad idea.

I did it anyway.

Just as the kettle began to heat, the front door of the building opened downstairs.

I didn't hear it clearly.

More like a chain of sounds.

The door swinging shut.

Footsteps in the stairwell.

Slow. Then faster. Then slow again.

I remained still.

The kettle grew louder behind me.

The footsteps reached the fifth floor.

I recognized Liora.

Not exactly by her usual rhythm.

Something was missing.

Or something was weighing on it.

Her steps still had that energy that seemed to take the stairs as a personal provocation, but the final few were heavier. Less attacked. As though her body had agreed to obey until the landing only because it was under contract.

Then a key fell on the other side.

A small metallic sound.

Silence.

"Seriously?"

Her voice.

Tired.

Lower.

I placed my empty mug on the counter.

You did not open your door after midnight because a neighbor had dropped her keys. That was exactly the kind of gesture that required a more clearly defined relationship than ours.

Neighbor.

Animals.

Balcony.

Guitar.

Stadium.

Another sound.

She had probably kicked her bag.

"Perfect."

Fine.

Maybe.

I crossed the studio.

Eugène lifted his head.

“Don’t start.”

I wasn’t sure I was talking to him.

I unlocked my door and opened it just far enough to look out.

Liora was crouched in front of her apartment, one knee on the floor, the other leg bent, searching beneath an enormous bag with an expression of hostile concentration.

She wore a black jacket too thin for the night, a sweatshirt underneath, jeans, and sneakers marked with rain.

Her hair had been tied up in a hurry. Several strands had escaped, as though even they had given up trying to keep pace with her schedule.

The smell of cold coffee, light frying oil, and rain entered the hallway.

Not unpleasant.

Just very alive.

Very end-of-shift.

She looked up at me.

“Oh.”

“Hi.”

“Did I wake you?”

I looked at myself.

Sweater, pants, glasses, light on behind me.

“No.”

“Shame. I could’ve looked guilty.”

“You can be guilty about something else.”

“I have enough open cases, thanks.”

She finally retrieved her keys from beneath the strap of her bag and stood.

Too quickly.

She stopped for a second with one hand against the wall.

I saw it.

She pretended it hadn’t happened.

I saw that too.

“You okay?” I asked.

She exhaled, then raised the keys.

“Victory.”

“That wasn’t the question.”

“It answers a nearby question.”

“Not really.”

She slid the key into the lock without turning it. She stayed leaning against the wall of the landing, one shoulder slightly tilted. The hallway’s yellow light was unflattering, especially to people trying to pretend they weren’t exhausted.

“Long shift?”

“No.”

I looked at her.

She raised her eyes.

“Yes.”

“There.”

“Very long. Productive in the sense that I carried trays, pretended to like customers, spilled two coffees, cleaned a floor that had developed an identity of its own, and stopped a man from explaining why modern cappuccino isn’t what it used to be.”

“Serious subject.”

“He was genuinely devastated.”

"Milk foam has destroyed civilizations."
"Thank you. Exactly."
She smiled.
The smile arrived.
Not all the way.
It stopped at the edges.
I didn't know what to do with that information.
I didn't yet occupy the right relational space to say, You look completely done.
I wasn't exactly no one anymore.
That was the problem.
She finally opened her door, then remained on the threshold.
The apartment inside was dark except for a light in the entryway. Farther in, probably the living room.
No voices.
Her family was asleep.
Or trying to be.
"Were you working?" she asked.
"Yes."
"The eggplants?"
"Never the eggplants again."
"Sorry. Sensitive subject."
"A cabin."
"Oh."
"And a statement for the exhibition."
"The exhibition?"
I regretted it immediately.
I didn't know why.
It wasn't a secret.
Technically, it was the opposite of a secret, since an exhibition involved hanging things on a wall so strangers could look at them with varying degrees of eyebrow movement.
"A small group exhibition," I said.
"You never told me."
"No."
"Why?"
"Because you never asked."
She narrowed her eyes.
"Evasive answer."
"Accurate answer."
"The two can coexist."
She was right.
Unfortunately.
"When is it?"
"Three weeks from now. The opening, I mean. Assuming I don't disappear into a hole first."
"What are you showing?"
"Interiors."
"Your empty rooms?"
"They aren't empty."
The answer came too quickly.
Liora didn't smile.
She noticed.
Obviously.
"Okay," she said simply.

Silence.
Not long.
Long enough for me to feel that I had placed something between us without meaning to.
She looked down at her bag, then her keys, then me.
“I’m going to put my things down.”
“Yes.”
“But I’m too awake to sleep.”
I looked at her face.
“You look like the opposite.”
“Misreading.”
“Really?”
“I’m awake on the inside.”
“The outside is protesting.”
She gave a small laugh.
Then lifted a hand to her forehead.
A brief, tired movement.
“I’m going to drink something on the balcony,” she said. “Nothing concerning. Water. Or herbal tea, if I can find the moral strength.”
She paused.
“You can come out onto yours.”
I blinked.
“Onto my balcony?”
“Yes.”
“That doesn’t count as coming over.”
“Exactly. It’s practical.”
“Practical for what?”
“Talking without waking everyone up in the hallway.”
“The balcony does not count as an invitation.”
She smiled.
Tired, but clear this time.
“Of course not. It’s a diplomatic zone.”
Then she disappeared into her apartment before I could answer.
Her door closed softly.
I remained in my own doorway.
Fine.
Diplomatic zone.
Perfect concept.
Dangerous.
I went back inside the studio.
Eugène was sitting in the middle of the room.
He looked as though he understood everything.
Which was impossible.
And yet...
“Don’t look at me like that.”
He blinked.
“I’m going onto my balcony.”
He turned his head toward the glass door.
“My secured balcony.”
He stood.
“No.”
He stopped.
“You stay here.”
He stared at me with silent indignation.

"You've lost your diplomatic privileges."
I closed the glass door behind me as soon as I stepped outside.
The air was cold.
The night still held a trace of rain. The railings shone faintly beneath the streetlights.
Liora's balcony was still empty, but her glass door opened a few seconds later.
She appeared in a large sweatshirt, a mug in her hands, her hair down this time.
Not completely.
Just enough to make her face look less organized.
She had taken off her shoes.
Thick socks.
Again.
A domestic detail.
Dangerously domestic.
"Is Eugène sulking?" she asked.
"He's preparing an appeal."
"Does he have a lawyer?"
"Still himself."
"Bad strategy."
"Very confident one, though."
She leaned against the railing.
Not abruptly.
Not with her usual energy arriving slightly ahead of the rest of her.
Slowly.
As though she wanted to conserve movement.
I noticed her voice was lower.
The volume went down when she no longer had the strength to project the world in front of her.
I took my mug of lukewarm tea and leaned against the wall beside the glass door.
Appropriate distance.
Late-night neighbor distance.
Diplomatic zone.
"Did you find the moral strength?" I asked.
She looked at her mug.
"Herbal tea."
"Impressive."
"I almost ate cereal from a dirty bowl, so we'll call this a victory."
"Why a dirty bowl?"
"Because the clean one was too far away."
"Where was it?"
"In the cupboard."
I nodded.
"Extreme circumstances."
"You understand."
"Completely."
Silence settled between us.
Liora took a sip, both hands wrapped around her mug. Her gaze stayed on the street, not me. Her shoulders were lower. The sounds of the city rose carefully toward us.
A bus in the distance.
Tires on wet pavement.
A window closing somewhere.
I wasn't used to Liora inside silences.
Not like this.
Usually, even when she wasn't speaking, she seemed about to.

Now she was simply there.
Tired.
Present.
Without trying to occupy all the air.
“Do you often finish this late?” I asked.
“At the café?”
“Yes.”
“It depends. On Saturdays, yes. Well, sometimes. Often. Too often.”
She ran a hand through her hair, then immediately seemed to regret it when several strands fell across her face.
“It isn’t horrible. It’s just long.”
“You say that as though long isn’t already a category of problem.”
“Long can be managed.”
“Everything can be managed, according to you.”
“No.”
She answered too quickly.
Then exhaled.
“Well, I’d like it to be.”
I said nothing.
She didn’t continue immediately.
The silence became something else.
More precise.
I could see her profile in the dim light. The curve of her nose. Her lowered lashes.
The tiredness around her eyes.
Nothing that needed rescuing.
Or interpreting.
Or a grand sentence placed over her life.
Only the real cost of her rhythm.
“Do you have practice tomorrow?” I asked.
“No. Just an easy run in the morning.”
I looked at her.
She turned toward me.
“What?”
“Nothing.”
“Aurèl.”
“You work until midnight, sleep for five conceptual hours, then run in the morning.”
“Easy run.”
The word easy does not fix everything.”
She smiled more slowly.
“Are you worried?”
A simple question.
Too direct.
Far too direct for a diplomatic zone.
I took a sip of tea.
Cold.
Betrayal.
“I’m observing.”
“Ah, yes. Your favorite word.”
“It’s useful.”
“It hides many things.”
I didn’t answer.
She didn’t push.
That was new too.

Or maybe I was only noticing it now.
She looked at her mug, then the street.
“I’m not falling apart,” she said.
“I didn’t say you were.”
“I know.”
“You’re saying that as though I thought it.”
“Maybe.”
“I think many absurd things.”
“I know that too.”
She smiled slightly.
Then her gaze drifted toward the windows across the street.
“It’s only a busy period.”
“How long has this busy period lasted?”
She turned toward me.
“Very good question.”
“Bad answer.”
“Yes.”
She took a sip of tea and grimaced.
“This is terrible.”
“The tea?”
“The exhaustion. And the tea. Mostly the tea.”
“You chose it.”
“I thought I was the kind of person who made good decisions at midnight.”
“Common mistake.”
“Do you make good decisions at midnight?”
I thought about files saved three times, emails sent too late, the drawing of Liora I closed like incriminating evidence, the guitar I played without realizing it crossed through walls.
“No.”
“There.”
Her hand rested on the cold metal a few inches from the divider between our balconies.
Not close.
Not far.
I noticed the distance.
I looked away.
Eugène appeared behind my glass door, a massive silhouette in the studio light. He placed one paw against the glass.
Liora saw him immediately.
Her face changed.
“Eugène.”
“Don’t encourage him.”
“He looks sad.”
“He looks strategic.”
“He wants to join us.”
“He has already participated in too many things.”
Eugène meowed behind the glass.
The sound came through muffled.
Very dramatic.
“See?” Liora said.
“He’s lying.”
“You can’t know that.”
“I know him.”
“So do I. A little.”
She said it without giving it any weight.

The sentence had some anyway.

A little.

I looked at Eugène.

He looked at us.

Liora and me.

The balcony.

The divider.

The diplomatic zone from which he had been excluded for reasons of national security.

“He chose you by breaking and entering.”

“That’s a solid foundation for a relationship.”

“A concerning one.”

“Solid.”

She smiled, then turned her mug between her hands.

The conversation could have remained there.

Eugène.

Her allergy.

The usual jokes.

Familiar ground.

Safe.

But then she looked toward my studio behind me.

“What were you working on?”

“When?”

“Tonight.”

I followed her gaze.

From where she stood, she could see the corner of my desk, the lamp, part of the screen.

Not its contents.

Thankfully.

“A commission,” I said. “And the exhibition.”

“The rooms that aren’t empty.”

I went slightly still.

She had remembered.

Obviously.

“Yes.”

“You have to choose which ones?”

“Yes.”

“Is it difficult?”

“Yes.”

“Because you love all of them?”

“No.”

“Because you don’t love any of them?”

“Closer.”

She laughed softly.

Then coughed a little.

I straightened.

She immediately raised one hand.

“I’m fine.”

“I didn’t say anything.”

“You straightened.”

“Observation.”

“No. That’s my territory.”

I almost leaned back against the wall purely to prove that nothing was happening.

Bad reflex.

She smiled.

"Why interiors?" she continued.
I looked at the street.
Simpler than her face.
"I don't know."
"Lie."
"Provisional answer."
"So a lie under construction."
"Exactly."
She didn't speak.
I waited for her to fill the silence.
She didn't.
It was almost unfair.
Tired Liora knew how to listen in a way that removed the escape routes. Not by staring intensely. Not by asking, "And how does that make you feel?" in a deep voice.
She simply stayed quiet.
And the silence seemed to say: Go ahead, if you want. If not, that's fine too.
Which made me want to speak.
Probably unintentional manipulation.
Highly effective.
"I don't really draw rooms," I said.
She turned her head slightly toward me.
"I mean, I do. Technically. Rooms, windows, corners, hallways, tables. But it isn't only... the place."
I searched for a proper sentence.
There wasn't one.
Only approximations.
"People think an empty room doesn't say anything."
Liora didn't respond.
I continued.
"But a room is never truly empty. Not if someone lives there. Even when the person is gone, things remain. A chair that hasn't been put back. A mug. A light left on. The cushion flattened by Eugène. The rug shifted because Demitrius has decided it's suspicious."
She almost smiled.
She was listening.
Actually listening.
"I like drawing what remains after someone passes through," I said. "Not the important moment. Not the scene. The traces. The habits. What a presence does to a place without necessarily realizing it."
I stopped.
Too much.
Far too much.
The balcony had not been designed for this level of information.
I drank from my empty mug.
Pathetic gesture.
Liora saw.
She didn't smile.
Not this time.
"That's why the kitchen made me feel that way," she said softly.
I looked at her.
"What way?"
"Like it was waiting."
The word remained between us.
Waiting.

The track.

The second lap.

The guitar.

The rooms.

Some words had no discipline whatsoever.

"Maybe," I said.

She looked down at her mug.

Her fingers rested near the railing.

Closer to the divider than before.

I noticed my own hands. One around my empty mug, the other resting against the wall.

A perfectly reasonable distance.

Which made it needlessly visible.

"And the exhibition," she continued. "Is it important?"

"Small exhibition."

"That isn't what I asked."

I exhaled through my nose.

"Yes."

The word came more easily than expected.

Liora didn't move.

"It matters because it isn't a commission," I said. "No one asked me to make these images. No one gave me a brief about the correct level of emotional warmth for a chair. So if it doesn't work, I can't say the client wanted something absurd."

"It would only be you."

"Exactly."

She nodded slowly.

Her face was calm.

Tired, but calm.

"That's scarier."

"Yes."

"And more yours."

I stayed silent.

Another simple sentence.

That evening, she had a way of saying things without throwing them. They arrived softly, which let them travel farther.

I didn't like the mechanism.

I liked it a little anyway.

"Will you come?" I asked.

The question escaped.

Without authorization.

Directly.

She raised her eyes.

I regretted it immediately.

"I mean, only if you want. It's small. There'll probably be lukewarm wine, people using the word 'materiality' with complete seriousness, and me pretending I don't want to flee through an emergency exit."

Liora was still looking at me.

Her smile appeared slowly.

"Did you just officially invite me somewhere?"

"No."

"Aurèl."

"I described a public event."

"With a question at the beginning."

"An informational question."

“Will you come?” is rarely purely informational.”
“We can debate that.”
“We can. You’ll lose.”
I looked down at my mug.
“You don’t have to.”
“I know.”
“And it isn’t...”
I stopped.
Because I didn’t know how to finish.
It isn’t what?
Important.
Personal.
An invitation.
Something I would like.
Liora tilted her head slightly.
“I’ll come.”
Silence.
Very brief.
Far too noticeable.
“Unless I’m working,” she added. “And if I am, I’ll come afterward. Even if I smell like coffee and defeat.”
“That’s a perfectly acceptable smell.”
“You say that now.”
“I survived the hallway earlier.”
She laughed.
More softly still.
Probably from exhaustion.
I wondered when she would finally go inside and sleep.
Mostly, I wondered why I didn’t want to be the one who said it.
“You should sleep,” I said anyway.
Very responsible.
Very annoying.
She looked at me.
“There it is. Sleep hygiene in three points.”
“It’s always the first one.”
“You haven’t evolved.”
“Consistent.”
“Like Eugène.”
“Eugène isn’t consistent. He’s heavy.”
Behind the glass, Eugène meowed again.
Liora lifted one hand to her mouth to contain a laugh.
“He knows.”
“He mostly knows he hasn’t been the center of attention for four minutes.”
“That’s a long time for him.”
“He’s going through something.”
She continued smiling.
Then the smile faded slightly.
The exhaustion returned to its place on her face.
She lowered her head, looking at her socks, the railing, the mug.
“I’m going to sleep. Yes.”
“Good idea.”
“Don’t look victorious.”
“I’m completely neutral.”

"Your neutral face is sometimes unbearable."
"I thought it assessed emergency exits."
"It can do several things."
She straightened.
The movement was slower than usual.
Her hand remained on the railing for a second.
Mine did too, now.
I hadn't realized I had put it there.
On my side.
At a distance.
Cold metal beneath my fingers.
The divider between us.
A few inches.
The night.
The drop.
No grand moment.
No music.
No sentence intended to change anything.
Only two hands resting on two pieces of railing, close enough for me to notice and far enough apart that nothing required us to talk about it.
I moved mine first.
Too quickly.
Liora saw.
Obviously.
She said nothing.
That was almost worse.
She picked up her mug.
"Are you going to keep working?"
"Probably."
She gave me a look.
"Sleep more."
"That's your advice?"
"First point."
"The other two are missing."
"I'll invent them after I've had five real hours of sleep."
"Ambitious."
"Revolutionary."
She stepped back toward her glass door, then stopped.
That moment.
Again.
The moment when she could leave, but something remained caught.
"Thank you," she said.
"For what?"
"I don't know."
Strange answer.
She lifted one shoulder.
"The diplomatic balcony. Eugène. The rooms that aren't empty. The one-point lecture on sleep. Choose."
"I'll take Eugène. He enjoys responsibility."
She smiled.
"Good night, Aurèl."
"Good night, Liora."
She went inside.

The glass door slid shut.
The curtain moved.
Then she disappeared into her apartment.
No grand sentence.
No deliberately prolonged look.
Only good night.
And yet, when the light on her balcony went out, I remained outside.
A few seconds.
Then a few more.
The cold began to seep through my sweater.
The railing still held the trace of my hand.
Or maybe I was inventing it.
Across the street, almost every window was dark. The city wasn't silent, but the building seemed to be holding something back.
I looked at the neighboring balcony.
Empty.
Ordinary.
The same balcony as before.
Except it had now contained too many things to become merely a suspended piece of concrete again.
An allergy.
A fugitive cat.
Cold mugs.
A guitar heard from the other side.
A girl who claimed she slept five hours as long as no one examined the details.
An invitation that wasn't one.
An exhibition I had made real by speaking about it aloud.
I finally went inside.
Eugène was waiting in front of the glass door.
He immediately slipped between my legs to inspect the balcony before I closed it. I blocked him with my foot.
"No."
He looked at me.
"Diplomacy suspended."
I closed the door.
The studio felt warm after the cold air. The lamp beside the desk created an island of light over the papers. The screen still displayed the five images for the exhibition.
I approached it.
The empty rooms.
No.
Not truly empty.
I looked at them one by one.
The kitchen.
The hallway.
The window.
The table.
The couch.
I had believed those images came from my need for quiet, order, distance.
Maybe.
Not only.
They also contained what people left behind without realizing it.
A hair tie in a dish.
Red dust from a shoe in an entryway.

A cat sleeping where someone had been sitting.
An empty mug on a balcony.
A silence that remained afterward.
I reopened the artist statement.
The cursor blinked.
This time, I wrote:
“I draw places after people have passed through them.”
I stopped.
“Rooms are never empty. They keep habits, forgotten objects, repeated gestures, and presences we no longer notice immediately.”
I read it again.
It was too personal.
So it was probably usable.
I saved.
Once.
Twice.
I stopped before the third.
Then did it anyway.
Emotional growth was no excuse for recklessness.
A faint sound came from the other side of the wall.
A drawer.
Footsteps.
Slower.
Then nothing.
Maybe Liora was asleep.
Or trying.
I lowered the screen brightness.
Eugène jumped onto the couch, turned around three times, then settled into the hollow of the blanket.
Demitrius, true to himself, decided that after midnight was an excellent time to chew hay with disproportionate volume.
The studio returned to its quiet.
Not the quiet from before.
That evening, the building’s silence had a different shape.
Before, it had felt like a boundary.
Now it felt like what remained after someone had just left and part of their presence had not yet left the room.
I looked at the glass door.
The balcony was empty.
The wall was there.
So was the night.
I thought about Liora on the other side. Her lowered voice. Her exhaustion carried like one more bag. The way she listened without filling the silence.
The accident had become a habit.
Not practical.
Not reasonable.
Not officially named.
An emotional habit, perhaps.
I closed the document.
Then remained in front of the dark screen for another minute, looking at my own reflection in the glass.
I didn’t feel like putting anything back where it belonged.
And for once, that felt less concerning than true.

Chapter 11

A father questions

The next day, I discovered that a balcony could have social consequences.

Well.

I had already suspected as much.

Since the Eugène incident, the balcony was no longer really a balcony. It was a border zone, a source of responsibility, allergies, hallway conversations, and decisions my cat regarded with criminal interest.

I thought I had stabilized the situation.

Reinforced mesh.

Glass door closed.

Increased surveillance.

Removal of furniture that could serve as a launchpad, ladder, or philosophical justification.

An imperfect system, but a coherent one.

I hadn't accounted for Liora's father.

Mistake.

On Sunday afternoon, around four, someone knocked on my door.

Two knocks.

Sharp.

Not Liora's.

Liora knocked the way she entered a sentence: quickly, as though the conversation had begun before the door opened.

This was controlled.

Measured.

The kind of knock that appeared to have read the building regulations and found several points of concern.

Eugène lifted his head from the couch.

Demitrius froze in his corner with a strand of hay between his teeth.

"If it's for you, you're not here," I told Eugène.

He blinked.

I looked through the peephole.

Liora's father.

Obviously.

He stood upright in the hallway with that calm presence that made even the walls seem as though they ought to correct their posture. Beside him, Liora occupied the space very differently. Pale sweatshirt, hair tied back, hands in her pockets, expression half guilty and half amused.

A very bad combination.

I opened the door.

"Good afternoon."

"Good afternoon, Aurèl."

He knew my name now.

I still wasn't used to it.

In his voice, it sounded less like a name than a case file.

"Hi," Liora said.

She smiled too quickly.

"Before he starts, I should clarify that this is not a summons."

Her father slowly turned toward her.

"No one said anything about a summons."

"It's the atmosphere."

"Liora."

"I'm warning him."

I kept one hand on the door handle.
Defensive position.
Probably visible.
“Is there a problem?” I asked.
“No,” her father said.
Then he looked toward my balcony, visible behind me.
“Not yet, at least.”
Very reassuring.
Liora rolled her eyes.
“Dad.”
“A problem does not need to happen before it can be addressed.”
“See?” she said to me. “Active prevention.”
Her father took a small folded notebook from his pocket.
Of course.
He had a notebook.
“I examined the divider between our balconies.”
“From your side?”
“Yes. It is inadequate.”
I looked at Liora.
She grimaced in a way that meant, I know.
“I’m working on securing it.”
“I saw the current installation.”
Silence.
Not good.
“It’s temporary,” I said.
“I should hope so.”
Fine.
The conversation had just become a technical assessment.
“Dad has an idea,” Liora said.
“An idea with diagrams,” her father corrected.
The hallway suddenly seemed too narrow for their family dynamic and my discomfort.
“You want me to take a look?”
“Yes.”
“You need to see the angle from our side,” Liora added. “Two minutes.”
I froze.
Their apartment.
The place next door.
The territory where the footsteps, voices, doors, moderately deafening political videos, and Liora’s laughter came from.
That place had existed in my life for months in the form of sounds.
I hadn’t expected it to have an entrance.
Well, obviously it had one.
But until then, their door had represented a theoretical boundary. A closed rectangle explaining why the sounds weren’t exactly mine.
“Only two minutes,” Liora repeated more softly.
She had noticed my hesitation.
Which annoyed me.
Not at her.
At the fact that it was visible.
“Yes, of course.”
Too formal.
Eugène appeared behind my legs.
Perfect timing.

He slipped halfway into the doorway and looked up at Liora, then at her father, as though greeting two diplomats from an opposing nation.

Her father looked at him.

"He is not coming."

"I didn't say anything," Liora replied.

"You were about to think it."

"Thinking isn't forbidden by the building regulations."

"Not yet," I murmured.

Liora almost burst out laughing.

Her father looked at me, surprised that I had spoken.

I stepped into the hallway while blocking Eugène with my foot.

He attempted a lateral escape.

Failure.

"Stay."

He looked deeply betrayed.

Liora's door was open.

I crossed the threshold.

And the apartment next door became real.

Not merely larger than my studio.

Much more inhabited.

The space was filled with passageways. With evidence that several people lived there on different schedules, with overlapping habits and incompatible emergencies.

Shoes beside the entrance.

Too many shoes.

A coat rack overloaded with jackets.

A sports bag against the wall.

Keys in a dish that was too small.

A scarf over a chair.

The smell of something simmering.

Tomato.

Spices.

Coffee too.

A television playing with the sound off.

Framed photographs on the walls.

Liora when she was younger, in running shorts with a medal around her neck, looking victorious and probably already unbearable.

Her father younger too, with less gravity in his shoulders.

A woman came out of the kitchen, drying her hands on a dish towel.

I recognized her before I had really seen her.

Liora's mother.

Not because she looked exactly like Liora.

Something in her eyes said the same thing more quietly.

"Hello."

A gentle voice.

Steady.

A voice that didn't need to rise in order to exist.

"Hello."

"Mom, this is Aurèl," Liora said.

"I know."

Silence.

Brief.

Highly effective.

Liora opened her mouth.

Closed it.
I searched for a neutral point near the coat rack.
Bad choice.
One of Liora's jackets was there.
So it wasn't neutral.
"I mean," her mother continued with a smile, "you mostly talk about Eugène, obviously."
"There," Liora said. "Exactly. Eugène."
"And Demetrius."
"Obviously."
"And the exhibition."
I remained still.
Liora scratched her temple.
"Yes, well."
Her father returned to us.
"We came to discuss the balcony."
"Yes," Liora said. "Fascinating subject."
Her mother looked at me.
"Would you like something to drink?"
"No, thank you."
Immediate response.
Survival instinct.
She smiled as though she had expected it.
"I'll make tea anyway."
Fine.
So I had lost.
We crossed the living room.
I didn't know where to look.
In my studio, every object had a relationship with me. Even the disorder was mine.
Here, everything looked at me from too many angles.
The photographs.
The books.
An abandoned mug.
A blanket folded halfway.
Administrative papers stacked neatly.
A small plant on a windowsill.
The living room was louder than mine even without sound.
Liora looked at me.
"You okay?"
"Yes."
"You have the face."
"Which one?"
"The one trying not to touch anything."
"That's a common face when entering someone else's home."
"Not that common."
"Liora, let him breathe," her mother called from the kitchen.
"I am."
"You're commenting on his breathing."
"Not yet."
I smiled despite myself.
Her father opened the glass door.
"Come and look."

The family balcony was slightly larger than mine, or seemed that way because it contained more things. Two folding chairs, a pot of basil healthier than all my plants combined, a toolbox, an outdoor rug, a solar lamp.

From this side, the divider seemed even lower.

Treacherous.

Her father pointed at the ledge.

"Your cat crossed here."

"Probably."

"Certainly."

"Yes."

"The slope gives him leverage. The problem isn't only the height. It's the angle."

He was right.

I hated how easily he was right.

"I put mesh up on my side."

"I saw."

That phrase again.

Liora, still standing beside the glass door, said:

"He's doing what he can."

I turned toward her.

Too quickly.

She stopped.

So did I.

Her father didn't appear to notice.

Or pretended not to.

"I don't doubt it," he said. "But a solution that depends on human optimism is not a solution."

"You should frame that," Liora said.

"I could."

I looked at the divider.

"What do you suggest?"

He took a folded diagram from his notebook.

An actual diagram.

With measurements.

Arrows.

Annotations.

The kind of document produced either by a serious carpenter or an air-accident investigation.

"A transparent panel here. Attached to the railing and the divider. Not too high, so it won't block the light. With an angled return on the side."

"A return?"

"Otherwise he'll go around it."

I looked at the drop.

Then the imaginary panel.

Then Liora.

"He would go around it?"

"It's Eugène," she said. "Probably."

Betrayal.

Accurate, but still betrayal.

"I have a sheet of Plexiglas in the basement," her father continued. "We'll need to check the fittings on your side."

It took me a few seconds to understand.

"You want to install it?"

"I'm offering to help."

A simple sentence.

His tone made the assistance sound like a decision that had already been established as reasonable.

"I can do it."

"Do you have the appropriate drill?"

"No."

"An electric screwdriver?"

"No."

"A saw to adjust the panel?"

"No."

He nodded.

Not triumphantly.

Worse.

Factually.

"Then I can help."

Liora was looking at the balcony floor.

I could sense that she wanted to intervene.

"That would be kind," I finally said.

"It is a matter of safety."

Of course.

Kindness had been removed from the file.

We returned to the living room.

Liora's mother had placed four cups on the coffee table.

I had refused one.

She had assigned one to me anyway.

Family life ignored certain answers.

"Sit down."

Her father took the armchair.

Liora dropped onto the couch with the ease of an official resident. Her mother sat beside her.

There was one place left on the couch.

Beside Liora.

Or a chair.

I chose the chair.

Obviously.

Liora gave me a look.

"Strategic choice."

"Mobility."

"Emergency exit?"

"Always."

Her mother smiled into her tea.

Her father had already moved on to the next part of the file.

"So you work from home?"

"Yes."

"You're an illustrator."

"Yes."

"Freelance."

"Yes."

Three yeses.

A beautiful beginning to an interrogation.

No.

A normal conversation.

That was precisely the problem.

"How long have you been doing it?"

"A little over two years."

"You began after completing your studies?"

"Not exactly. I spent one year at an applied arts school, then left. After that, I worked other jobs while gradually taking commissions."

I didn't like the sentence.

It was true.

It still felt like walking over loose floorboards.

"Why did you leave?"

A simple question.

Not unkind.

Maybe that was what made it difficult.

"It wasn't really for me. I felt as though I spent more time learning how to present my work than actually making it. And financially, it was difficult."

Her father nodded.

"And is it stable now?"

There.

The word arrived.

Stable.

I could almost see it settle between the tea and the cushions.

Liora opened her mouth.

"He genuinely works, Dad. He has commissions, clients, an exhibition coming up. It isn't as though he draws three things in a corner while waiting for inspiration to fall through the ceiling."

I knew she was trying to help.

And something inside me was touched so quickly that I didn't have time to reject it.

She defended me with simple certainty.

As though my work did not need to apologize for existing.

But hearing "he genuinely works" inside her family's living room made me want to disappear into the upholstery of the chair.

Because if she needed to say it, perhaps it wasn't obvious.

Or not obvious enough.

"I didn't say otherwise," her father replied.

"You were going to."

"I'm asking whether he can support himself."

"That isn't the same thing."

"It is very close."

"Not when you say it like that."

"Liora," her mother said.

One word.

Not harsh.

She fell silent.

Quickly.

I noticed.

Like at the stadium.

Not the same, obviously.

But there were rhythms in this family that she knew very well.

"It isn't always stable," I said.

Liora turned toward me.

I didn't look at her.

"Some months are better than others. Sometimes all the commissions arrive at once, and sometimes they don't. I have a few regular clients. I also make artwork for small publishers and posters."

"Are you officially registered?"

"Yes. As a sole trader."

"You keep proper accounts?"

"Yes."

He nodded.

I couldn't tell whether he approved or had added the information to a column.

"And the exhibition, is that paid?"

"No. The pieces can be sold, but there's no guarantee."

"You're paying for the prints?"

"Partly."

"So you are investing without any guaranteed return."

"Dad," Liora said.

More quietly this time.

Tired.

Her father looked at her.

"These are normal questions."

"I know. But they all land on the same side."

The silence became more delicate.

Her mother lifted her cup again.

"Your father always counts the steps before climbing a staircase."

I looked toward her.

She was smiling slightly.

"It isn't because he thinks it will collapse. He wants to know where he is placing his feet."

Her father raised one eyebrow.

"I do not count stairs."

"Mentally."

"Not systematically."

"Of course."

Liora smiled.

So did I.

A little.

The air shifted inside the room.

Her mother turned toward me.

"And have you been drawing for long?"

The question didn't carry the same weight.

"Always, I think."

"You think?"

"I don't know when it starts counting."

She nodded.

"Liora told me you draw interiors."

"She talks a lot, apparently."

Liora pointed one finger at me.

"Careful."

Her mother smiled.

"She talks when something interests her."

Fine.

I drank tea.

Too hot.

I needed to stop using beverages as a tactic.

"Rooms, corners, windows. Things like that."

"Things like that," Liora repeated.

I glanced at her.

She looked almost proud to have caught me minimizing it.

"It's more than that," she told her mother. "He draws what remains. Places after people. I'm not sure I'm saying it properly."
I looked down at my cup.
She had taken my words from the balcony.
Brought them here.
Into her living room.
In front of her parents.
It wasn't a betrayal.
But something inside me closed slightly.
The previous evening, those sentences had belonged to the cold air, the railing, that zone that wasn't entirely hers or mine.
Here, they became presentable.
Shareable.
Liora's mother looked at me gently.
"That's a beautiful idea."
"It isn't really an idea," I said too quickly. "I draw first, then try to understand why."
She nodded.
"That is often the order it happens in."
Her father picked up his cup again.
"And does your family live in the area?"
"No."
"Do they support your work?"
A normal question.
Again.
I felt the answer approaching like a fragile section of floor he was inevitably going to step on.
"They aren't against it."
A magnificent sentence.
Very convincing.
Liora looked at me.
So did her mother.
Her father put down his cup.
"That is not always the same thing."
"No."
"They would have preferred a more conventional path?"
I had intended to stop there.
Really.
But the tired atmosphere of the living room, or the questions, or Liora's presence on the couch loosened something.
"They mostly want me to do something. Like everyone, I suppose."
Her father nodded.
"That's normal."
Normal.
The word had a strange effect.
Normal to ask whether it was stable.
Normal to want guarantees.
Normal to prefer a path that could be clearly read.
And I, with my irregular commissions, my sketchbooks, my unpaid exhibition, my repeat-offender cat, and my files saved three times, wasn't entirely sure what category I occupied.
Not shameful.
Only fragile.
Liora leaned forward.

“He isn’t irresponsible. He works constantly. He thinks about everything, too much, even. He takes better care of his animals than many people take care of themselves. And he came to the stadium even though he looked like he was having an existential crisis in the bleachers.”

“Liora,” her father said.

Not harsh.

Serious.

“Aurèl can answer for himself.”

Silence.

He was right.

And the worst part was that I didn’t want him to be right.

Part of me wanted to let her continue.

A shameful part, relieved to be defended with such certainty.

Another part wanted to leave immediately.

I didn’t want to be someone who needed explaining.

Especially not in front of her parents.

Especially not in front of her.

Liora understood one second too late.

Her face closed slightly.

“I know.”

Her mother briefly placed a hand on her knee.

Her father looked at me.

“I wasn’t trying to make you uncomfortable.”

That was probably true.

That was the problem.

“I know.”

“I tend to ask practical questions. It isn’t directed against you.”

“I know.”

This time, the words weren’t completely empty.

I knew that his way of looking at the world passed through fittings, income, social contributions, allergy risks, and cats finding ways around barriers.

I also knew that my own doubts already spoke that language.

He didn’t need to attack.

All he had to do was place the words on the table.

The rest happened by itself.

Liora’s mother continued gently.

“You seem to be holding a great deal together in very little space, Aurèl.”

I looked at her.

“Sorry?”

“Your studio. Your work. Your animals. Your drawings. That’s a lot inside one small place.”

The sentence did not ask for proof.

It observed differently.

“Yes.”

Brilliant.

She smiled.

“That is a kind of stability too.”

Liora’s father turned his head slightly toward her.

Not in disagreement.

More surprised by the shift.

Liora looked at her mother with quiet gratitude.

Her father continued:

“I can come by tomorrow at the end of the day. We’ll install the panel.”

"Yes. Thank you."

"Six o'clock?"

"Fine."

"You'll need to be there."

"I work from home."

"Exactly."

I couldn't tell whether that was a clarification or a joke.

His face didn't help.

Liora smiled.

"That was almost funny, Dad."

"I can be funny."

"That remains under debate."

The tension loosened slightly.

Not completely.

It had left a trace.

I finished my tea, the only clear action available.

Then stood.

"I should let you get on."

Liora stood too.

Too quickly.

"I'll walk you out."

"The door is twenty feet away."

"Critical distance."

Her father folded his notebook.

"Thank you for coming over, Aurèl."

"Thank you for the tea."

Her mother smiled.

"You'll come back when we aren't discussing mesh."

Liora turned toward her.

"Mom."

"What?"

Had she gone red?

Maybe it was the living-room light.

Very bad lighting.

I replied with something like:

"Yes, thank you."

Which meant nothing.

In the entryway, Liora remained beside me while I put my shoes back on.

An unnecessarily vulnerable activity.

There was no perfectly dignified way to put on your shoes beneath the gaze of someone who had defended you too quickly in front of her father.

I straightened.

"Sorry," she said.

Quietly.

She was staring at the door handle.

"For what?"

"I spoke for you."

I didn't answer immediately.

The family hallway continued living behind her.

Her mother was probably putting away the cups.

Her father might already have been flipping through his notebook.

A pipe vibrated somewhere.

"You were trying to help."

“Yes.”

“I know.”

She looked up.

“But?”

There.

She could hear missing sentences now.

A very bad development.

“But I don’t want to look like someone who needs defending.”

She remained open.

Not offended.

Hurt, perhaps.

“That isn’t how I see you.”

“I know.”

“Really.”

“I know, Liora.”

This time, maybe she heard that I knew.

And that it didn’t fix everything.

She nodded.

More slowly than usual.

“Okay.”

Then she added:

“My father does this with everyone. Neighbors, delivery people, my friends, my coaches.

Once, he asked a doctor whether he’d slept properly before examining me.”

“Had he?”

“No.”

“So...”

“Don’t take his side.”

I smiled.

A little.

So did she.

“And I’m still coming to the exhibition.”

“Even after the family presentation of my complete lack of a retirement plan?”

“Especially after that. You need someone in the audience who won’t ask whether the paintings are profitable while standing in front of them.”

“There may be worse people there.”

“Impossible. My father is professional level.”

A laugh escaped through my nose.

She seemed relieved.

So was I.

She opened the door.

The shared hallway appeared.

Almost my territory.

The landing.

My door opposite hers.

A few yards.

A distance I knew.

“See you tomorrow for Operation Anti-Eugène,” she said.

“Don’t call it that in front of him.”

“Does he understand French?”

“Not yet. But he interprets tone.”

“Like you.”

I looked at her.

She smiled.

Not too brightly.
“Have a good evening, Aurèl.”
“You too.”
I crossed the hallway and unlocked my door.
Eugène was waiting behind it.
Of course.
He looked toward Liora’s apartment and attempted to move forward.
I blocked him with my foot.
“No. You are literally the subject of a security plan.”
Liora laughed softly on the other side.
I went in.
The studio welcomed me with its usual quiet, size, and disorder.
The desk.
The lamp.
The sketchbooks.
The cables.
The guitar.
Demitrius’s corner.
The couch too close to everything.
The open kitchen that didn’t have enough space to be called a kitchen without some degree of real-estate optimism.
After Liora’s apartment, its smallness seemed more visible.
As though I had returned to a reduced version of my life with someone else’s gaze still attached to me.
Eugène sniffed my pants.
“Yes, I went to their apartment.”
He looked at me.
“Without you.”
He turned away.
Offended.
Demitrius raised one ear.
“At least you don’t ask questions about my social contributions.”
He chewed.
Quiet support.
I returned to my desk.
The exhibition folder was still open.
The five images lined up.
The artist statement I had begun the previous evening.
“I draw places after people have passed through them.”
I reread the sentence.
Then the questions returned.
How long have you been doing it?
Is it stable?
Is it paid?
Does your family support you?
They weren’t attacks.
Maybe that was what made them difficult to forget.
You could reject an attack.
A normal question entered without breaking down the door.
It sat down.
It quickly found where you had stored the doubts.
I opened my income spreadsheet.
Bad idea.

I knew before doing it.
I did it anyway.
Decent month.
Less decent month.
Good month.
Catastrophic month rescued by a commission that arrived too late.
An acceptable annual total, provided no one examined the details too closely.
Like Liora's five hours of sleep.
I closed the spreadsheet.
Stability.
For me, the word looked like something cobbled together from files, follow-up emails, compromises, invoices paid just in time, and months that were denser than others.
For her father, it appeared to mean something else.
Guarantees.
Counted steps.
A Plexiglas panel properly secured so a cat couldn't find a way around it.
Eugène jumped onto the desk and sat in front of the screen.
A familiar obstacle.
Massive.
Reassuring despite himself.
I placed one hand on his back.
He began purring immediately.
Opportunist.
I looked around the studio.
Small, yes.
Fragile, perhaps.
But real.
The commissions.
The sketchbooks.
The animals.
The guitar.
The drawings.
The rooms that weren't empty.
All of it held together.
Not elegantly.
Not with perfect guarantees.
But it held.
I was annoyed that I had to ask myself the question as though the answer belonged to someone else.
As though stability had changed definition because a square-shouldered, protective man who was probably highly competent with a drill had said the word inside his living room.
I wasn't a file waiting for approval.
I repeated the sentence mentally.
It didn't sound entirely convinced.
Fine.
We would begin there.
On the other side of the wall, I heard Liora speaking with her mother.
Not the words.
Only the voices.
I wondered whether they were talking about me.
An immediately unbearable thought.
I petted Eugène to pretend I had something to do.
He purred more loudly.

“Don’t get used to it.”
He lay down on my sketchbook.
Of course.
Knowing Liora wasn’t only running into her in the hallway, talking on a balcony,
watching her practice, or recognizing her laugh behind a wall.
It was entering the apartment next door.
Seeing her photographs.
Drinking her mother’s tea.
Receiving her father’s questions.
Being seen by the people who had loved her before I was there.
I reopened the artist statement.
The cursor blinked after the final sentence.
I typed:
“What remains inside a room is not always visible at first glance.”
I looked at the sentence.
It was about drawings.
It was also about something else.
A very bad sign.
I saved.
Once.
Twice.
I stopped.
Looked at Eugène.
“Do you think twice is enough?”
He stared at me.
No confidence whatsoever.
I saved a third time.
There was no reason to confuse self-assertion with technical recklessness.
On the other side of the wall, Liora laughed briefly.
Then nothing.
I remained in front of the screen with her father’s questions still arranged badly inside my
head.
They weren’t attacks.
Not even warnings.
They were simply there.

Chapter 12

What remains in the sketchbooks

The next day, the balcony officially became more serious than I was.

At 6:07 p.m., Liora's father arrived with a drill, a Plexiglas panel, a box of screws, two brackets, a level, construction tape, and the particular concentration of a man who had decided a problem would not survive his presence.

He also had a pencil tucked behind one ear.

An entirely consistent detail.

Liora was with him.

Obviously.

"I'm here for moral support and unnecessary commentary," she announced as she stepped onto the landing.

"You can also hold the panel," her father replied.

"So I'm indispensable."

"Temporarily."

"I'll take it."

I opened my door with the impression that I was welcoming a small feline-security company.

Eugène immediately tried to get out.

Because the irony was entirely lost on him.

Or because he understood it far too well.

I pushed him back with my foot.

"No."

He looked at the Plexiglas panel. Then at Liora's father. Then at me.

New obstacle. Distracted humans. Possibilities.

"Not even in your dreams," I said.

Liora smiled. Her father merely nodded, as though the sentence were part of the protocol.

The installation took forty-two minutes.

I knew because I checked the time at the beginning and again at the end.

Forty-two minutes during which I discovered that I knew how to hold a panel, pass someone a screwdriver, search a box for a drill bit, and respond yes to simple instructions without looking completely useless.

Progress.

Liora's father worked well.

Obviously.

Precise, calm, and not talkative except when explaining what he was doing. He checked every measurement twice, adjusted the panel by a few millimeters, stepped back, returned.

"There," he finally said.

Transparent. Solid. Discreet enough not to turn the balcony into a detention cell. High enough to discourage Eugène, or at least force him to submit a more elaborate escape plan.

"He won't be able to cross," Liora said.

Her father looked at the cat behind the glass.

"He'll be able to try."

Eugène was sitting in the middle of the living room, perfectly still.

As though taking notes.

"He already understands," I said.

Liora leaned toward the glass.

"Eugène, you have been defeated."

He blinked.

"He refuses to accept it," I added.

"Great minds never surrender immediately."

"He's a cat."

"Exactly."

Her father packed away his tools, refused coffee, accepted a glass of water because his daughter stared at him insistently, then returned home with the quiet satisfaction of a man who had made the world slightly more compliant with how it ought to be.

Liora stayed.

Not officially.

She lingered on the threshold, one hand on the frame, the other in the pocket of her sweatshirt, her eyes already searching for Eugène.

Visible pretext.

Increasingly unconvincing.

"Is he okay?" she asked.

I looked at Eugène, lying in front of the glass door with the solemnity of a deposed monarch.

"He's going through a difficult period."

"Can I offer my condolences?"

"You're allergic."

"To fur. Not compassion."

"I'm not sure science agrees."

She smiled.

But she didn't move immediately.

Her gaze drifted toward my desk.

The screen was on.

So were the five images for the exhibition.

I realized this approximately one second too late.

Too late.

"Are you working on the exhibition?"

"No."

She slowly turned her head toward me.

"Aurèl."

"Yes."

"You just said no while standing in front of a screen displaying five drawings."

"I could be working on something else."

"You could."

Silence.

"But you aren't working on something else."

I sighed.

"No."

This time, she properly entered, closing the door behind her carefully.

Not the way she closed doors at home.

In my apartment, she paid attention.

I didn't want to notice that.

I noticed anyway.

Demitrius lifted his head in his corner.

Liora stopped immediately, six feet away from him.

"Hello, Demitrius."

He didn't move.

"Is he still angry with me?"

"He hasn't issued an official statement yet."

"So he's thinking?"

"Always."

She smiled, then turned toward Eugène.

"And you, political prisoner?"

“Don’t give him vocabulary.”

Eugène moved his tail.

Liora remained standing in the middle of the studio.

Long enough for me to feel the room through her eyes again.

She already knew the place, but this time she was entering after I had seen her family’s apartment. The larger living room. Her father’s questions. Her mother’s remark about holding many things together in very little space.

The studio hadn’t changed.

It was still small.

Except now I had seen how it looked from another world.

I walked toward the computer to close the folder.

Bad reflex.

Liora noticed immediately.

“Are you hiding it?”

“I’m putting it away.”

“You never put things away that quickly.”

“You don’t know that.”

“I’m learning.”

A very bad development.

I kept one hand on the mouse without clicking.

Ridiculous.

Closing the window wouldn’t undo the fact that she had seen the screen.

“It isn’t final,” I said.

“I didn’t say anything.”

“Exactly.”

“You’re defending yourself against my silence?”

I released the mouse.

“Maybe.”

She looked at the images from where she stood. Not close enough to see everything. Close enough to understand that they were a series.

“Can I look?”

A simple question.

Not show me.

Not her usual open-door energy.

I looked at the screen.

Then the sketchbooks.

Then Eugène.

No support.

“It isn’t very interesting.”

She tilted her head.

“Bad sign.”

“What?”

“When you say that.”

“Sometimes it’s true.”

“Not this time.”

“You don’t know.”

She lifted one shoulder.

“I’m not your father.”

The sentence struck a place that was far too precise.

She seemed to understand that afterward.

Her expression changed slightly.

“I mean...”

“I know.”

Silence.
Demitrius chewed something.
His dramatic timing was questionable.
I rolled my chair backward.
“You can look.”
Liora approached.
Not too quickly.
She leaned toward the screen. I moved aside slightly, then farther, then too far.
She glanced at me.
“I’m not going to bite your computer.”
“It isn’t personal.”
“Yes, it is.”
“Yes.”
At least that was clear.
She smiled into her sleeve, then looked at the first image.
The kitchen.
Chair out of place. Late-afternoon light across the tile. A mug beside the sink. No person.
She stayed silent.
I waited for her to speak.
She didn’t.
I realized that was worse.
I almost preferred it when she commented too quickly. At least that gave my panic a direction.
Here, she was looking.
Actually looking.
Her gaze moved across the image, returned to the chair, the mug, the light. She wasn’t searching for a clever sentence. She wasn’t pretending to understand the technique. She didn’t narrow her eyes the way people did when they wanted to look cultured in front of a painting.
She looked the way she had looked at Eugène on the first night.
Attentively.
Objectively dangerous.
“It looks like someone just left the room,” she finally said.
I didn’t answer.
The sentence had reached the center without asking for directions.
“Not long ago,” she added. “Just... now. Two seconds ago.”
I looked at the image too.
The kitchen.
The chair.
The mug.
I had drawn it because it had seemed right. Because the light had landed that way one evening. Because the chair was out of place. Because something remained.
I hadn’t found a better way to explain it in my statement.
She had.
I moved to the next image.
The hallway.
Long. Narrow. Shoes beside the entrance. A jacket hanging crookedly. The light came from an open door outside the frame.
Liora leaned closer.
Her shoulder moved near mine.
Not against it.
Near.
Close enough for my body to receive the information before my brain.

"It isn't empty," she said.
I turned my head toward her.
She was still looking at the screen.
"It's only quiet."
I didn't know what to do with that.
With her shoulder.
With the sentence.
With the fact that both had arrived at the same time.
"That's the hallway from my old apartment," I said.
"The one before this place?"
"Yes."
"Did you like it?"
I looked at the image.
"Not really."
"But you kept it."
"In a sketchbook."
"That counts."
Yes.
Unfortunately.
I moved on.
A partly open window. A balcony. Not mine. A window from somewhere else, blended with several others. Thin curtains. A potted plant. A patch of light on the wall.
Liora almost smiled.
"Windows appear a lot."
"Yes."
"Why?"
I shrugged.
She looked at me.
I sighed.
"Because they let you look outside without leaving."
I regretted it.
But not completely.
Normally, Liora might have made a joke about neighbors, spies, or my emergency-exit face.
Instead, she gave a quiet:
"Oh."
Not empty.
Not heavy.
Just enough not to crush the sentence.
I scrolled faster.
"Wait," she said.
"What?"
"That one."
I stopped.
A table after a meal. Two plates. A crumpled napkin. A half-full glass. A knife lying at an angle.
The image wasn't part of the final selection. I had kept it in the folder by mistake.
Or through hesitation.
There was something less polished about it.
Less composed.
Closer.
"You didn't want to show that one," Liora said.
"It isn't the strongest."

"I don't know what that means."
"Visually."
"I still don't know."
I smiled despite myself.
"It's less constructed."
"Maybe that's why."
"Why what?"
"Why it works."
I looked at the image.
I wouldn't have used that word.
It works.
Not successful.
Not strong.
Not interesting.
It works.
Like a door opening.
Like a silence holding.
"You should keep it," she said.
"You're not an exhibition curator."
"Thankfully. I'd have a badge and too many opinions."
"You already have too many opinions."
"But no badge."
I laughed softly.
The studio relaxed slightly.
Or I did.
Difficult to establish the difference.
Liora moved away from the screen and looked at the sketchbooks stacked beside my tablet.
"Is that where you prepare everything?"
"Among other places."
"Among other places?"
"They're sketchbooks."
"Yes, thank you. I had identified that."
I placed my hand on the top one.
Reflex.
She stopped.
Her gaze moved from my hand to my face.
"Can I?"
A question again.
Not taking.
Not intruding.
She was being careful.
That was worse.
It was difficult to push her away when she was careful.
"Not the one on top."
"Okay."
She withdrew her hand before she had even placed it anywhere.
I picked up the top sketchbook and moved it onto a pile of papers.
Bad idea.
Now it looked important.
Liora looked at it.
So did I.
Fine.

Wonderful.

I picked up the second sketchbook and handed it to her.

"This one."

She accepted it almost cautiously. The paper was less fragile than my tolerance for being observed.

She sat on the edge of the couch, ready to leave if necessary.

I remained standing.

Mistake.

It looked as though I were supervising a medical consultation.

I sat in the chair near the desk.

Too far away.

Then stood again to pick up my empty mug.

Again.

She turned a page.

"You can breathe," she said.

"I am breathing."

"Technically."

I put the mug in the sink, then returned.

She was looking through the pages slowly.

Corners of rooms. A door handle. The bottom of a window. Plants. The kitchenette in my studio several times. The lamp beside the bookcase. The couch without Eugène, then with Eugène. Demitrius reduced to two ears behind the line of a piece of furniture.

"There he is," she said.

She pointed at Demitrius.

"Yes."

"He looks like he's spying on you."

"That's probably what he's doing."

"He has a complex inner life."

"You are forbidden from using my own sentences against me."

"Too late."

She continued.

Eventually, I sat on the couch, not too close.

The sketchbook between us.

A safe distance.

An absurd distance, considering she was literally holding pieces of my mind on her lap.

She turned one page.

Then another.

Sometimes her fingers followed a line without quite touching it.

I noticed her hands.

The small marks across her knuckles. One slightly broken nail. The unexpected delicacy with which she turned the pages. Her calm breathing. A strand of hair beside her cheek.

I should have been looking at the sketchbook.

I was looking at the sketchbook.

Partly.

"There," she said.

I returned to the page.

A window.

Mine.

At night.

The desk lamp reflected in the glass and, in the background, the blurred shape of the glass door leading onto the balcony.

"This is here."

"Yes."

"After the first time I came over?"
I froze.
She looked up.
"Am I wrong?"
"No."
She looked at the page again.
There was no one in it.
Only the couch, the light, one corner of the coffee table, a sheet of paper out of place.
But she had recognized it.
Or guessed.
"How did you know?"
She lifted one shoulder.
"I don't know. There's something."
An unacceptable answer.
Extremely precise.
She turned another page.
Then stopped.
I understood half a second too late.
The figure.
Not a portrait.
Not Liora.
Not really.
A body on a bend. One shoulder held back. A leg driving forward. Tied hair following the movement.
The stadium page.
I reached out to take the sketchbook back.
Too quickly.
Far too quickly.
Liora lifted it slightly out of reach.
Not high.
Just enough.
Her gaze moved from the page to me.
"Oh."
"It's nothing."
"Excellent answer."
"It's a sketch."
"Yes."
"An observational sketch."
"Of course."
"There were many people running."
"And you happened to draw that one."
"A silhouette."
"A silhouette with my hair."
"Many people have hair."
She looked at me.
I mentally watched myself abandon all credibility.
"And my hair tie," she said.
"Hair ties are common."
"And my bend."
"You don't own the bend."
"Almost."
I closed my eyes.
Mistake.

When I opened them, she was smiling.
Not triumphantly.
Not mockingly.
A smaller smile.
Warmer.
The kind that said she had understood something and wasn't going to force me to admit it.
Which made me want to admit everything and move away in the same second.
"Can I look?" she asked.
"You're already looking."
"Really look."
I lowered my hand.
She returned her gaze to the page.
The silence changed.
She sat beside me with the sketchbook open on her lap. Her arm almost brushed mine whenever she tilted the page toward the light.
I could feel the warmth of her presence.
A physical fact that my body took far too seriously.
She stayed on the sketch for a long time.
Too long.
"You drew me as though I were about to leave," she said.
I hadn't expected that.
"What?"
She indicated the line of the shoulder.
"There. It looks like everything is moving forward. Even the part that's left behind."
I looked.
I hadn't thought about that.
I hadn't thought about much of anything while drawing.
That was exactly the problem.
"It was during the practice," I said.
"I know."
"I didn't do it deliberately."
"I know that too."
Silence.
She turned the page.
I breathed.
Then she turned back to the previous one.
Betrayal.
"Did you draw more of them?"
"No."
She looked at me.
"Aurèl."
"Not many."
"So yes."
I stood.
"I'm going to make tea."
"You're fleeing toward the kettle."
"It's a proven strategy."
"I respect it."
She let me leave.
I put water on to boil. Too early for tea, too late to pretend the action didn't have a defensive purpose.
Behind me, I heard a page turn.

Then another.
"Not the one on top," I reminded her.
"I haven't touched it."
"I'm checking."
"Your lack of trust wounds me."
"Your curiosity puts me in danger."
"That's honest."
I smiled despite myself as I took out two mugs.
Two.
I stopped.
I thought Liora did too.
Or perhaps that was only in my head.
I took the second one anyway.
Eugène chose that moment to jump onto the coffee table, drawn by the particular energy of scenes he could disrupt.
"No," we both said at once.
He stopped.
We looked at each other.
Liora burst out laughing.
I almost did too.
Offended by this coalition, Eugène climbed down from the coffee table and settled in front of Demetrius, who backed away three inches with injured slowness.
"He's jealous," Liora said.
"Of a sketchbook?"
"Of the attention."
"He can't stand flat objects."
"He sleeps on your sketchbooks."
"Exactly. He neutralizes them."
I returned with the mugs.
Liora placed the sketchbook open on the table, but kept her hand near the stadium page.
Not on it.
Near it.
As though hesitating to leave.
I placed her mug in front of her.
"Thanks."
"It's hot."
"I'm an adult."
She picked it up.
Immediately put it down again.
"Very hot."
"I warned you."
"That was information, not sufficient protection."
"I'll improve the labeling."
She smiled.
Then looked back at the screen.
"Which ones are you showing?"
"I don't know."
"These?"
"Maybe."
"The table, yes."
"You haven't let that go."
"No."
"Why?"

She thought.
I liked it when she thought before answering.
I shouldn't have liked it so much.
"Because you can feel the people without seeing them," she said. "But not sadly. It's more like... they could come back."
I kept my eyes on my mug.
Steam rose from the tea.
Very useful for blurring someone's gaze.
"Maybe that's too simple," she added.
"No."
She turned toward me.
"No?"
"It's right."
I didn't say more.
She seemed to receive it carefully.
As though it were fragile.
I didn't like that certain sentences between us were beginning to carry that sort of weight.
Or maybe I did.
That was the problem.
She picked up the sketchbook again.
Farther on, there were other drawings. The desk lamp. The edge of the balcony after rain. Eugène from behind. Demetrius inside a cardboard box.
Hands.
I froze when I saw them.
Not hers.
Well.
Not explicitly.
Hands resting on a railing. Two sides of a divider. A few quick lines drawn after the night on the balcony.
I had barely looked at them since.
Liora stopped.
Obviously.
"Oh," she said again.
"You say oh a lot."
"A lot is happening."
"No."
"Yes."
"They're only hands."
"Exactly."
She wasn't smiling as much anymore.
The scene seemed to tighten around the sketchbook.
I could see her profile, the light across her cheek, her hand beside mine on the coffee table.
Our fingers weren't that close.
Close enough that I knew the exact distance between them.
Two inches.
Maybe two and a half.
Ridiculous.
She finally lowered the page.
"You draw quickly sometimes."
"Yes."
"Like you're trying to catch something before it leaves."
"You're unbearable tonight."

"Why?"

"You say things that are too accurate without using any specialized vocabulary."

"Sorry. I can add 'the dynamics of invisible presence' if you'd like."

"Absolutely not."

She smiled.

The silence that followed was lighter.

But not entirely.

The sketchbook remained there.

Open.

Between us.

Not like a barrier.

More like a shared place where neither of us wanted to put a foot down too heavily.

"Your father asked whether the exhibition was paid," I said.

I didn't know why I said it.

Maybe because the sentence had been waiting since the previous day. Maybe because Liora was looking at my work while her father had looked at its stability.

Liora lowered her eyes.

"I know."

"He wasn't wrong."

"I know that too."

She didn't try to argue.

"It annoyed me," she said.

"I noticed."

"Because he did it in front of you."

"He was asking normal questions."

"Maybe. But I don't like it when people reduce something to what it earns."

"He wasn't necessarily reducing it."

"No. But sometimes that's where he starts."

I looked at the images on the screen.

"Many people start there."

"Do you?"

"When I panic, yes."

She turned toward me.

I kept my eyes on the screen.

"Since yesterday, I've been looking at my drawings as though they need to justify their place on a spreadsheet."

Silence.

Liora didn't answer too quickly.

Good.

Or dangerous.

"And are they failing?" she asked.

"On a spreadsheet, probably."

"Wrong software."

I smiled.

She placed her mug on the table.

"You don't only make useful things, Aurèl."

"That isn't very reassuring when you put it that way."

"Wait."

She searched.

I watched her search.

Not for a phrase.

Not for a compliment.

For something true.

"I'm not saying money doesn't matter. I count things too. Hours, shifts, practices, classes, the things I can accept, the ones I have to turn down, the months when I can replace my shoes and the ones when I keep wearing them."

I didn't answer.

She hadn't complained.

Not for one second.

She had only opened a small window.

"But when I look at your drawings," she continued, "I don't think, Does this make money? I think you see things I move through too quickly."

The studio became very quiet.

Not actual silence.

Eugène was breathing.

Demitrius was chewing.

The kettle was cooling in the kitchen.

But something around the coffee table stopped.

I didn't know where to look.

Not at her.

Especially not at her.

I looked at the sketchbook.

The hands on the railing.

"I don't know how to answer that," I said.

"You don't have to."

"Do you ever leave a sentence unfilled?"

"Yes."

"Since when?"

"Since I became very mature."

"So today."

"Approximately."

The laughter returned.

Quiet.

Necessary.

Liora turned a few more pages, then stopped on a drawing of my own studio. No person, only the couch, the displaced blanket, the glass door, and Eugène curled on the cushion.

"That one."

"What?"

"It should be in the exhibition."

"It's too personal."

"You're exhibiting your drawings."

"Yes, thank you."

"So being personal isn't evidence against it."

"You've decided that?"

"Yes."

"By what authority?"

"Regular allergic visitor."

"Questionable status."

"Status earned in the field."

She was wrong.

Or right.

Or an irritating combination of both.

I looked at the image.

My studio.

Small.

Too full.

But not closed.
On the page, it didn't look insufficient.
It looked inhabited.
I couldn't tell whether the drawing did that, or the way Liora looked at it.
"Maybe," I said.
She raised her eyes.
"Is that a yes?"
"It's a genuine maybe."
"Enormous progress."
She closed the sketchbook gently, but not completely. She left one finger between the pages.
"Can I see the one on top now?"
I closed my eyes.
"No."
"Okay."
She said it without insisting.
Which was obviously a far more powerful technique than insisting.
I opened my eyes.
She was looking at me with imperfect innocence.
"You're extremely manipulative."
"I'm respecting your no."
"Too well."
"Is that a criticism?"
"Yes."
She smiled, then removed her finger from the sketchbook and placed it on the table.
A clear gesture.
She wasn't going to take more than I gave her.
I hated how much that made me want to give her more.
I picked up the top sketchbook.
Kept it in my hands.
Liora didn't move.
Didn't speak.
I opened it in the middle.
Not at the beginning.
Especially not at the end.
Several pages of research for the exhibition. Notes. Crossed-out sentences. Composition experiments. Sketches of the balcony.
Far too many sketches of the balcony.
I saw her notice them.
She didn't say anything.
Again.
I turned the pages faster.
Then stopped.
"This one," I said. "I was thinking about redoing it on a larger scale."
An almost empty room. A door open onto a balcony. A mug placed beside the window.
No figure. But two sources of light. One from the studio. Another, fainter one from outside, as though the neighboring apartment existed without being shown.
Liora leaned closer.
Too close.
Her shoulder almost touched mine.
Almost.
The word suddenly became far too important.
I could smell her shampoo, a trace of detergent, the cold from outside.

"There's someone there," she said.

"No."

"Yes."

"There's nobody in the picture."

"I know."

She raised her eyes toward me.

We were too close for the kind of conversation we were having.

Or too close for me.

She didn't move back immediately.

Neither did I.

Very poor coordination.

"You can feel someone," she said.

Her voice was low.

Not deliberately.

Proximity reduced the volume.

I looked at the page.

Then her face.

Mistake.

Her eyes were on me now.

Not for long.

Just long enough.

My body reacted before thought did.

A slowing.

An attention.

A dangerous focus on her mouth, then the distance between us.

I straightened slightly.

Not abruptly.

Enough.

"Maybe it's too obvious," I said.

Normal voice.

Almost.

Liora lowered her gaze to the sketchbook. A very slight smile passed across her face.

Not mocking.

She had understood that I had moved away.

And she allowed me that movement.

"Maybe," she answered.

Then added:

"Or maybe it's good that it can be seen."

I closed the sketchbook.

Gently.

"I'll think about it."

"Another improvement."

"Don't push it."

She laughed.

Eugène, judging that the tension had exceeded an unacceptable threshold without his involvement, suddenly jumped onto the couch between us.

Not beside us.

Between us.

Heavily.

With remarkable precision.

Liora startled, then reflexively brought one hand to her nose.

"Eugène."

"There. You have his critical opinion."

"He wants to be exhibited."

"He wants to be fed."

"Artists often do too."

"He isn't an artist."

Eugène lay down on the sketchbook.

Directly.

"He's protesting your contempt."

"He's crushing my work."

"A strong artistic statement."

I ran a hand over my face.

"You're all against me."

"Demitrius is neutral."

We both turned toward Demitrius.

He was half-hidden behind his cardboard tunnel, perfectly still, his ears slightly raised.

"He's judging," I said.

"Yes, fine. No one is neutral."

Liora moved farther back on the couch, probably to limit her contact with Eugène. Her nose was already beginning to turn slightly red.

I saw it.

"You should move away."

"From him or from your work?"

"Both, maybe."

She smiled.

But she stood.

"I should go home before my immune system publishes an open letter."

"Good idea."

She picked up her mug, then put it down again.

"Can I?"

"What?"

"Come back to see the final choices after you've made them."

The answer was yes.

Very clearly.

Too clearly.

So I said:

"Sure."

She narrowed her eyes.

"Translation?"

"Yes."

"Thank you."

She picked up her sweatshirt from beside the door.

I hadn't even seen her take it off.

The studio had already begun accepting her belongings without consulting me.

A bad precedent.

She turned toward me.

"And I want to come to the exhibition."

"You already said that."

"I'm confirming."

"It isn't a big deal."

She remained beside the door with one hand on the handle.

The studio behind me.

The screen displaying the images.

The sketchbooks on the table.

Eugène lying on one of them like an official seal.

Demetrius in his corner.
Me, standing in the middle of all of it with an empty mug and limited escape options.
Liora looked at me.
Not intensely.
Not as though this were a scene where something had to be said more loudly.
Simply.
“For you, it is.”
She added nothing.
No explanation.
No smile to make it lighter.
No joke to give me an immediate exit.
Only the sentence.
Exactly where it needed to be.
I didn’t know what to do with it.
Maybe she didn’t either.
Or maybe she knew exactly what she was doing and had decided to leave me alone with
it.
“Have a good evening, Aurèl.”
“You too.”
She left.
Closed the door softly.
The studio became quiet again.
Well.
Not exactly.
Her sentence was still inside the room.
“For you, it is.”
It was the perfect size to resist rejection.
Too simple to argue with.
Too accurate to put away.
Eugène lifted his head from the sketchbook.
“Don’t start.”
He blinked.
I approached the coffee table and gently pulled the sketchbook from beneath him.
He resisted through moral weight.
“You don’t have the rights.”
He finally stood, offended, and spread himself across the cushion instead.
I picked up the sketchbook again.
The balcony page.
The mug.
The light.
The apartment next door existing without being shown.
I looked at it for a long time.
Then I opened the exhibition folder on the computer.
I added the drawing of the studio to the selection.
Then the table.
Then removed a cleaner hallway.
More controlled.
Easier to defend.
I stood in front of the new selection.
The images were less perfect.
Less protected.
Closer.
I heard footsteps on the other side of the wall.

Liora at home.
Her voice for a moment.
Then a short laugh.
I couldn't make out the words.
I didn't need to.
I looked at the drawings.
The rooms didn't seem more stable.
More profitable.
More capable of answering her father's questions.
But they held.
And for the first time since the previous day, I looked at them without feeling as though they needed to apologize.
I saved.
Once.
Twice.
My hand hovered before the third.
I smiled despite myself.
Then saved anyway.
There was no need to turn artistic vulnerability into technical negligence.
The sketchbooks were still open on the table.
I didn't put them away immediately.
The studio kept the traces.
A half-full mug of tea.
A turned page.
A displaced cushion.
A few strands of Eugène's fur on the paper.
And something of Liora in the way I now looked at my own rooms.
I wasn't reassured.
Not rescued.
Not suddenly certain.
But I had been seen.

Chapter 13

Second lap

The second time I went to the stadium, I knew where to sit.

Which, objectively, constituted major progress.

Not a transformation.

I had not become a stadium person. I owned neither a performance water bottle, nor a windbreaker, nor reliable sports vocabulary.

But I knew the entrance by the trees, the unreasonable temperature of the second row, and the place where Liora's group left their bags.

I also knew that taking out my sketchbook quickly made me look less suspicious than a motionless man who had come to silently watch people run.

Important distinction.

On Tuesday evening, I arrived eight minutes early.

Eight.

Not twenty-five.

Spectacular progress.

I had even written "Stadium" in my phone.

Not "Go Out."

Not "vague outdoor activity."

Stadium.

The word seemed almost aggressively clear.

The air had the same cold, synthetic smell as the first time. Damp track, grass, plastic jackets, metal railings. Rain was waiting somewhere above the floodlights.

A group of children was finishing practice. Parents waited beside the gates. A group of adults jogged with a discipline I found deeply incomprehensible.

The first time, everything had seemed to belong to the same baffling whole: the cones, the lines, the people running without fleeing from anything.

This time, I could distinguish stages.

One practice ending.

Another beginning.

Bodies that were already tired and others that weren't yet.

It wasn't exactly competence.

Let's call it a limited reduction in ignorance.

Farther away, Liora's coach was speaking with two boys, a stopwatch hanging around his neck.

He lifted his chin in my direction.

A brief gesture.

Terrifying in its simplicity.

I responded with a movement that was probably a greeting.

Or a neck mobility check.

I climbed the bleachers and sat in my unofficial seat.

Second row.

By the bend.

The previous time, Liora had said the bend was better for watching disasters.

I hadn't asked her to elaborate.

I opened my sketchbook.

Blank page.

I drew the track, then the railings.

I had not come to draw today.

Not officially.

The sketchbook remained a social safety measure. An object that said: I am occupied, not strange.

It lied acceptably.

"You picked the right place."

I looked up.

Liora stood at the bottom of the bleachers, bag over one shoulder, gray sweatshirt, black leggings, hair tied high. Her cheeks were already red.

She was smiling.

To someone who didn't know her, she looked normal.

I saw her fingers gripping the strap too tightly, her gaze returning to the coach, her weight shifting from one foot to the other.

She wasn't holding still very convincingly.

"I learned," I said.

"I'm proud."

"Concerning, coming from someone who calls this bend 'the site of disasters.'"

"It's affectionate."

She climbed one step and placed her bag beside the railing.

"You look less like you're having a crisis."

"I prepared a plan."

"Oh, yeah?"

"Arrive. Sit down. Avoid any movement suggesting participation."

"Very solid."

She smiled.

Then looked toward the coach again.

"You're tense."

"No."

Immediate answer.

Bad sign.

"Focused," she corrected.

"Is that different?"

"Focus has better publicity."

I smiled.

So did she.

"There's a test today," she added.

"What kind?"

"An eight."

She said it like that.

An eight.

Not eight hundred meters.

As though the distance had become an annoying person she had known for too long.

"A full one?"

"Yes. To see where I am before regionals."

The word entered the conversation with more weight than expected.

"Is that soon?"

"Two and a half weeks."

"Oh."

"Don't make that face. It isn't surgery."

"I didn't make a face."

"You made a 'two and a half weeks is serious information' face."

"It is precise information."

She laughed slightly.

Her fingers remained around the strap.

The coach called:

"Liora, are you coming?"

"Coming!"

She turned toward me.

"If I die, tell Eugène he was right not to trust the Plexiglas."

"You aren't going to die."

"Athletically."

"Not even athletically."

She stepped away, then came back half a step.

The famous half step.

I was beginning to recognize it.

"Watch the second lap."

"Okay."

"Not the first."

"Can I watch both?"

"Yes, but the first one lies."

Then she left before I could ask what that meant.

Fine.

New athletic information.

I mentally filed it under: things Liora says that sound absurd and then probably become important.

The group was smaller than the first time.

Two girls, three boys, the coach.

Fewer jokes.

The athletes spoke quietly as they changed shoes. One of the boys checked his laces three times. A girl bounced in place with her headphones on and her eyes closed, as though trying to leave the stadium before she even ran.

Even the jokes seemed to serve a purpose. They appeared, lowered the pressure by one degree, then disappeared.

Liora made two.

Neither sounded entirely like her.

She laughed one second too late.

I noticed.

A very bad habit in development.

The bags were in the same place, the jackets too, but everything felt tighter.

Like the moments before something real.

The coach gathered everyone together.

Fragments crossed the air.

"Target pace."

"No stupid starts."

"The second lap is where it happens."

Then:

"You don't improvise a strategy because your own time has offended you."

If he ever grew tired of coaching, he could become a writer of athletic threats.

Liora was trying to listen without already running inside her head.

I could see it in her shoulders, her chin, the foot tapping the ground before she stopped it.

She wasn't distracted.

She was too full.

They began warming up.

I now recognized the slow jog, the drills, the progressive strides. The movements were no longer entirely incomprehensible.

When the coach pointed to his left shoulder, Liora lowered her arm slightly on the next pass.

I felt a strange satisfaction.

Highly provisional.

No getting carried away.

She passed close to me during one of the strides without looking over.
Not because she was ignoring me.
Because she was already inside it.
Her stadium face.
Concentration.
Irritation available.
Energy contained.
The coach called everyone back to the line.
“We’re doing a controlled eight. Not a record. You should finish with information, not an ambulance.”
Weak laughter.
“I want the four-hundred split. Stick to the plan. Go out too fast and you’ll pay at six hundred. Fall asleep and you won’t have time to come back. The final two hundred should not have to repair the first six hundred.”
He drew the race in the air with one hand.
“You settle in. You hold. You build. Only then do you use what’s left.”
Liora looked at the track as though “what’s left” were a personal insult.
He turned toward her.
“You know your trap.”
She adopted a perfectly illegal expression of innocence.
“No?”
“Yes. Say it.”
She rolled her eyes.
“I start too hard.”
“Because?”
“Because I enjoy suffering.”
“Liora.”
She crossed her arms.
“Because I hate waiting.”
The coach nodded.
“There. Today, you wait.”
Even from the bleachers, I saw how much she disliked that sentence.
She smiled.
Through clenched teeth.
Two athletes ran before her.
The coach noted their times, then called Liora and another girl.
Liora removed her sweatshirt.
Dark T-shirt.
Bare arms despite the cold.
She jumped twice in place, shook out her hands, looked at the bend, then the line.
The joke had disappeared from her face.
I straightened without meaning to.
My sketchbook remained open to the line I had drawn at the beginning.
This time, I couldn’t draw.
The coach raised his hand.
Then the whistle sounded.
Liora started.
Too fast.
I saw it immediately.
Or thought I did.
The coach shouted almost at once:
“Liora, no. Settle.”
She adjusted.

The start had lasted only a few dozen meters, but her body had already thrown itself forward as though the race needed to be settled before the first bend.

The first lap lies.

I understood better now.

It said: everything is fine, you have energy, you can take the position now.

The second lap, presumably, presented the bill.

Liora ran in second place, directly behind the other girl.

Not trapped.

Positioned.

The coach walked along the inside of the track, stopwatch raised.

“There. Hold.”

“Don’t move up.”

“Breathe.”

Everything about her wanted to do the opposite.

Her head slightly forward. Her arms ready to take up more space. Her stride opening, then returning.

A very tense conversation between her body and an instruction.

I didn’t know enough about the 800 meters to judge a time.

I knew enough about Liora to recognize the frustration of waiting.

At the four-hundred mark, the coach shouted numbers I didn’t understand, followed by:

“Good. Now you build.”

Build.

A strange word for running.

And yet it seemed right.

Liora passed in front of the bleachers.

Her breathing was already there.

Not broken.

Present.

On the following bend, the other girl accelerated slightly.

Liora reacted.

Her torso moved.

Her foot searched.

The coach shouted:

“Not yet!”

She remained behind.

I didn’t know how.

I only saw the decision pass through her.

The fury of not immediately transforming energy into speed.

That waiting seemed more violent than the acceleration.

At five hundred meters, her face changed.

The effort became less polished.

More real.

The girl in front held a lead of a meter, maybe two.

“Another fifty!” the coach shouted.

Liora clenched her teeth.

My fingers tightened around the sketchbook.

Ridiculous.

Completely useless.

Then:

“Now!”

She attacked.

Not like an explosion.

Like someone finally releasing a door they had held shut for too long.

She moved to the outside.
Her left arm rose too high.
She corrected it almost immediately.
A tiny detail.
I saw it anyway.
She came level.
Then moved ahead.
The final straight was less clean.
Her legs continued, but everything else negotiated each meter. Her shoulders rose. She forced them down. Fatigue had found somewhere to enter.
She crossed the line, slowed, and placed her hands on her hips.
The coach announced a time.
Her expression was enough.
It wasn't what she wanted.
Not catastrophic.
Not good either.
Or perhaps good, but not in a way that allowed her to be satisfied.
The coach approached.
I only heard fragments.
"Better positioning."
"You waited."
"That matters."
"The time will come when you trust the plan."
Liora answered something while pointing at the finish line.
The coach shook his head.
"You're looking at the result as though it erases the way you ran. It doesn't."
She ran both hands over her face.
He pointed toward the first bend.
"There, you still tried to settle the race in thirty meters. After that, you worked. That's what we keep."
Liora shook her head.
Frustration.
Not refusal.
Then her hand briefly moved behind her right calf.
A quick rub.
She removed it immediately.
I saw.
I didn't like it.
The coach didn't seem to notice.
Or perhaps, in that world, bodies constantly signaled things and not all of them became emergencies.
I wasn't qualified.
That didn't stop me from worrying.
Competence and worry rarely required one another.
The boys ran afterward.
I watched them less.
My attention kept returning to Liora.
She walked along the railing, drank, rotated her ankle, listened to another girl talking.
She smiled at the right moments.
But the smile didn't hold.
The group did a few more short accelerations.
Liora ran them cleanly.
Too cleanly, perhaps.

As though she wanted to prove the session had left no mark on her.
 On the final pass, she pushed slightly too hard.
 “No need to add anything!” the coach shouted.
 She raised one hand without turning around.
 A gesture that said: yes, yes.
 And also: too late.
 When the session ended, she remained with the coach.
 He spoke calmly.
 She answered quickly.
 He stood still.
 She moved too much.
 Then she went quiet.
 Finally.
 I couldn’t understand the words.
 I understood the shape.
 Liora wanted more.
 The coach wanted her to hold better.
 Those two things weren’t opposites.
 Except inside her, apparently.
 She eventually nodded.
 Not satisfied.
 But she took the instruction with her.
 Then she climbed toward me.
 More slowly than the first time.
 I closed my sketchbook by reflex.
 She reached me, still breathing hard, face red, strands of hair stuck to her temples.
 Alive and furious.
 A now-familiar combination.
 “So?”
 The same question as the first time.
 Not the same weight.
 I searched for a sentence that wasn’t empty.
 She sat beside me, leaving a little space. She stretched out her legs with the caution of
 someone negotiating with her muscles.
 “You can say it was terrible.”
 “I don’t know how to evaluate that.”
 “Diplomatic answer.”
 “True answer.”
 She stared at the track.
 “The time was average.”
 “Okay.”
 “Not horrible. Average.”
 “Okay.”
 “You don’t have to say okay after every sentence.”
 “I lack the necessary tools.”
 A very brief laugh escaped her.
 Then silence returned.
 I looked toward the opposite bend.
 “You waited.”
 She turned her head.
 “What?”
 “On the second lap. When she accelerated. You wanted to follow.”
 “Yes.”

"You didn't do it immediately. It was obvious that every part of your body found that unbearable."

"Thank you for that deeply flattering description."

"I didn't say you looked reasonable."

"Oh. Good."

"You mostly looked like you were negotiating with a version of yourself that wanted to disobey."

She turned toward me.

"You can really see that from the bleachers?"

"I have good eyesight."

"That's concerning."

"You've said that before."

She looked down at her shoes.

"It was unbearable."

"But you did it."

"And ran an average time."

"Maybe that wasn't the only result."

She narrowed her eyes.

"You sound like my coach."

"I'm sorry."

"This is serious."

"I can sit farther away."

One corner of her smile returned.

"Continue."

I sighed.

"The first time, I understood that running could mean holding yourself back. Today, I saw what it costs you."

The smile disappeared.

Not badly.

It was replaced by a quieter attention.

"You looked more tired after waiting than after accelerating."

The stadium continued around us.

A bag zipped shut.

Children shouted near the exit.

The floodlights overtook the sky.

Liora ran one hand over her face.

"You see too many things."

"I can look less carefully."

"No."

One word.

Quick.

Then:

"Don't do that."

The sentence entered anyway.

She rested her elbows on her knees.

"I feel like I'm losing time if I don't attack."

"Even when the plan says to wait?"

"Especially when it says to wait."

"Why?"

She looked at the track.

"Because waiting feels a lot like letting something pass."

She rotated her water bottle between her hands.

"When someone accelerates ahead of me, even when I know it isn't the right moment, it feels like they're taking something I won't get back. A position. A second. I don't know. So I go."

"Even when it costs you later."

"Yes."

"Do you know that while it's happening?"

"Perfectly."

"And it changes nothing?"

She gave a humorless smile.

"Knowing isn't always an instruction."

I didn't answer.

A reasonable person would have thought only about the 800 meters, the coach, and the time.

I also thought about her overfilled days and the way she moved toward things before they had the chance to leave.

I said nothing.

Some parallels became unbearable the moment you explained them.

"Your coach said you waited."

"He also said I still start too hard and force things when I'm frustrated."

"I heard fragments."

"You always choose the irritating fragments."

"They carry better."

She laughed.

Then grimaced slightly.

Her hand moved toward her calf.

Again.

"You okay?"

She stopped.

"Yes."

I looked at her.

"It's only tight," she added. "The session was hard."

"Did you tell your coach?"

"No need."

I didn't answer.

She sighed.

"Aurèl."

"I didn't say anything."

"Your silence took over."

"It's autonomous."

She smiled and quickly massaged the lower part of her leg.

Not for long.

Not as though it hurt.

Long enough for me to keep the image.

"I'll tell him if it stays."

"Okay."

"You're not going to report me to my father?"

"I was considering it."

"Traitor."

"Balcony safety, calf safety. It's consistent."

Her laugh removed some of the tension from her face.

She straightened.

"Regionals are Saturday, two weeks from now."

I looked ahead.

“Okay.”

“In the afternoon. There’ll be several races, lots of people, differently ugly bleachers.”

She played with the cap of her water bottle.

Open.

Close.

“Could you come?”

I turned toward her.

She was looking at the bottle.

Not at me.

Liora, who normally threw invitations like balls against a wall, had placed this one more quietly.

More slowly.

As though giving it the possibility of not holding.

“Only if you want,” she added. “You don’t have to. It’s long. And not necessarily exciting if you aren’t running. There’ll probably be terrible sandwiches. My parents might be there, so the risk of practical questions will be higher.”

“I’ll come.”

She looked up.

I had answered too quickly.

No delay.

No emergency exit.

Not even a defensible “I’ll see.”

I’ll come.

Two words.

Solid.

Far too exposed on municipal concrete.

Liora looked at me as though waiting for me to correct myself.

I didn’t.

Because I didn’t want to.

Which was worse.

“Oh.”

“I can phrase it more administratively.”

Her smile appeared slowly.

“No. That was good.”

“Concerning.”

“Very.”

She closed her water bottle.

“You know my father might be there.”

“I’ll bring a summary sheet.”

“Income, social contributions, five-year plan?”

“Eugène’s safety plan in the appendix.”

She burst out laughing.

The coach shouted from beside the railing:

“Liora, stretching. Not philosophical discussion.”

“Coming!”

Then, more quietly:

“He thinks anything that doesn’t resemble a workout is philosophical.”

“He isn’t completely wrong.”

She stood carefully.

I noticed the way she placed weight on her right leg.

She noticed me noticing.

“I’m fine.”

“I didn’t say anything.”

"Your face filed a report."
"It works with your father."
"I suspected as much."
She picked up her bag, then stopped in front of me.
That moment again.
The one when she could leave but didn't quite.
"Thank you for coming."
"You gave me the time."
"That isn't a contractual obligation."
"I'm learning."
She smiled, then joined the group.
I stayed a few more minutes during the stretching.
Liora spoke less than usual.
She listened to the coach.
I looked away on principle.
And because worry could quickly become a form of surveillance.
I didn't want to be that.
I still didn't know exactly what I wanted to be.
A much more complicated question.
I left the stadium before she did.
At the gate, I turned around.
She was sitting on the track, one leg extended, the other bent. The coach was speaking to the group. Liora looked up at the same moment.
She waved.
Not broadly.
Not the energetic gesture she used in the hallway or from her balcony.
A wave precise enough to be meant for me.
I answered.
A still-approximate social gesture.
But recognizable.
It remained.
On the tram, the sketchbook rested on my knees.
The blank page still held the line of the track from the beginning.
An incomplete oval.
Two laps.
The first lies.
The second presents the bill.
I thought about Liora waiting on the bend.
About her anger at not immediately turning energy into movement.
And about my own answer.
I'll come.
Without delay.
Without caution.
The previous time, my calendar had accepted something before I did.
This time, my mouth had handled it directly.
Questionable progress.
When I returned, the studio seemed too quiet.
Eugène was waiting on the couch.
Superior judge position.
"I went to the stadium."
He closed his eyes.
"Yes, again."
I took out my phone.

Saturday.
Two weeks later.
I created an event.
“Regional Championships.”
Too official.
“Big Stadium.”
Too vague.
“Championships, 800 m.”
Almost acceptable.
The problem was that it could have been any 800 meters.
It wasn’t.
I replaced it with:
“Liora, 800 m.”
Far too clear.
Far too personal.
I left the cursor after her name.
I could have erased it.
I could have returned to a clean, administrative phrase with no visible emotional implications.
I kept it.
Truth had defeated caution.
I added the time, location, and an alert.
Then a second one.
Then removed one.
Then put it back.
Ridiculous.
I saved.
“Liora, 800 m” appeared inside my week.
A small visible box between my commissions, emails, deliveries, and invoice reminders.
I picked up my sketchbook again.
Added a second line beside the first.
Only the bend.
The place where she had waited.
Then, in very small letters in one corner, I wrote:
Second lap.
I closed the sketchbook.
Not too quickly.
Eugène opened one eye.
Fine.
Almost no one.
The studio returned to its ordinary calm.
And an 800-meter race had found its place inside my week.

Chapter 14

Almost

The problem with things you almost did was that they didn't exist enough to be dealt with rationally.

You couldn't file them away.

You couldn't undo them.

You couldn't say they had happened.

Still less that they hadn't changed anything.

But I didn't know that yet.

That evening, I only thought the week had a strange texture.

Liora's championship had entered my calendar.

My exhibition was progressing, which meant it was becoming more real and therefore more alarming.

The balcony was secure.

Eugène had lost access to his international career.

The rabbit continued to live in a state of calm alert, as though he knew things about all of us but refused to cooperate with the authorities.

And I was trying to work.

Trying.

Important word.

On the screen, the exhibition images had finally been chosen.

Finally.

More or less.

Five files in one folder.

Three I almost stood behind.

Two I looked at with the feeling that I had let someone into my apartment while I was asleep.

The drawing of the studio was there.

The one Liora had said belonged in the exhibition.

I hadn't included it because she had said so.

Obviously.

I had included it because she had been right.

An extremely unpleasant distinction.

I zoomed in on the light beside the couch.

Too yellow.

I cooled it down.

Too cold.

I undid the change.

Then saved.

Once.

Twice.

The third time, Eugène jumped onto the desk.

He placed one paw on the drawing tablet with destructive precision.

A black line cut across the image.

I remained still.

"You just contributed to the exhibition."

He blinked.

The black line ran directly above the couch.

Like a crack.

Like an artistic decision made by eighteen and a half pounds of fur and complete absence of remorse.

"No."

I undid it.
Eugène sat in front of the screen.
“You are not my art director.”
He moved his tail.
“Not even on a volunteer basis.”
He looked toward the glass door.
The Plexiglas panel faintly reflected the lamp.
He had stared at it frequently since its installation, with silent resentment. I knew he hadn’t given up. He was only waiting for the humans to lower their guard.
Which, statistically, would eventually happen.
A sound rose behind the wall.
Not loud.
A door.
One voice.
Then another.
Liora.
I recognized her immediately.
But there was something else in her voice.
Not the end-of-shift exhaustion.
Not the physical exhaustion of the stadium.
Something tighter.
She was speaking quickly.
Too quickly.
Even for her.
I removed my headphones.
There was no music playing through them.
As usual now.
A shameful habit.
Her voice crossed the wall in fragments.
The words were impossible to understand.
Only the rhythm.
A sentence pitched higher.
A deep reply.
Her father.
Then Liora again.
Shorter.
A silence.
I looked at the wall.
There was nothing to see.
That was the principle of a wall.
Eugène turned his head too.
“Don’t pretend this interests you.”
He continued staring.
The conversation on the other side remained low for a few seconds, then moved away.
Footsteps.
A door.
Nothing else.
I left the headphones around my neck without putting them back on.
The file on the screen stared at me.
I closed the program.
Very professional.
I could continue later.

I stood, refilled Lapin's water bowl, picked up a strand of hay beside the bookcase, then stopped in front of the guitar.

It was on its stand.

In its place.

Silent.

Since Liora had told me she could hear me, the guitar wasn't quite the same object. It hadn't become public.

Not really.

But it had gained another opening.

A leak in the wood.

I wasn't playing for her.

I kept clarifying that to myself, which made the sentence less convincing every time.

I picked up the guitar.

The couch was still warm from Eugène, who had decided to return to the desk and supervise a more strategic area. I sat, rested the instrument against me, and played a few notes without choosing them.

Nothing constructed.

Simple chords.

The beginning of a melody.

Then the one that always returned.

The unfinished passage.

The gap in the middle.

I played quietly.

Not to fill the apartment.

Not to cross the wall.

To put something back in order inside my hands.

The beginning passed.

The silence.

The return.

Since the other evening, the gap bothered me less. It no longer looked like an error.

More like a place where I had to accept not forcing anything.

An irritating thought.

I played it again.

The silence held better.

I tried a variation.

Too clean.

I deleted it.

Mentally, at least.

The guitar didn't save mistakes, which made it superior to many professional tools.

I began again.

The melody was almost there.

Not finished.

Not presentable.

Not useful.

But it held.

Someone knocked.

I stopped immediately.

The strings continued vibrating beneath my hand.

Eugène lifted his head.

The rabbit froze.

So did I.

Two knocks.

Less precise than her father's.

Less lively than Liora's usually were.

I placed the guitar on the couch.

Not on its stand.

Mistake.

Then I opened the door.

Liora stood there.

Dark sweatshirt, open jacket, hair half tied back, bag over one shoulder. She looked as though she had left a conversation too quickly and hadn't managed to leave herself quite fast enough.

Her cheeks were slightly red.

Not from the cold.

Not from running.

She smiled as soon as she saw me.

Reflex.

The smile almost worked.

"Hi!"

"Hi."

I looked at her face.

Then her bag.

Then her face again.

"You okay?"

"Yes."

Too quick.

"Okay."

"No."

She closed her eyes for a second, then exhaled.

"I mean, yes. Well. Complicated question. Bad start."

"Do you want to come in?"

The question escaped before I could examine it.

She looked at me.

I looked at her.

The hallway seemed to be listening.

"Two minutes," she said.

"Of course."

She stepped inside.

The door closed softly behind her.

Eugène immediately appeared in the middle of the studio, as though his name had been added to the agenda.

Liora looked down at him.

"Hello, diplomatic prisoner."

"Don't encourage him."

"He looks dignified."

"He's preparing legal action."

She crouched slightly, but not too far.

Her allergy was beginning to learn caution, even if her admiration had made no progress.

Eugène moved forward, then stopped a foot away from her.

They looked at each other.

"I almost miss him," she said.

"He is literally standing in front of you."

"Yes, but he used to have access to a clandestine life."

"He lost an illegal privilege."

"Great figures are often brought down by reform."

I smiled.
So did she.
Then her smile faded more quickly than usual.
She stood and looked around.
Her gaze fell on the guitar lying on the couch.
Not put away.
Visible.
Traitor.
“Were you playing?”
I tensed.
Not much.
Enough.
“A little.”
“Did I interrupt you?”
“No.”
“Aurèl.”
“Yes?”
“I interrupted you.”
“A little.”
“Sorry.”
She said it simply.
Without a joke.
I didn’t know what to do with her apologies when they weren’t wrapped in energy.
“It’s fine.”
She placed her bag beside the door, then remained standing with her hands in the pockets of her sweatshirt.
Her gaze returned to the guitar.
“You can keep going.”
I looked at her.
“No.”
Immediate answer.
Solid.
Predictable.
She nodded.
“Okay.”
No insistence.
No negotiation.
No provocative smile.
Okay.
It was obviously the worst possible response.
Because she respected the door too well.
And a badly organized part of me would have preferred her to push a little, so I would have had a reason to resist.
She looked at Eugène.
Then Demetrius.
Then the glass door.
“Can I just stay here for a minute?”
I didn’t know why that sentence did more than the others.
Maybe because she wasn’t asking for anything entertaining.
Nothing active.
Not coffee.
Not a drawing.
Not a conversation.

Only to stay.
“Yes.”
She sat on the edge of the couch.
Not against the back.
As always.
Ready to leave.
Or ready to pretend she was.
The guitar lay between us on the cushion. She looked at it but didn’t touch it.
I remained standing for a second.
Then sat in the chair beside the desk.
Too far away.
Liora said nothing.
That silence was new.
Not heavy.
Not empty.
Simply present.
I watched her without really watching.
Her shoulders were lower. One hand rubbed the fabric of her sweatshirt near her wrist.
She wasn’t trying to fill the studio with her voice.
That worried me more than her rapid sentences.
“Practice?” I asked.
She gave a small, humorless laugh.
“No. Well, yes. This morning. But just now it was more... family, regionals, organization, work, calf, ‘you should be careful,’ ‘you should perhaps reduce your hours,’ ‘you should sleep more,’ ‘you should listen to your father when he says you should sleep more.’”
“A lot of shoulds.”
“A lot.”
She ran both hands over her face.
“And the worst thing is, they aren’t wrong.”
“Always the main problem.”
“Yes.”
She lowered her hands.
Her eyes looked tired, but not with sleep.
More with accumulation.
With too many things being carried at once.
“My father is worried about the championship,” she said. “My mother is worried about my sleep. My coach is worried about my start. I’m worried I’m not worried enough about the right thing.”
“That’s a lot of worry inside one person.”
“I’m versatile.”
She attempted a smile.
It didn’t travel well.
I looked at the guitar.
Then her.
“Do you want tea?”
“No.”
“Water?”
“No.”
“A lettuce leaf? Demetrius recommends them.”
She smiled more successfully.
“Tempting.”
From his corner, Demetrius moved one ear, probably objecting to the use of his stock for diplomatic purposes.

The silence returned.
I stood without entirely knowing why and picked up the guitar.
Liora followed the movement with her eyes.
“You don’t have to.”
“I know.”
“Really.”
“I know.”
I sat again, this time on the couch.
Not very close.
Not far either.
The guitar across my lap formed an acceptable barrier.
An object between us.
Practical.
Reassuring.
Temporary.
“It isn’t a song,” I said.
“Okay.”
“It isn’t finished.”
“I know.”
“And if you comment too quickly, I’m throwing the instrument off the balcony.”
“The Plexiglas will get in the way.”
“I’ll find an angle.”
She raised both hands.
“I won’t say anything.”
“That’s worrying too.”
“I can’t win.”
“Welcome.”
A real little laugh escaped her.
Not for long.
But enough.
I placed my fingers on the strings.
My whole body suddenly seemed intensely aware of itself.
The position of my hands.
The breath inside my chest.
The couch beneath me.
Liora less than three feet away.
The fact that I had just refused, then agreed without her insisting.
I played.
Not loudly.
The beginning.
A few chords.
The melody.
The silence in the middle.
The return.
I didn’t look up.
Especially not.
I stared at my fingers, the sound hole, the wood, the small mark beside the bridge.
Useless details that kept me from watching Liora listen.
I stopped before the end.
There wasn’t really an end.
The final notes died inside the studio.
Eugène didn’t move.
Neither did Demetrius.

Liora said nothing.
Nothing at all.
It was unbearable.
I raised my eyes.
She was looking at the guitar, not me.
Her face had lost the quick expression that answered before the world had finished asking its question.
She looked calm.
But not calm like me.
Calm like someone standing at the edge of something so she wouldn't damage it.
I didn't know what to do with that.
So I spoke.
A frequent mistake.
"You said you wouldn't say anything, but this is almost excessive."
She looked up.
"I didn't want to break it."
Simple.
There.
Again.
I looked down at the strings.
"It wasn't breakable."
"Yes, it was."
I didn't answer.
She didn't add anything.
This time, the silence didn't make me want to pick up the guitar again.
It made me want to ask a question I didn't have.
Or perhaps I had too many.
I rested the guitar against the other end of the couch.
The barrier disappeared.
Major strategic error.
The space between us revealed itself immediately.
Not enormous.
Not intimate in any official sense.
But less protected.
Liora tucked one leg beneath herself, then appeared to remember she wasn't at home and placed her foot back on the floor.
"You can get comfortable," I said.
"I am comfortable."
"You're sitting like someone waiting for evacuation clearance."
She looked at her position.
"It's your couch. I'm being careful."
"Since when?"
"Since I became highly respectful."
"So, tonight?"
"Exactly."
She finally slid farther back against the couch.
The movement brought her closer.
Not much.
Enough for me to know.
I kept my eyes on the coffee table.
A very beautiful coffee table.
Interesting construction.
Flat surface.

No apparent romantic threat.

"Do you often play when you don't know what to say?" she asked.

"Yes."

"Does it work?"

"It depends. Not particularly well right now."

She smiled.

"Sorry."

"You aren't entirely responsible."

"Only partly?"

"You brought an atmosphere with you."

"An atmosphere?"

"Yes."

"That's vague."

"You don't have the face of someone who came to ask about Eugène."

She looked at the cat.

Sensing his name, Eugène opened one eye.

"That was my excuse, though."

"Increasingly unconvincing."

"I need to diversify."

"Probably."

She rubbed her hands over her jeans.

"I don't think I wanted to go back to my room."

I didn't answer too quickly.

"Why?"

She shrugged.

"Too many things inside it. My bag still unpacked. Notes I haven't reviewed. My shoes still damp. The schedule on my desk. My time written on a sticky note because I had the very bad idea of recording it. And my calf continuing to exist even when I try to ignore it."

I looked at her leg.

She noticed.

"It's fine."

"I didn't say anything."

"Your eyes did."

"They're poorly behaved."

She smiled, then her face settled again.

"And if I go back, I'll either sleep or fail to sleep while thinking I should be sleeping. Both annoy me."

"So you came to your neighbor's apartment."

"Perfectly rational choice."

"Obviously."

"Your studio is quiet."

The sentence passed through me differently than expected.

I looked around.

The studio wasn't actually that quiet.

Eugène was breathing too loudly.

Demitrius was chewing.

The fridge was humming.

The downstairs neighbor had probably just sneezed hard enough to alter the atmospheric pressure.

But yes.

Quiet existed differently here.

"People tell me that often," I said.

"That your studio is quiet?"

"That I am."

She turned toward me.

"You say that like it isn't true."

"It isn't false."

"But?"

"There's always a but with you."

"I'm an athlete. I like obstacles."

I looked at my hands.

"People hear calm and sometimes translate it into anything they like."

She didn't answer.

I continued because the guitar had opened something, and now my sentences were escaping with less control.

A very bad instrument.

"Sad. Cold. Shy. Indifferent. Repressed. Afraid. I don't know. As though not making much noise meant there was nothing inside."

Liora was still.

Very still.

"And you?" she asked.

"Me what?"

"How do you translate it?"

I hadn't expected the question.

I hadn't prepared an answer.

Endangerment.

"I translate it as... I pay attention."

She looked down at my hands.

Then raised her eyes.

"Yes."

One word.

Again.

But this one didn't close anything.

It only held the sentence with me.

The silence returned.

I heard her breathing.

Not loudly.

Not close to my ear.

Just enough.

She was looking at the coffee table now too.

"It's the opposite for me," she said.

Her voice was low.

"People tell me to slow down, but it often sounds like they mean something else."

I turned slightly toward her.

She wasn't looking at me.

"Too loud. Too fast. Too intense. Too exhausting. Too spontaneous. Too 'Liora, breathe.' Too 'Liora, think first.' Too 'Liora, not now.' Too much of everything, sometimes."

She gave a small laugh.

Not a funny one.

"Even when people are right, it annoys me. Because they say slow down as though I'm calibrated wrong."

The sentence remained inside the studio.

I thought of her on the track.

Her body wanting to attack.

Her face when the coach said not yet.

Her father, her mother, everything she carried quickly because perhaps staying still too long felt like letting things catch up with her.
 I said none of it.
 It would have been too much.
 I only said:
 “You aren’t calibrated wrong.”
 She finally turned toward me.
 Her face changed.
 Almost imperceptibly.
 “You aren’t absent,” she answered.
 I remained still.
 The sentence contained no dramatic verb.
 No promise.
 No confession.
 It reached me anyway with indecent precision.
 I looked into her eyes.
 Mistake.
 Or not.
 They were darker in the studio’s low light.
 Slower.
 She looked at me without passing through me, without trying to make me speak faster, without filling the distance.
 She was there.
 Simply.
 My body understood something before I did.
 The space between us had become too small to remain neutral.
 I felt the warmth of the couch.
 The edge of my knee a few inches from hers.
 Her hand resting on the cushion, fingers slightly curled.
 The sleeve of her sweatshirt pushed back from her wrist.
 A strand of hair beside her cheek.
 The silence no longer felt like silence.
 It felt like waiting.
 I thought about kissing her.
 No.
 Too articulated.
 I didn’t think first.
 I understood that it was possible.
 That the movement existed somewhere between us before either of us made it.
 Liora lowered her eyes for a second.
 Toward my mouth?
 Maybe.
 Maybe not.
 My brain had no business turning itself into an expert on micro-movements at that particular moment.
 It did anyway.
 She raised her eyes again.
 Her breathing changed.
 Or mine did.
 Maybe both.
 The guitar lay beside us, silent.
 Eugène was asleep.
 Demetrius probably was too.

For once, the world seemed to possess the tact not to interfere.

I moved closer.

Very slightly.

Or she did.

Or the couch illegally reduced the distance.

I no longer knew.

Liora didn't move away.

Her gaze lowered again, then returned to mine.

The room was too small.

Or exactly small enough.

I felt my heart in a useless place somewhere inside my throat.

Fine.

So this was it.

The moment when everything we had avoided, diverted, and filed under practical categories, neighbors, animals, noise, stadium, exhibition, guitar, suddenly lost its cover.

I raised my hand.

Not all the way to her.

Only a movement.

Enough for me to know I was about to do something.

Liora didn't move.

She was close.

Too close for me to pretend I didn't understand.

And then Eugène jumped.

Not onto us.

No.

Obviously, that would have been too simple.

He jumped onto the guitar.

The instrument, resting crookedly against the couch, produced an appalling sound.

A crushed, metallic, enormous chord.

Something between a wardrobe collapsing and the complaint of a prehistoric animal.

Liora startled so violently that her knee struck the coffee table.

I made an absurd movement toward the guitar, then toward her, then toward Eugène, without managing to help anyone.

The rabbit bolted into his cardboard tunnel.

The tunnel tipped onto its side.

Eugène remained standing on the strings for one second, perfectly shocked by the sonic consequences of his own weight.

Then he climbed down from the couch with the dignity of a misunderstood musician.



Silence.

An enormous one.

Then Liora covered her mouth.

Her shoulders shook.

"Sorry," she said.

She burst out laughing.

Not loudly.

But completely.

The laughter folded her in half, slightly nervous, slightly exhausted, entirely impossible to contain.

I looked at her.
Then the guitar.
Then Eugene, already settling beside the glass door as though he had never been involved
in anything.
Eventually, I laughed too.
Not for long.
But long enough for the tension to break.
No.
Not break.
Shift.
It was still there.
Beneath the laughter.
Different.
Liora wiped the corner of one eye.
“He really chose his moment.”
“He’s experimenting with music.”
“That was extremely experimental.”
“It was sabotage.”
“Did he save you from something?”
The sentence escaped inside the laughter.
Then remained.
Liora almost stopped smiling.
So did I.
The studio caught its breath.
I didn’t answer immediately.
“Maybe,” I said.
My voice was lower than expected.
She looked at me.
The laughter had left her eyes shining.
Her smile returned, but with less certainty.
“Or he stopped me from doing something stupid,” she said.
The sentence was light.
Almost.
Not light enough to become a complete joke.
I looked at the guitar.
“It wouldn’t necessarily have been stupid.”
Silence.
This time, the interruption had passed.
What it had interrupted remained.
Liora lowered her eyes.
Her smile barely trembled.
“No,” she said.
Then her phone vibrated in the pocket of her sweatshirt.
She closed her eyes.
“Obviously.”
She took it out.
Checked the screen.
“My father.”
I straightened.
Too quickly.
She noticed, and another laugh escaped her.
“Don’t make that face. He doesn’t know.”
“He doesn’t know what?”

Catastrophic question.
She looked up at me.
I understood.
She understood that I had understood.
Fine.
The phone vibrated again.
She answered.
“Yes?”
Silence.
“Yes, I’m at Aurèl’s.”
Another silence.
“No, I’m not touching the cat.”
She looked at Eugène.
“Well, not actively.”
Silence.
“I’m coming back.”
Another silence.
“Yes, I know. Good night.”
She hung up.
“‘Not actively’ was a poor choice,” I said.
“I panic under paternal interrogation.”
“You’ve had practice.”
“He varies his angles.”
She stood.
The movement immediately placed distance between us.
Too much.
I remained seated.
The guitar was crooked, its strings still slightly out of tune after Eugène’s intervention.
Demetrius was beginning to emerge from his overturned tunnel with the caution of a victim of a cultural event.
Liora picked up her bag beside the door.
She seemed to have become herself again.
Not entirely.
Something in her face remained less certain.
As though she had left part of herself on the couch and didn’t know whether she ought to come back for it.
“I should go home,” she said.
“Yes.”
A reasonable answer.
Terrible.
She placed one hand on the door handle.
Then stopped.
That moment.
Again.
But this time, it had a different shape.
She turned toward me.
“You should tune your guitar.”
“That’s Eugène’s fault.”
“Of course.”
“He has a brutal style.”
“Very contemporary.”
I smiled.
So did she.

But the smile wasn't enough to completely cover what had just failed to happen.
 She looked at the couch.
 Then me.
 Not for long.
 Just enough.
 "Thank you for playing," she said.
 "It wasn't much."
 "Maybe not to you."
 She had said that before in another form.
 This time, she didn't let me answer.
 "Good night, Aurèl."
 "Good night."
 She left.
 The door closed softly.
 The studio remained open inside me for a few seconds longer.
 I didn't move.
 Eugène crossed the room with complete nonchalance, then rubbed himself against my leg.
 "No."
 He looked up.
 "You don't get immediate forgiveness."
 He purred.
 Opportunist.
 I picked up the guitar.
 One string was slightly out of tune.
 I tuned it.
 The action was simple.
 Turn the peg.
 Listen.
 Adjust.
 Return.
 I played the chord his jump had massacred.
 This time, it sounded normal.
 Much less interesting.
 I rested the instrument on my knees.
 The silence had returned.
 But it no longer resembled an absence.
 It didn't feel like my usual quiet, or the quiet Liora had come looking for when her room contained too many things.
 It felt like something stopped at the edge of itself.
 A movement held back.
 A step not yet taken.
 I looked at the place where she had been sitting.
 The cushion slightly indented.
 The sketchbook displaced on the table.
 The guitar on my knees.
 Eugène pretending to be innocent.
 Demitrius slowly pushing his tunnel back into an acceptable position with his nose.
 Everything was there.
 Evidence of an event that had not taken place.
 I rested my fingers on the strings.
 I didn't play.
 On the other side of the wall, I heard her door.

Footsteps.

Slower.

Then a voice, probably her father's.

Then Liora's.

I couldn't make out the words.

I didn't need to.

I lowered my eyes to the guitar.

The song was still waiting for its passage.

So was the silence.

And for the first time, I understood that waiting did not always mean avoiding.

Sometimes it meant almost.

And almost, apparently, could already leave a trace.

Chapter 15

A generation trapped inside

The day after the almost, I worked with the efficiency of a man who had nearly kissed his neighbor and whose cat had saved everyone by attacking a guitar.

Which is to say, very badly.

I wasn't thinking about Liora.

Obviously.

I was thinking about the guitar. The massacred chord. The necessity of storing instruments more carefully in a studio where cats possessed destructive intent.

I was also thinking about the couch cushion, still slightly indented after she left.

Her hand resting on the fabric.

Her voice when she had said:

"You aren't absent."

A simple sentence.

Far too durable.

I deleted a layer by mistake, recovered it, then saved.

Once.

Twice.

The third time was almost embarrassing, so I did it immediately.

The exhibition file was open on the screen.

Five images.

The kitchen.

The table after the meal.

The studio.

The window onto the balcony.

The hallway.

I had sent them to Mathilde, the organizer, the previous day. At 8:42 that morning, she had replied:

"Great, thank you, Aurèl. Very cohesive. I'll send you the layout for the wall text during the day."

Very cohesive.

That was supposed to be reassuring.

I had always been slightly suspicious of cohesion, especially when someone attributed it to me.

Eugène was sitting on the edge of the couch, facing the guitar.

Watching it.

Or threatening it.

"You've already done enough damage."

He blinked.

The rabbit ate in almost administrative silence. Since the previous day's incident, he had been avoiding the cardboard tunnel. I suspected he was reconsidering his interior architecture.

I adjusted the light in the kitchen.

Then undid it.

Then restored the adjustment.

Pointless.

I knew that light by heart. I knew where it needed to fall, how it should skim the tile, where it should stop before making the room too warm.

Too welcoming.

Too legible.

I also knew part of me was working only to avoid thinking about the couch.

A very bad method.

Not particularly profitable.
At 11:20, the computer chimed.
An email.
Mathilde.
“Subject: Wall Text, First Draft.”
My stomach tightened slightly.
The small movement that accompanied client feedback in which the words “very interesting” could announce catastrophe.
I opened it.
“Hi Aurèl,
I’m sending you the proposed general text for the section where your images will appear alongside Nora’s and Malik’s. Let me know if you have any comments, but I think we’ve found a strong direction. Your interiors work really well within this reading. They give the whole section a genuine melancholic breath.”
Melancholic breath.
Okay.
I scrolled down to the attachment.
The layout was clean.
Too clean.
A thin font made every sentence look as though it had thought about itself longer than it really had.
“A GENERATION TRAPPED INSIDE”
I smiled.
Not because it was funny.
My face had not yet found the correct reaction.
I kept reading.
“Between urban solitude and domestic refuge, this section examines interiors as spaces of contemporary confinement. The works of Aurèl, Nora Bessac, and Malik Tran trace the contours of a reclusive generation, confined to reduced spaces where the window becomes less an opening than a reminder of separation. Empty rooms, abandoned chairs, and silent tables form a sensitive cartography of isolation. Here, private space is no longer a refuge, but a gentle, almost familiar cage.”
I didn’t move.
The kettle stopped behind me.
Click.
The studio continued.
The fridge.
The pipes.
The rabbit chewing.
Eugène breathing with the indecency of an animal without a group exhibition.
I read it again.
A generation trapped inside.
Reclusive youth.
A window less an opening than a reminder of separation.
A gentle cage.
I waited for anger.
A laugh.
A sentence.
Nothing.
Only a precise tightening in the middle of my chest.
The kind that began by saying, It’s not a big deal.
Then added, Exactly.
It was well written.

That was the problem.
The text was appealing, readable, marketable. It gave the collection a direction. It placed my images inside a wider conversation, exactly what a group exhibition was supposed to do.
From the outside, it could look flattering.
My interiors had become a “sensitive cartography.”
My windows belonged to a “contemporary perspective.”
My rooms had a theme.
Fine.
Except the theme wasn’t mine.
I turned toward the studio.
The lamp.
The couch.
The guitar.
Demitrius’s corner.
The glass door.
The cluttered desk.
Eugène inside the hollow of the blanket.
A gentle cage?
This is absolute bullshit.
I stopped smiling.
I grabbed my mug, poured in hot water without a tea bag, and stood there holding a cup of clear water.
Very useful.
I returned to the computer.
“Let me know if you have any comments.”
I could reply:
“Thank you. I’ll take a look and get back to you shortly.”
A perfect sentence.
The sentence of someone who had not yet begun disappearing inside himself.
I wrote it.
Deleted it.
Wrote it again.
Then sent it.
A professional reply.
Calm.
Containing no actual information.
I reopened the PDF.
Mistake.
The words returned.
Behind the document window, my five images were still the same.
And yet something had just settled over them.
What had seemed to be waiting yesterday now looked abandoned.
The table after the meal no longer said, Someone might come back.
It said, No one is here.
The hallway no longer preserved a presence.
It led nowhere.
The window onto the balcony no longer breathed.
It looked outside without leaving.
The text had moved the objects without touching them.
I stood too quickly.
The chair slid backward with a sharp sound.
Eugène opened one eye.
“Nothing.”

A lie addressed to a cat.
A new low.
I walked to the window.
The balcony's Plexiglas panel reflected the light.
Transparent.
Solid.
A safety measure.
An obstacle.
Before, it stopped Eugène from crossing into Liora's apartment.
Now it looked like evidence.
Evidence of what?
No idea.
That was precisely the problem.
I returned to the desk and reopened my artist statement.
"I draw places after people have passed through them."
"Rooms are never empty."
"They keep habits, forgotten objects, repeated gestures, and presences we no longer notice immediately."
My sentences suddenly seemed naive.
Almost defensive.
What if Mathilde had seen more clearly?
What if my calm had always looked like confinement from the outside?
What if my rooms signaled absence more than presence?
I looked at the studio.
Small.
Very small.
The couch beside the desk. The kitchen beside the table.
The low mezzanine. The animals.
The guitar. The secured balcony.
Me in the middle.
I thought about Liora's father.
Is it stable?
You've been living alone for two years?
You left school?
I thought about my mother on the phone.
Will you make the effort to visit?
Then Liora.
Your studio is quiet.
Quiet.
Gentle cage.
The distance between those two phrases began to shrink.
I didn't like it.
I began a reply to Mathilde.
"I think this reading is somewhat removed from my intention. My images aren't really about confinement."
Somewhat removed.
Aren't really.
Magnificent weakness.
I deleted it.
"That isn't what they're about."
Too abrupt.
Deleted.

"I understand the overall cohesion, but I wonder whether 'confinement' risks closing down the interpretation."

Closing down the interpretation.

Unintentional irony.

I deleted that too.

The internal client wanted something more assertive.

The internal artist wanted to flee.

The internal freelancer pointed out that Mathilde was nice, that the exhibition was an opportunity, and that I should avoid becoming difficult before even hanging a single image.

I closed the email.

A courageous response.

I did something else.

Tea.

Actual tea this time.

Eugène's bowl.

Hay for Lapin.

Dishes.

Pointless cleaning of a counter that was already clean.

I even vacuumed for seven minutes.

At five, Liora knocked.

I wasn't expecting her.

Really.

Well, I knew she was supposed to come home early because she had mentioned it in the hallway the previous day.

But knowing someone could exist nearby did not constitute waiting for them.

A fragile defense.

I opened the door.

She had a bag over one shoulder, a pale sweatshirt, and her hair tied in a quick bun. Her gaze remained on my face for half a second before she smiled.

Bad sign.

She already saw it.

"Hi."

"Hi."

She looked behind me.

"I came to check on the Plexiglas victim."

Eugène appeared immediately.

"He heard you."

"He has an excellent sense of drama."

She leaned toward him, maintaining the required distance.

"Hello, prisoner."

Eugène sat very straight.

As though accepting the title.

Then Liora returned her attention to me.

"You okay?"

"Yes."

"No."

I sighed.

"Are you asking the question or giving the answer?"

"Both. Efficiency."

I let her in.

The studio immediately seemed smaller.

Usually, her presence animated it, made it more alive, more exposed sometimes.

Now, after reading the text, her entrance made its actual size appear like additional evidence.

"Bad day?" she asked.

"Something like that."

She placed her bag beside the door.

The animal pretext had officially lost a great deal of ground.

"The exhibition?"

I looked at her.

"How do you know?"

"Your face."

"I really need to replace it."

"Too late. I know this one."

She approached the desk, then stopped before looking at the screen.

"Can I?"

I hesitated.

Showing her the text would make it real in front of her.

Part of me was afraid she would read it and say:

Yes.

That's it.

They're right.

I shrugged.

"It's the wall text."

She walked around the chair and read the PDF.

I watched her face.

Bad idea.

She didn't react to the title.

Or to the urban solitude.

Or to the gentle cage.

When she reached the end, she straightened.

"Oh."

I laughed without humor.

"You too."

"What?"

"'Oh.' You do that when something happens."

"Something happened here."

She reread one sentence.

"Gentle cage?"

"Yes."

"They're talking about your drawings?"

"Apparently."

She narrowed her eyes.

"It's pretty."

My stomach dropped slightly.

Then she added:

"And wrong."

I looked up.

She continued reading.

"I understand why they wrote it. It sounds like an exhibition. It sounds serious. It sounds like people holding their glasses as though the glasses contain opinions."

Despite myself, I smiled.

Barely.

"But these aren't your drawings."

I didn't answer.

Liora turned toward me.
“Are they?”
“I don’t know.”
“What do you mean, you don’t know?”
“I thought I did.”
She leaned against the desk.
“Aurèl.”
“It’s well written.”
“And?”
“Mathilde is competent. She sees things.”
“She can see things and still be wrong.”
“Yes.”
I looked at the title.
“What if that’s what they say from the outside?”
“Your drawings?”
“My drawings. My studio. Everything.”
She frowned.
“Your studio isn’t a cage.”
“You say that because you like it.”
She opened her mouth.
Closed it.
Fine.
We had both heard the sentence.
I regretted it immediately.
Not because it was false.
Because it had escaped too quickly.
Liora looked at the couch.
“I do like it.”
Simply.
I didn’t know what to do with that answer.
So I looked at the PDF.
Classic.
“That isn’t the point,” she continued.
“A little.”
“No.”
Her energy returned, sharper now.
“You have to write to them.”
“It isn’t that simple.”
“Why?”
“Because it’s a group exhibition. Because the text also concerns the other artists. Because Mathilde didn’t do this to betray me. Because I’m not going to appear two weeks before the opening and say, ‘That isn’t what it means,’ like some misunderstood genius.”
“You don’t have to say genius.”
“Thank you.”
“You can just say misunderstood.”
I didn’t smile.
She saw.
“Sorry.”
I ran a hand through my hair.
“I don’t know.”
“You know it hurts you.”
I tensed.
“This isn’t about being hurt.”

"Of course it is."

"Liora."

"Your face changed as soon as I started reading."

"You're becoming very invested in people's faces."

"Because you don't say much."

"I speak."

"When you can control the words."

I looked at her.

She was right.

Which didn't help her.

Or me.

"It isn't only that the text hurts me. It moves everything. It gives the images a caption. People are going to see them with those words in their heads."

"Then change the caption."

"You say that like it's a chair."

"Sometimes chairs need moving."

"This isn't a chair."

"I know."

"Not completely."

The sentence came out more sharply than she deserved.

Liora stopped.

Demitrius knocked something over in his corner.

A small sound.

Terribly timed.

Eugène sat down between us as though a mediation committee had become necessary.

"Sorry."

Liora crossed her arms, then uncrossed them.

"Explain it to me."

"I don't feel like explaining."

She absorbed it.

Not dramatically.

Still, I saw something inside her step back.

"Okay."

The word should have relieved me.

It didn't.

Because she had stopped moving toward me.

I looked at the screen.

"What I mean is, if I answer now, I'll answer the wrong thing. I know I can send an email. I know I can ask them to change it."

She waited.

"The problem is that now I look at my own images and I don't know whether they're still mine."

Something passed over her face.

The sentence had reached an area she hadn't seen.

"Oh," she said softly.

"There."

She sat on the edge of the couch.

Less certain.

Less prepared to act.

"So it isn't only the text."

I shook my head.

"It's what it does to the drawings."

"And to you."

I didn't answer.
She didn't insist.
She looked at the images.
"When I saw them, I didn't think that."
"I know."
"Really."
"Yes."
"Then keep that somewhere too."
She placed the sentence between us without trying to win.
That version, I could hear.
A little.
Not enough to repair anything.
Enough to keep the room from closing completely.
"I'm not saying you should do nothing," she added.
"I know."
"I'm bad at doing nothing."
"I had noticed."
A small smile passed between us.
"I can try."
I remained silent.
"Not for long," she clarified.
This time, I genuinely smiled.
Not much.
She saw.
The misalignment hadn't disappeared.
She had wanted to respond by moving forward.
I had stopped abruptly.
Neither of us was entirely wrong.
Clear blame was more convenient.
Eugène chose that moment to climb onto the desk and place a paw on the mouse.
The PDF scrolled to the bottom of the page.
"Eugène, not now."
Liora leaned over to move him and sneezed.
"Fine. Immunological punishment."
I placed Eugène on the floor.
He turned his back on me.
"Clear response."
Liora stood.
"I'm going to leave you alone."
I turned too quickly.
She noticed.
"Not like that."
"Like what?"
"Like, 'I'm leaving because this is awkward.' I'm leaving because if I stay, I'll want to help you too hard, and apparently that's a high-risk sport."
"It isn't exactly..."
"I know. Well, I think I know part of it."
She pulled the strap of her bag over her shoulder.
Then walked to the door.
The usual moment.
Less smiling.
More caution.
"Are you going to answer them?"

"I don't know."
She nodded.
A sentence rose into her face.
She held it back.
That mattered.
"Okay."
Her hand settled on the handle.
"I still think you should."
I lowered my eyes.
"I know."
"Not because you're afraid."
I looked up.
She was watching me seriously.
"Because you know it isn't right."
The word remained between us.
She added nothing.
"Have a good evening, Aurèl."
"You too."
She left.
The door closed.
Not softly, the way it usually did.
Not violently either.
After some conversations, that was enough to make noise.
I remained in front of the computer.
The PDF was still open.
At the bottom of the page, the exhibition logo appeared beneath the text.
Very clean. Very serious.
Very ready to be printed.
I scrolled back to the title.
A Generation Trapped Inside.
Liora had said it was wrong.
Mathilde thought it was powerful.
I no longer knew exactly what I saw.
I closed the PDF.
The images returned.
What was gentle looked sad.
What was quiet looked suspicious.
Someone had just shown me one possible translation of my own perspective.
Even if I rejected it, it had left subtitles.
I opened the drawing of the studio.
The couch.
The light.
The balcony.
Eugène on the blanket.
Everything I had wanted to preserve.
I thought about Liora sitting there the previous evening.
About what had almost happened.
Her laughter after the atrocious chord.
Her sentence:
You aren't absent.
And I wondered whether she still meant it.
An absurd question.
Unfair.

It had nothing to do with the text.
 My brain placed it there anyway.
 I closed the image.
 Then the folder.
 Then the program.
 I reopened Mathilde's email.
 The cursor blinked.
 Nothing came.
 On the other side of the wall, I heard Liora's door.
 Footsteps.
 Her voice, low, probably speaking with her mother.
 I couldn't make out the words.
 I almost wanted to try.
 I didn't.
 Not out of virtue.
 Because I was afraid I would hear my name.
 I picked up the guitar.
 Then put it back down.
 Not tonight.
 Even the silence seemed open to interpretation.
 I returned to the desk one final time and reopened the PDF.
 A Generation Trapped Inside.
 The phrase didn't change.
 Obviously.
 I shut the computer.
 The dark screen reflected the studio.
 The glass door. The secured balcony.
 The guitar. The couch.
 Eugène. Me.
 Everything fit inside the reflection.
 Everything seemed too close.
 The exhibition had been a goal.
 Difficult. Anxiety-inducing. Too personal.
 Still positive.
 Now it looked like a room where my images would be hung beside a caption that didn't belong to them.
 People would look at my spaces and say confinement.
 At my traces and say solitude.
 At my quiet and say cage.
 I no longer wanted to exhibit.
 Not because I was afraid of being seen.
 Because I didn't want to be translated backward.
 I placed one hand on the closed computer.
 The plastic was still warm.
 A brief laugh crossed through the wall.
 Liora.
 I recognized it without listening.
 The laugh remained in the room for a moment.
 Then disappeared.
 The studio became quiet again.

Chapter 16

What you call running away

For twenty-four hours, I didn't withdraw my name.

Which, by the modest standards of my inner life, almost counted as action.

I didn't answer Mathilde either.

Which probably counted less.

The email remained open in one tab.

Then closed.

Then reopened in a separate window, as though geographical separation on the screen might produce a decision.

The title hadn't moved.

A Generation Trapped Inside.

It hadn't apologized.

It hadn't realized its mistake in my absence.

Very disappointing behavior from a sentence.

I had started several replies.

The first was too polite.

"Thank you for the text. I understand the proposed direction, but I might like to qualify a few points."

Might.

Qualify.

A few points.

It sounded as though I were asking for less cilantro in my soup.

Deleted.

The second simply said:

"I don't want my work presented from this angle."

I had stared at it for four minutes.

Too naked.

Deleted too.

The third proposed an alternative text. After two paragraphs, I was explaining what I did, what I didn't do, and what I especially didn't want anyone to think I did.

The result sounded like someone falling down a staircase while trying not to spill a full glass.

Deleted.

At seven, the draft read:

"Hi Mathilde,

I'm getting back to you about the wall text. I understand the overall cohesion of the section, but the interpretation centered on confinement feels removed from my work. My images are more about traces, habits, quiet presences, and spaces that remain inhabited even when they seem calm. I'm concerned that the title and some of the language direct the viewer too strongly toward an interpretation I don't recognize.

Could we discuss it?"

It was fine.

Measured.

Usable.

I hadn't sent it.

I had remained in front of it long enough for Eugène to climb onto my lap, not out of affection, but because he regarded my stillness as the availability of heated furniture.

"Not now."

He settled in anyway.

A highly personal understanding of negotiation.

I reread the final sentence.

Could we discuss it?
Reasonable.
Small.
Not aggressive.
I could send it.
I didn't.
Instead, I reopened the PDF.
Mistake.
A Generation Trapped Inside.
I closed it.
Then opened the folder containing my images.
The kitchen.
The table.
The studio.
The window.
The hallway.
Since the previous day, they no longer obeyed me.
Before, I had known where to look. The light. The mug. The space left by a body. The small disorders that said a presence had shifted the air.
Now every image seemed to accept the wrong interpretation with troubling passivity.
The chair could be abandoned.
The window, a refusal to go outside.
The studio, somewhere you remained because you didn't know how to go anywhere else.
I hated myself for doing that to them.
For searching my own drawings for evidence against them.
Or against me.
I closed the folder.
On the couch, the cushion still held a slight indentation.
Not really.
Liora had left two nights ago. Cushions returned to their original shape. A fundamental property of cushions and a mediocre consolation of domestic life.
But I knew where she had sat.
And where I had stopped.
Almost.
A useless word.
Very cumbersome.
I returned to the draft and placed the cursor over Send.
The button was blue.
Very blue.
A color far too enthusiastic for a decision like this.
I could click, then wait. Mathilde might answer the next day. Maybe she would suggest a call. Maybe she would say the text had already been printed, that the overall framework couldn't be changed, that I had misunderstood the project from the beginning.
Or maybe she would simply reply:
"Of course. Let's talk."
An almost more alarming scenario.
Then I would need to know what to say.
My phone vibrated.
"Did you answer?"
Liora.
Direct.
Obviously.
"Not yet."

"Tell me you've at least written something."

"Yes."

"Sent it?"

"No."

The three dots returned almost immediately.

"Can I come over?"

No would have been possible.

Simple.

Legitimate.

I had the right to be alone with my draft, my newly suspicious rooms, and my heavy cat.

I typed:

Yes.

Deleted it.

"Sure."

Pathetic answer.

"I'm coming."

Less than two minutes later, someone knocked.

Not loudly.

But quickly.

I opened the door.

Liora stood on the landing in a dark sweatshirt, hair tied crookedly, crossbody bag over one shoulder. She looked as though she had crossed the hallway while already beginning the conversation in her head.

"Hi."

"Hi."

She entered when I stepped aside.

Not hurriedly.

With enough energy to fill the room.

I closed the door.

The studio contracted.

Not like the other evening.

Liora placed her bag on the floor without asking. The Eugène pretext didn't even appear. He was beside the couch, but neither of us pretended he was the subject.

Her gaze went to the screen.

"Is that your message?"

"Yes."

"Can I read it?"

I didn't like the speed of the question.

"It isn't finished."

"Exactly."

She approached.

I didn't move.

She read the draft.

Her eyebrows drew together at "feels removed."

Her mouth tightened at "I'm concerned."

"It's good," she said. "It's clear."

"Okay."

"You have to send it."

There.

Simple.

Predictable.

Not violent.

Still, I felt myself step backward.

"I'm going to think about it."

She turned her head.

"You've already thought about it."

"Not enough."

"Aurèl."

I didn't like my name inside that sentence.

Not tonight.

"What?"

"You can't stay stuck on this for three days."

"I'm not stuck."

She looked at the draft.

"You've had an email written since yesterday and you aren't sending it."

"That's called not sending an email immediately."

"So, being stuck."

I fell silent.

She leaned against the desk. Too close to the screen. Too close to the message. Too close to my images.

"If you don't agree with the text, you say so. You ask for a discussion. That's normal."

"I know."

"Then send it."

I looked toward the window.

The Plexiglas on the balcony reflected a blurred version of the studio. A room superimposed over itself.

"I'm not sure I still want to exhibit."

Silence fell.

Sharp.

Liora straightened.

"What?"

"If the text stays like this, I don't know whether I want my images there."

"You want to withdraw?"

"I'm considering it."

The word entered the room like a chair placed in the middle of a passageway.

Liora remained still for a second.

Then her energy returned more forcefully.

"No."

I looked at her.

"No?"

"You can't do that."

"I can."

"Technically, yes. But it isn't a good idea."

"I never said it was."

"With you, considering something for long enough often turns it into an emergency exit."

The sentence struck me.

Not in the right place.

I felt my face close.

She continued because she hadn't seen it yet.

Or because she thought she needed to keep going anyway.

"You worked for this exhibition. You chose the images. You showed me your sketchbooks. You can't give up because one text is bad."

"It isn't giving up."

"Yes, it is."

"No. If the presentation says the opposite of what I'm doing, I can decide not to put my name on it."

"Then you ask them to change it. You don't leave."
"Do you think I haven't considered that?"
"I think you've considered it so much that you're circling around it."
A brief laugh escaped me.
Without humor.
"Fine."
She heard the shift.
"What?"
"Nothing."
"Don't do that."
"Do what?"
"That thing where you become polite."
I crossed my arms.
Bad sign.
"I'm not being polite."
"Yes, you are. You close every door and put a welcome mat in front of it."
I looked at her.
She was worried.
I could see that.
She wasn't trying to win an argument. She saw something that mattered to me and the possibility that I might move away from it. She was approaching it with her own weapons.
Speed.
Action.
Refusal to let go.
It was almost beautiful.
And it made me want to retreat farther.
"You don't understand."
She took the hit.
"Then explain."
"I'm trying."
"No. You say, 'You don't understand,' and stop."
Her voice wasn't loud.
Neither was mine.
The studio was shrinking anyway.
"Because whenever I explain, you turn it into a plan. Send. Answer. Correct. Don't run away. Don't sabotage yourself."
"Because maybe you are sabotaging yourself."
The word landed between us.
Sabotaging.
It made more noise than expected.
Eugène turned his head.
Even he seemed to think the atmosphere had become unpleasant.
"You think that?"
Liora inhaled.
She could have stepped back.
She didn't.
"I think you're afraid, and you're capable of calling that a boundary."
I remained very still.
With me, stillness sometimes looked like calm.
Here, something was lowering the shutters from inside.
"Okay."
Liora went slightly pale.
"I didn't mean it as an attack."

"I know."

"Then why are you answering as though I've become someone against you?"

I didn't answer.

Because she wasn't against me.

And because part of me still felt surrounded.

Difficult to explain without becoming unfair.

"You aren't against me."

"Then let me help you."

"This isn't necessarily helping."

She pressed her lips together.

"Watching you withdraw isn't helping either."

"I'm not withdrawing from a race, Liora."

The sentence stopped her.

Me too.

I continued anyway.

"This isn't a race."

She crossed her arms.

"I know."

"No. You listen to me as though it is."

The silence was sharp.

Liora remained beside the desk, shoulders tense.

"What does that mean?"

"It means you want me to move forward. To get through it. To win against something. Maybe against myself. Maybe against my fear."

I looked at the screen.

"I only want to avoid lying about what I made."

She received the sentence.

Not enough to resolve anything.

Enough to hurt.

"I never wanted you to lie."

"I know."

"Then don't say that."

"I'm not saying you want me to. I'm saying you don't always see the difference between pushing me and moving me."

She took half a step backward.

Very little.

Enough.

I regretted the sentence as soon as it was out.

Because it was true in a way that was too harsh.

Liora looked down.

With her, closing off looked like energy that no longer knew where to go.

"I thought I was on your side."

"You are."

"Apparently, I move you."

"I didn't say..."

"Yes, you did."

I fell silent.

The word was out.

It belonged to her now.

Demitrius moved in his corner, knocked over a piece of wood, then froze as though understanding that it was better not to draw attention.

Liora ran a hand over her forehead.

"I don't want to force you. I want you not to disappear from your own work."

"I'm not disappearing."
"You're talking about removing your name."
"Because the presentation doesn't fit."
"Then change it."
"You're doing it again."
She fell silent.
I saw the effort.
Physical.
Waiting.
Not attacking.
Not taking the bend immediately.
"Okay," she finally said. "What do you want to do?"
The question should have helped.
It came too late.
Or I was too closed to receive it.
"I don't know."
"You don't know, or you don't want to tell me?"
"I don't know."
She nodded.
"Okay."
The word was colder.
Not hostile.
Tired.
She sat on the edge of the couch. I remained standing, then took the desk chair at an angle.
The open message between us.
"When I saw your sketchbooks," she said, "I thought you had to show that. Not to prove anything. Because it exists. Because it matters. And it makes me angry to see you let someone else make you doubt it."
Her voice trembled slightly at the end.
Sad anger.
Or fear.
"See?"
"What?"
"You said 'let' again. Like I'm passive."
"That isn't what I meant."
"I know."
"Then stop taking every word I say in the worst possible way."
I fell silent.
She was right too.
A perfectly useless situation.
We were each saying partially true things using words that landed too heavily on the other.
"I don't want you to lose something because someone named it badly," she continued.
"And I don't want to stay in a room with the wrong name written on the wall."
"But you can say that."
"Maybe."
"Not maybe."
She stopped.
"Sorry."
The word came quickly.
Sincere.
Already caught in its own momentum.

“See?” she said. “I do that. I say ‘not maybe’ as though it will help.”
She looked at her hands.
“I’m not good at watching someone stay at the edge.”
The sentence was almost an offering.
I saw it.
I couldn’t accept it properly.
“I’m not good at being pushed toward the edge.”
She gave a small, humorless laugh.
“I wasn’t trying to push you.”
“I know.”
“You say ‘I know’ a lot for someone who doesn’t really believe me.”
I raised my eyes.
She was looking at me.
Not harshly.
Hurt.
That was worse.
“I believe you.”
“You believe my intention.”
I didn’t answer.
She smiled slightly.
Not with happiness.
“There.”
The silence became heavy because she had understood something.
So had I.
I believed she wanted to help.
I didn’t believe her help reached me in the right place.
There was no one to blame strongly enough to make things simple.
“I should go.”
The sentence wasn’t surprising.
It still hurt.
“Yes.”
Too quick.
She felt it.
She stood and picked up her bag.
Eugène approached.
Bad timing.
She looked down at him without crouching.
“Not today, Eugène.”
He stopped.
So did I, almost.
Even he seemed to understand that the refusal wasn’t meant for him.
Liora walked to the door.
Her hand settled on the handle.
The usual moment still existed.
It no longer knew what to do.
She remained facing the door.
“I don’t think you run because you’re a coward.”
My throat tightened.
“I think sometimes you run because you learned to protect things by taking them away.
And I don’t know what to do with that yet.”
She opened the door.
I found my voice.
“And sometimes you think you can save things by pushing them faster.”

She remained still, one hand on the open door.
The hallway behind her.
“Yes,” she said.
One word.
Not defensive.
Not exactly agreement either.
She turned her head slightly.
“Good night, Aurèl.”
“Good night, Liora.”
She left.
The door closed carefully.
That care hurt more than a slam.
I remained seated.
The studio didn’t move.
No object came to the scene’s rescue.
Eugène looked at the door, then at me, with rare incomprehension.
Or perhaps I was assigning him temporary sensitivity for personal reasons.
I looked at the screen.
The draft was still there.
Hi Mathilde.
I understand.
I’m concerned.
Could we discuss it?
The sentence seemed tiny.
Not large enough for what it had just triggered.
I closed the email.
Then reopened it.
No gesture resembled a decision.
On the other side of the wall, I heard Liora’s door.
Her footsteps.
Nothing else.
No voice.
No laugh.
No bag thrown down.
The wall carried mostly what failed to pass through.
I remained listening as though a clearer sound could still correct the scene.
A laugh would almost have been reassuring.
A rapid conversation with her father.
Even an object placed down too hard.
Something that said she had recovered her usual speed.
Nothing came.
I stood and turned off the screen.
The glass door reflected the couch, the guitar, the sketchbooks, the desk, me standing too
straight in the middle.
Everything appeared to be in its place.
It wasn’t.
You learned to protect things by taking them away.
An unbearable sentence.
Because it wasn’t entirely false.
Sometimes you think you can save things by pushing them faster.
Unbearable too.
Because I knew where it had struck.
There had been no misunderstanding.

We had understood the words.
It was everything else that failed to follow.
The rhythm.
The way each of us held an injury.
The speed at which you could approach without moving the other person.
I picked up my phone.
The championship event was still in my calendar.
Liora, 800 m.
I didn't delete it.
Then I sat on the couch.
The guitar was beside me.
I didn't pick it up.
The song, the email, the exhibition, the championship, the almost-kiss, the argument.
Everything was waiting.
Not filed away.
Not resolved.
Eugène climbed up beside me without making a sound.
Which, for him, qualified as either an achievement or accidental compassion.
He placed one paw on my leg.
"I think I handled that badly."
He purred.
Bad adviser.
Good animal.
A very faint sound came through the wall.
A chair.
Or a cupboard door.
Then nothing.
I knew she was there.
She probably knew I was there too.
That was almost worse than not knowing.
We cared about each other.
I could still feel it in the championship I hadn't removed from my calendar, in the way
she had left without slamming the door, in the way I listened despite myself.
But caring about someone wasn't enough to know how to touch them without pressing
the wrong place.
I closed my eyes.
The studio was quiet.
This time, the quiet felt like neither a refuge nor a cage.
It felt like a room after a sentence that was too true.
A room someone had just left.
And where everything that remained weighed more than their presence.

Chapter 17

Taking his name off

The next day, I did exactly what a mature man does after an important argument.

Nothing.

Very dignified.

Very adult.

The rabbit ate his hay with almost aggressive regularity.

Hay. Water. Cardboard.

Suspicion.

No exhibition organizer came along to explain that he represented a generation trapped inside.

Lucky.

Eugène was asleep beside the bookcase, rolled onto his side with one paw in the air, in a position that said no human crisis deserved to interfere with his spine.

“You have no opinion?”

He opened one eye.

Then closed it again.

A very comprehensive response.

The studio was quiet.

Not as usual.

Usually, quiet put things slightly back in order. It made objects sharper, distances simpler, walls more useful.

This time, it arranged nothing.

The chair still turned from the previous day.

The cushion where Liora had sat.

The door she had left through.

The wall on the right, especially.

Since the argument, it had carried almost nothing.

I would have preferred an honest silence.

This one contained implications.

I sat down in front of the computer.

The draft was still there. Correct. Almost too correct.

It looked like an email capable of wearing a beige sweater and saying, “I completely understand,” to someone who had just stepped on its foot.

I placed my hands on the keyboard.

Removed them.

Put them back.

A ridiculous warm-up before an operation requiring no physical exertion whatsoever.

I reopened the PDF.

Mistake.

A Generation Trapped Inside.

The phrase was still there.

Obviously.

“In a world saturated with screens and withdrawal, these young artists examine domestic space as an ambiguous refuge, suspended between protection and confinement.”

Ambiguous refuge.

A very useful phrase. You could apply it to almost anything without having to decide.

An ambiguous cat, for example.

Soft, warm, capable of waking you by walking across your chest with the confidence of a real-estate agent inspecting underused space.

I returned to the email.

The draft wasn't lying.

It was only insufficient.
I didn't want to ask for a discussion.
I wanted the text to change.
I didn't want to arrive at the opening, see my name beneath that description, and feel my whole body withdraw while my drawings remained hanging on the wall.
I selected the message.
All of it.
My finger hovered over Delete.
Very dramatic.
A movement of a quarter inch.
I deleted it.
The page went blank.
I typed:
"Hi Mathilde,
I would prefer to withdraw my name from the exhibition."
No.
It sounded like I was slamming a door while wearing socks.
I deleted it.
"Hi Mathilde,
I'm sorry, but I ultimately won't be able to participate in the exhibition."
Even worse.
I was able to participate.
I didn't want to participate like this.
I deleted it again.
The rabbit scratched at his rug.
"Yes, I know."
He looked at me.
"Technically, you know nothing, but I appreciate the effort."
He returned to his hay.
I stood, opened a cupboard for no reason, then closed it.
Pointless movement accomplished.
My brain felt slightly more qualified.
I reopened the images.
The kitchen. The table. The studio. The window. The hallway.
For two days, I had been looking at them as compromised objects.
Contaminated by the text.
It was absurd, but other people's gaze sometimes did that. It arrived before they did, moved the furniture, stuck labels onto things.
I zoomed in on the drawing of the table.
An empty plate.
A cup with a tea stain.
Two crumbs.
Morning light interrupted by a chair.
Nothing spectacular.
Nothing confined.
Only a place afterward.
After someone.
After a gesture.
After a conversation, perhaps.
A room that didn't need to shout to prove it had been inhabited.
I picked up my sketchbook and found the sentence:
I draw places after people have passed through them.
It was uneven.

But right.

I returned to the email.

This time, I wrote more slowly.

“Hi Mathilde,

I’m getting back to you regarding the wall text and the presentation of my series.

I understand the overall direction of the section, but the interpretation centered on confinement does not reflect my intention. My rooms are about chosen spaces, traces, quiet, habits, and subtle ways of inhabiting a place.

I’m not trying to deny that a form of solitude can be read in these images, but I don’t want them to be presented as a symptom of withdrawal or an inability to go outside.

I’d like to suggest wording that feels closer to the series:

‘In his images, Aurèl draws places after bodies have passed through them: a table, a window, a hallway, a studio. The spaces seem quiet, but they retain the traces of habits, subtle presences, and repeated gestures. His work is concerned less with confinement than with the way a place becomes inhabited.’

If the presentation needs to remain centered on the idea of a generation trapped inside, I would prefer to withdraw my name and my pieces from the exhibition.

I’m available to discuss it.

Thank you,

Aurèl”

I read it again.

Once.

Twice.

On the third time, I moved a comma.

Then put it back.

I removed “rather.”

Then restored it.

Without it, the sentence seemed too hard.

With it, the sentence took a step backward.

I kept it and disliked myself slightly.

Not dramatically.

With the weariness you felt toward someone who moved a cup instead of putting out a fire.

I reread the important sentence.

“If the presentation needs to remain centered on the idea of a generation trapped inside, I would prefer to withdraw my name and my pieces from the exhibition.”

It was there.

Not hidden.

Not so polite it disappeared.

Not aggressive either.

A boundary.

The word arrived with unpleasant clarity.

A boundary.

Not an escape.

Maybe.

I closed my eyes.

My brain immediately opened a full department of catastrophic scenarios.

Mathilde offended.

The email forwarded to the committee with the note: “Aurèl problem.”

A man in round glasses saying beside the buffet, “When you agree to a group exhibition, you have to accept the curatorial framework.”

Curatorial framework.

I already hated him.

Then Liora.
 Obviously.
 Liora seeing only the final sentence.
 I would prefer to withdraw my name.
 Liora saying softly:
 "I understand."
 Worse than anything.
 I opened my eyes.
 The email was still there.
 I placed the cursor over Send.
 You learned to protect things by taking them away.
 I didn't want her to be right.
 I didn't want to prove her wrong merely to win an argument either.
 I only wanted this gesture not to be a disappearance.
 So I asked myself whether I was disappearing.
 The answer arrived slowly.
 No.
 Not this time.
 I wasn't removing my work from the world.
 I was saying where it could stand.
 Which might have been more frightening.
 I clicked.
 Send.
 No earthquake.
 No power outage.
 The window only displayed:
 Message sent.
 Two words.
 Very restrained.
 Very cruel.
 "There," I said.
 My voice seemed to belong to someone else.
 Eugène didn't react.
 Neither did Lapin.
 Difficult audience.
 I checked my sent messages.
 The email was there.
 Real.
 I had written it.
 I had sent it.
 I had set a boundary.
 And I didn't feel better.
 Scandalous information.
 We had been lied to extensively about boundaries.
 In movies, books, and conversations between people who probably kept orderly
 calendars, someone set a boundary and then something inside them straightened.
 I mostly wanted to check whether my internet provider could legally recall an email.
 My phone vibrated.
 I froze.
 Not Mathilde.
 Liora.
 "Are you there?"
 Two words.

Very dangerous.

“Yes.”

The three dots appeared.

“Can I stop by for two minutes?”

I looked at the sent email.

Terrible timing.

Which meant it was probably the only timing available in a normal life.

“Yes.”

I didn’t add “sure.”

A small improvement.

Or exhaustion.

She knocked less than a minute later.

When I opened the door, Liora stood on the landing with a sports jacket over her shoulders, hair tied back, bag over one arm.

She seemed held together differently.

As though she had tied something inside herself down to keep everything from flying in different directions.

“Hi.”

“Hi.”

She studied my face.

“Did you sleep?”

A very unfair question from someone with clearly visible circles beneath her own eyes.

“A little.”

“Survivor’s answer.”

Her smile began.

Then stopped.

I stepped aside.

“Come in.”

She entered while paying attention to her bag, the rug, the door.

Usually, the studio had to negotiate with her energy.

Now she was careful with everything.

That was worse.

Eugène lifted his head.

“Hi, Eugène.”

He yawned.

“He’s happy to see you too.”

She put her bag beside the door.

Not in the middle.

Another detail that was not enough like her.

Her gaze moved toward the computer.

“Did you answer?”

I waited too long.

“Yes.”

“Mathilde?”

“Yes.”

She turned fully toward me.

“Okay.”

A cautious word.

She waited.

I didn’t have to show her.

It was my email.

My work.

My name.

A beautiful theory.

In reality, the previous day's argument still occupied enough space that keeping it from her would have felt like closing another door.

"I can show you."

She hesitated.

With Liora, hesitation looked almost brutal.

"Sure."

That sure hurt.

I returned to the desk and opened the sent message.

She approached without coming too close.

I left her the screen.

She read.

I looked away.

Very noble.

In reality, I followed her reflection in the dark glass behind the monitor.

Her eyebrows.

Her mouth.

The moment she reached the alternative wording.

The moment she arrived at the final sentence.

Her body tensed.

"You sent it like this?"

"Yes."

"With the sentence about withdrawing your name."

"Yes."

She nodded.

"When?"

"Ten minutes ago."

"Before I arrived."

"Yes."

She took one step back.

"You could have told me."

"I'm telling you."

"Afterward."

"Yes."

She gave a brief, humorless laugh.

"I don't want to repeat yesterday."

"Neither do I."

"Then explain it to me."

I looked at the email.

"It's written there."

"No. Explain it to me."

The distinction touched me.

So I distrusted it.

"The text doesn't reflect my work. So I said that."

"And you added that you might withdraw your pieces."

"Because it's true."

She ran one hand over her forehead.

"You just made everything more complicated."

"It was already complicated."

"Not like this."

"No. Before, it was complicated mostly for me."

She fell silent.

I almost regretted it.

Not entirely.

"I didn't mean that your problem didn't matter."

"I know."

"You say 'I know,' then answer as though I said it anyway."

I closed my eyes.

She was right.

Again.

A deeply irritating habit.

"Sorry."

The word came out without preparation.

She looked surprised.

So did I.

Her face loosened slightly.

"I wanted us to talk about it."

"We talked about it yesterday."

"We hurt each other yesterday. That isn't the same thing."

I looked at the screen.

"I thought after you left."

"And concluded I was wrong?"

"No. That you were right about part of it."

She waited.

"I do sometimes protect things by taking them away."

She didn't look triumphant.

Thankfully.

"But not this time," I added.

"Why?"

I felt the sentence arriving before I had decided on it.

"I'm not refusing to be seen. I'm refusing to be mistranslated."

The silence didn't slam shut.

It remained between us.

Denser.

Liora looked at me as though trying not to move too quickly.

With her, listening looked like muscular effort.

"I understand," she said. "I don't want anyone telling the story of your work for you."

"But?"

"I'm afraid you might use a real boundary to build an exit."

It wasn't an empty accusation.

That was worse.

It was her fear.

"So am I," I said.

She blinked.

"That's why I proposed different wording. I want to participate. I want the images there.

Just not beneath that sentence."

I gestured toward the screen.

"Not if someone explains to the wall what we're supposed to see before anyone even looks."

She reread the email.

"You could have sent something less definitive."

"The version with 'I'm concerned' and 'could we discuss it?'"

"It was good."

"It was correct."

"That isn't a flaw."

"It is if I disappear inside it."

She looked at me.

“Do you think I wanted you to send it because it made you disappear?”

“No. I think you wanted it sent.”

“Yes.”

“I wanted it to hold.”

The studio went quiet.

Eugène climbed down from his cushion and walked over to Liora.

He sat in front of her.

A furry mediator with no qualifications whatsoever.

She didn't touch him.

She only pulled her hands farther into her sleeves.

That detail hurt more than expected.

“Hi, you,” she murmured.

“He doesn't understand the atmosphere.”

“Maybe better than we do.”

“Don't give him too much credit. He tried to eat a receipt yesterday.”

A tiny smile passed over her face.

We were still capable of letting one second of air into the room.

No more.

“I felt like you acted against what we had said,” she continued.

“We hadn't said anything specific.”

“No.”

“We argued. Then you left.”

The sentence came out more quietly than expected.

“Did you want me to stay?”

A simple question.

Terrible.

“Yes. But part of me needed you to leave.”

She didn't move.

“If I had asked you this morning before sending it, I don't know whether I would still have been able to hear what I wanted to say. I would have heard your fear, my desire not to hurt you, your urgency, my panic. By the end, I might have sent an email that no longer belonged to me.”

I lowered my eyes.

“That's why.”

She inhaled slowly.

Not enough to become someone else.

Only enough to try.

“I hadn't understood that.”

My body almost relaxed.

“But it still hurts that you did it without me.”

Oh.

“It wasn't against you.”

“I know.”

She gave a sad smile.

“See? I can say ‘I know’ too and still not know what to do with it.”

Eugène rubbed against her leg.

She stepped back slightly.

Allergy.

Distance.

Everything seemed to carry an additional meaning.

“I wanted to help you.”

“You did.”

"Not with this."

"Yes. The argument helped."

She made a sharp movement.

"Great. So I should continue doing things badly to produce results?"

"That isn't what I meant."

"No. I know."

I saw her hold back a sentence.

Knowing someone's restraints was dangerous.

"You should have waited longer," she said.

"I've been thinking for two days. For me, that almost qualifies as intense physical activity."

She didn't laugh.

Okay.

Humor rejected.

Hostile audience.

"I couldn't keep looking at that sentence without doing anything."

"You had written a draft."

"I had manufactured an elegant way not to speak yet."

She looked at the final line.

"And if Mathilde refuses?"

"Then I'll withdraw my pieces."

The words came out steadier than I felt.

Liora closed her eyes.

"There."

"What?"

"Do you hear how easily you say it?"

I gave a very brief laugh.

"Easily?"

"You know what I mean."

"No."

Our voices weren't loud.

At least we had learned that much: shouting wasn't necessary to damage a room.

"You say it as though you've already left."

"I say it like someone who knows where the door is if they're asked to become something else in order to remain in the room."

She went silent.

The sentence hadn't been prepared.

Maybe too accurate.

Maybe too heavy.

She picked up her bag.

The movement struck me before the words did.

"You're leaving?"

A stupid question.

"Yes."

"Okay."

She pulled the strap onto her shoulder.

"I'm not leaving to punish you."

"I know."

She gave me a look.

Almost reproachful.

Almost tender too.

Or I was inventing that.

"I'm leaving because I don't know what else to say without pressing the wrong place."

The sentence cut through me.

I found nothing.
“Neither do I.”
She walked to the door.
Her hand rested on the handle.
That moment again.
Liora in front of my door.
Me behind her.
Something open that didn’t know whether it should let someone through or hold them back.
She turned around.
“I hope Mathilde agrees.”
“Really?”
“Yes, Aurèl. Really. I don’t want you to lose the exhibition. I only want you not to lose yourself inside it either. And I don’t know how to tell the difference quickly enough yet.”
I remained still.
She had just said something important.
I failed to catch it before it hit the floor.
“Okay.”
A tiny response.
Not false.
“See you, Aurèl.”
“See you, Liora.”
The door closed normally.
That normality felt almost violent.
I remained standing.
The studio was exactly the same.
The table.
The couch.
The desk.
The sent email.
The closed door.
Nothing had changed.
False sentence.
I closed the sent-message window.
Then reopened it.
The email was still there.
I closed it again.
No reply from Mathilde.
Of course.
Normal people did not instantly respond to emails sent at seven in the evening.
I placed my phone facedown on the table.
A highly useful gesture.
Breathing was ordinarily a basic activity.
The human body had been practicing it for years without assistance.
And yet I almost had to think about it.
I breathed in.
Out.
No better.
I looked at the door.
Beyond it, the hallway.
Beyond that, Liora’s apartment.
The wall would begin carrying footsteps again, a voice, perhaps nothing.
I didn’t want to wait.

I couldn't do anything else.
I turned toward Eugène's cushion.
Empty.
I didn't react immediately.
He changed places often.
Couch.
Rug.
Chair.
Forbidden box.
Sink, if he thought I wasn't looking.
A busy schedule.
"Eugène?"
Nothing.
I looked at the couch.
Not there.
The chair.
Not there.
The rug beside the guitar.
Not there.
The rabbit lifted his head.
He was there.
One fixed point in a room beginning to lose its shape again.
"Eugène?"
My voice changed.
Very slightly.
Enough.
I walked around the couch.
Under the coffee table.
Beside the window.
In the bathroom.
Nothing.
The glass door was closed.
I checked anyway.
Closed.
Locked.
Fine.
So not the balcony.
Under the desk.
Behind the cabinet.
Inside the laundry basket.
Up on the mezzanine.
Nothing.
I came down too quickly and nearly missed the final step.
Fine.
I was going to die before the cat.
Impractical.
I returned to the middle of the room.
The empty cushion had changed in nature.
It was no longer an available space.
It was an absence.
I looked at the door.
Liora had left.
I had opened it.

Eugène had been near her.
Then he had rubbed himself against her leg.
Then...
I couldn't remember.
I hadn't been looking.
I had been too busy not asking her to stay.
My stomach tightened.
I opened the door.
The hallway was empty.
Quiet.
Ordinary.
Far too ordinary.
"Eugène?"
No answer.
I returned to the studio, because the human brain liked to check empty places a third time when it began to panic.
Under the table.
The bathroom.
The laundry basket.
The mezzanine.
Nothing.
The silence no longer had anything to do with Liora, Mathilde, or the exhibition.
It had become concrete.
An empty cushion.
A door that had been open a few minutes earlier.
A cat who didn't answer.
Real silence.
My phone vibrated on the table.
I startled.
Mathilde, perhaps.
Liora, perhaps.
The entire world could wait.
I grabbed my keys.
"Not now," I whispered.
But it was exactly now.

Chapter 18

Eugène doesn't answer

I grabbed my keys.

Then put them down again.

Bad idea.

Not the keys.

Putting them down.

I picked them up immediately, with the distinct feeling that my brain had just wasted a precious second on a pointless internal procedure.

The studio door was still open.

The hallway waited.

Or rather, it was there.

Hallways didn't wait for anything.

They merely became far too long when you needed them to provide an answer.

"Eugène?"

My voice remained low.

Ridiculous.

If he was already in the stairwell, he wasn't going to return out of respect for acoustic discretion.

I stepped onto the landing anyway.

Nothing.

Liora's door was closed.

Behind me, mine stood open onto the studio, where Lapin watched from his corner in complete stillness.

Fine.

So I had a rabbit witness.

Better than nothing.

Or worse.

I returned to the studio.

Not to search again.

Well.

Yes.

To search again.

Because a disappearance only became official after several humiliating checks of the same places.

Under the couch.

Nothing.

Behind the television stand.

Nothing.

Between the cushions.

Nothing except an old sock of mine, which I discovered with immediate disapproval toward the person I had become.

Under the desk.

Nothing.

In the bathroom.

Nothing.

Behind the shower curtain.

Nothing, though the sight of Eugène standing inside the bathtub, perfectly dry, staring at me like an owner surprised in a secondary room, would almost have reassured me.

I checked the cupboard.

The entryway.

The laundry basket.

The box beside the bookcase.
Especially the box.
He loved that box.
He had already managed to become invisible inside it despite eighteen and a half pounds of fur and the dignity of a former cabinet minister.
Empty.
I climbed to the mezzanine.
Too quickly.
Hit my knee against the edge of the ladder.
Sharp pain.
Very useful.
The bed.
The blanket.
The small space behind the crate of books.
Nothing.
I climbed back down.
I was already breathing hard despite having covered a cumulative hundred feet inside my own apartment.
A concerning performance.
I returned to the glass door.
Closed.
Locked.
I checked anyway.
The lock was in place.
I opened it.
Closed it.
Opened it again.
Highly constructive.
I stepped onto the balcony.
The evening air struck my face immediately.
The reinforced mesh was still there.
So were the fastenings.
The barrier I had installed after his first escape held.
I ran one hand over it.
Solid.
Well, solid by freelance-illustrator standards.
No gaps.
No obvious route through.
Obvious to me.
Not necessarily to Eugène.
Cats had a particular relationship with geometry. They entered impossible holes, occupied absurd volumes, and occasionally passed through spaces where a liquid would have hesitated.
I leaned toward the divider.
Liora's balcony.
Empty.
The chair outside.
A plant.
A sports shirt forgotten across the backrest.
Nothing gray and white.
"Eugène?"
My voice fell between the balconies.
No answer.

I looked down.

Mistake.

Again.

The courtyard seemed farther below than usual.

Which made no sense.

Gravity did not change according to my level of panic.

Normally.

The trash cans stood in a line beside the wall, two bicycles were locked to a rack, a rectangle of yellow light came from the lobby, and cars were parked along the street beyond the gate.

No cat.

No body.

No motionless shape.

I forced myself to look properly.

Not merely avoid the images.

Nothing.

Fine.

No cat visible below.

Which meant everything.

And nothing.

He could be inside the building.

At Liora's.

In the stairwell.

In the courtyard.

Under a car.

Trapped somewhere.

He might have slipped through the door while she was leaving.

While I watched her leave without watching him.

The thought arrived.

Simple.

Brutal.

I had left the door open.

Not for long.

A few seconds.

Maybe a minute.

I had been standing there inside the studio, occupied with not asking Liora to stay, thinking about the email, Mathilde, the sentence she had said before leaving.

And Eugène.

Eugène might have crossed the threshold.

Silently.

Like a cat.

Obviously like a cat.

I went back inside.

Demitrius moved one ear.

I crouched in front of him.

Completely unrelated.

I needed to perform an action that resembled verification.

"Did you see him leave?"

He chewed a strand of hay.

Fine.

The witness refused to cooperate.

I stood.

Picked up my phone.

No answer from Mathilde.
The message was from an unknown number.
Delivery postponed.
Perfect.
Even national logistics had chosen this moment to contribute to the disorder.
I put the phone down.
Then picked it up again.
I had to tell Liora.
No.
I had to check her apartment.
Telling her required a sentence.
A sentence required a choice.
A choice created the possibility of landing badly.
Knocking was simpler.
In theory.
In practice, my hand remained suspended in front of my door for two seconds.
The argument was still there.
Not in the middle of the hallway.
Not in any visible form.
But inside my body.
In the way my shoulder tensed before I even opened the door.
In the idiotic thought that she would assume I had come to discuss the email again.
In the even more idiotic fear that she wouldn't answer.
I closed my eyes.
Eugène came first.
Before my pride.
Before the awkwardness.
Before the sentence I hadn't known how to say.
Before the one I had said too much.
I stepped out.
The landing was silent.
I took three steps.
Knocked.
Not too loudly.
Then louder, because there were moments when politeness became a form of acoustic cowardice.
Footsteps.
Quick.
Even through the door, I recognized them.
The lock turned.
Liora opened.
Her jacket was still around her shoulders, as though she hadn't truly had time to enter her evening. Her hair had come slightly loose. A strand fell beside her cheek. At first, she looked at me the way you looked at someone when the conversation between you wasn't finished.
Then she saw my face.
Everything changed.
Not dramatically.
She didn't place a hand over her heart.
She didn't produce a sentence.
She simply stopped being inside the argument.
"What happened?"
I swallowed.

Very professional.

"Eugène is gone."

Her gaze immediately dropped to the floor, as though the cat might be standing between us.

Then behind me.

Then toward my apartment.

"Since when?"

"I don't know. A few minutes. I think."

"Did you check your place?"

"Everywhere."

"Everywhere everywhere?"

"Yes."

"The cupboard?"

"Yes."

"The mezzanine?"

"Yes."

"Under the couch?"

I looked at her.

She stopped.

"Okay. Insulting question. Sorry."

Then she opened the door wider.

"Wait."

She was already turning away.

"Dad!"

Her voice shot through the apartment with enough force to wake a regional governor three districts away.

I stepped forward despite myself.

"Not too loud."

She froze.

Turned around.

Looked at me.

Then immediately lowered her voice.

"Sorry."

That was almost worse than if she had continued.

Because she had listened.

Immediately.

Without arguing.

Without turning the instruction into a debate.

She disappeared into the entryway and returned with her keys in one hand and her phone in the other.

"We're going downstairs."

"I wanted to check your balcony first."

"Yes. We check. Then we go downstairs."

She was already speaking faster, but less loudly.

A strange compromise.

Very Liora.

She gestured for me to enter.

I hesitated for half a second.

Not because of the argument.

Because of the allergy.

Because of my missing cat.

Because of the very unpleasant sensation of bringing my fear into someone else's apartment.

Liora probably saw something.

“Aurèl.”

One word.

I followed her.

The apartment next door was larger than mine.

I already knew that.

But crossing it in that state felt like moving through a version of the world that was too open. A hallway with shoes. A jacket hanging from a hook. The smell of laundry detergent and reheated food. Photographs on the wall I didn't have time to examine, except one in which Liora must have been twelve, a ball under one arm, her hair everywhere.

Useless information.

So naturally my brain kept it.

Her father appeared at the end of the hallway.

Pale shirt, glasses in one hand, expression already prepared to contain an incident.

“What's happening?”

Liora answered before I could.

“Eugène is missing.”

Her father's gaze moved from his daughter to me.

Then to the open door behind us.

“What do you mean, missing?”

Serious tone.

Not cold.

Not worried yet.

Not completely.

“He isn't in my apartment anymore,” I said.

My voice sounded flat.

Very far away.

“Are you sure?”

A normal question.

Unbearable.

“Yes.”

He must have seen something on my face, because he didn't elaborate.

He put on his glasses.

“How long has he been gone?”

“A few minutes. Maybe more.”

“Was the door open?”

I clenched my teeth.

“Yes. When Liora left.”

Her name remained between us.

Not as before.

Not with its usual weight.

Liora lowered her eyes slightly.

Her father made no comment.

Thank you.

I wasn't sure I could have survived a remark about responsible supervision of domestic animals.

“First, the balcony,” he said.

Liora had already crossed the living room.

I followed.

The glass door was closed but unlocked. She opened it.

Liora's balcony appeared with its plants, chair, sports shirt, an empty pot in one corner, and the divider leading to my balcony.

No Eugène.

Liora leaned over.
Too quickly.
My body reacted before my voice.
“Careful.”
She stopped.
Her fingers closed around the railing.
“I’m being careful.”
She actually was.
It was almost visible.
Her father stepped behind us.
He examined the passage.
The mesh.
The ledge.
The floor.
“He doesn’t appear to have crossed here.”
“He could have,” Liora said.
“Not if Aurèl’s apartment door was open. The hallway is more likely.”
The hallway is more likely.
A beautiful sentence.
Very simple.
Very catastrophic.
I looked at the balcony floor.
A gray hair was caught beside the leg of the chair.
My heart stopped.
I crouched.
Picked it up.
Looked at it.
Hair.
Gray.
Ridiculous.
Eugène shed enough fur to form a second independent animal. There had probably been hairs on Liora for weeks, in the hallway, on the doormat, in places where he had never officially set foot.
“Is it his?” she asked.
“Maybe.”
My voice wasn’t doing well.
Liora didn’t say it meant nothing.
She didn’t say it wasn’t serious.
She only looked at the hair between my fingers.
Then at me.
“We’re going to find him.”
I didn’t answer.
Because I didn’t know that.
And because part of me was afraid replying would break the sentence.
Her father was already taking out his phone.
“I’ll check the floors. Liora, go downstairs with Aurèl. Start with the stairwell and courtyard. I’ll tell your mother.”
“I’ll get treats,” she said.
“Good idea.”
We went back inside.
Her mother appeared in the living room almost immediately, as though she had heard only the necessary words. Her hair was tied back, she wore a long cardigan, and her face was gentler than the situation deserved.

“Eugène?”

Liora nodded.

“He’s missing.”

Her mother looked at me.

Not reproachfully.

Not in panic.

With direct attention that almost made me unstable.

“What does he like?” she asked.

A practical question.

Blessed.

“Dry food. Tuna. Cardboard boxes. Places he isn’t allowed.”

“Fine.”

She disappeared into the kitchen and returned with a small plastic container.

“Does this smell strong?”

I looked at her.

“Sorry?”

“We need something that will attract him.”

She opened it.

Fish.

Very strong.

Very immediate.

Completely contrary to social convention.

“Mackerel,” she said.

“Mom, did you just sacrifice dinner?”

“There’s still pasta.”

Her father ran a hand over his face.

“That wasn’t the meal plan.”

“The meal is no longer the subject.”

I almost smiled.

Failed.

Something began inside my mouth, then came apart.

Liora’s mother may have noticed.

She also handed me a small flashlight.

“Here. It helps under cars.”

Under cars.

The sentence entered my chest.

I took the flashlight.

“Thank you.”

My voice sounded almost normal.

Which was worse.

Serious things sometimes had that absurd quality.

They made you polite.

All four of us stepped onto the landing.

Liora’s father took the stairs upward.

“I’ll check the sixth floor, then come down one floor at a time.”

“We live on the fifth, Dad.”

“I know where we live, Liora.”

“I’m clarifying.”

“Unnecessarily.”

“That’s my specialty.”

He gave her a look.

Not stern.

Not really.

Then looked at me.
“If he is inside the building, avoid frightening him. No sudden movements.”
Liora inhaled to answer.
Then stopped.
She looked at me.
“No sudden movements,” she repeated more softly.
As though saying it to herself.
We went downstairs.
The staircase I had used hundreds of times immediately changed in nature.
Every landing became a possibility.
Every step a delay.
Every door a place behind which Eugène might be sitting, offended and alive, waiting for the humans to stop panicking long enough to open it.
“Eugène?” I called.
My voice didn’t sound like mine.
Not entirely.
It was thinner.
More exposed.
I didn’t like hearing it in the stairwell.
Behind me, Liora called too.
“Eugène!”
Too loudly.
I turned around.
She stopped immediately.
“Sorry.”
I shook my head.
Not at her.
At my inability to speak normally.
“More softly. If he’s scared...”
“Yes. Of course.”
She lowered her voice.
“Eugène?”
Almost a whisper.
Strangely awkward on her.
As though speaking softly required an instruction manual.
We checked the fourth-floor landing.
Behind a neighbor’s plants.
Beside the utility cupboard.
Under the little bench where someone always left expired catalogs.
Nothing.
Third floor.
Nothing.
Second.
A door opened.
A man stuck his head out.
The second-floor neighbor.
I knew him in the form of coughing.
“Is there a problem?”
I opened my mouth.
No useful sound emerged.
Liora took over.
“We’re looking for a gray-and-white cat. Fairly large. Very handsome. A bit of a thief.”
I looked at her.

She made a brief grimace.

“Sorry. Reflex.”

The neighbor frowned.

“I haven’t seen a cat.”

“If he enters your apartment, can you call us?” Liora asked.

She took out her phone as though preparing to organize a crisis unit with a database and real-time reports.

Very Liora.

Very useful.

Very too much.

“Yes,” he said. “I mean, I can tell you if I see him.”

“Thank you.”

She recorded his floor in her phone anyway.

“Second floor, nothing.”

I saw it from the corner of my eye.

I said nothing.

Because I would have made a spreadsheet.

Probably.

With columns.

And colors.

We continued.

First floor.

Nothing.

Lobby.

Nothing.

Liora’s mother joined us with the container of mackerel, treats in a bowl, and a folded towel over one arm.

“In case we find him injured,” she said simply.

I looked at the towel.

White.

Clean.

Too concrete.

My stomach contracted.

Liora looked at it too.

This time, she said nothing.

Her father came down the stairs a few seconds later.

“Nothing upstairs. Not in the hallways or beside the utility rooms.”

He looked more serious.

We went out into the courtyard.

The evening light had that color between two states.

Not yet night.

No longer truly day.

The corners were becoming less defined. The shadows beneath the cars looked thicker than necessary.

I immediately hated cars.

All of them.

Their weight.

Their heat.

Their wheels.

The dark spaces underneath.

Very unfair toward objects that were simply parked.

I crouched beside the first one.

Flashlight.

White beam.

Dust.

Dead leaves.

An old ticket.

No cat.

“Eugène?”

Nothing.

Second car.

Nothing.

Third.

A shape.

I froze.

Plastic bag.

I almost had a heart attack because of salad packaging.

Fine.

The modern city was a threat.

Liora was checking the bushes along the wall, moving more slowly than she wanted to. I could see it. Her entire body seemed designed to run from one point to another. Here, she was forcing herself to move carefully.

One step.

Look.

Listen.

Another step.

Her father checked the gate, the entrance to the trash room, and the corners beside the bicycles.

Her mother gently shook the bowl of treats.

Not too loudly.

Just enough.

The sound was tiny.

Familiar.

At home, Eugène would have appeared within two seconds, looking as though he had been summoned to an important meeting.

Here, nothing.

I crouched beside a black car.

“Eugène?”

My voice broke on the final syllable.

I lowered my head.

Fine.

Not now.

I didn’t have time for that.

A hand entered my field of vision.

Not touching me.

Beside me.

Liora had crouched too, but at a distance.

She tilted her head to look beneath the car.

“Nothing.”

I stared into the darkness beneath the chassis.

“He could be injured and not answering.”

“Yes.”

She hadn’t said no.

Thank you.

Really.

The things that helped were strange sometimes.

She could have said, Of course not.
She could have said, Don't think about that.
She could have filled the air to push the image away.
She didn't.
She simply accepted that the possibility existed in the courtyard with us.
And that made it less alone.
Not less frightening.
Less alone.
We continued.
The trash room smelled of damp, wet cardboard, and failed collective decisions.
Her father opened the door with almost ceremonial care.
"Eugène?"
Hearing the name in his voice did something to me.
No longer "that cat."
No longer "your cat."
Eugène.
He looked behind the bins, between the bags, into the corner where pipes descended from the ceiling.
Nothing.
"He wouldn't have come in here," Liora said.
"A cat can go anywhere," her father replied.
"Yes, but he has taste."
"Liora."
She fell silent.
Then looked at me.
"Sorry."
This time, I almost managed to smile.
"He once tried to sleep in my laundry bag."
"So he doesn't have that much taste."
"No."
"Okay."
A small piece of air.
Again.
Then the fear returned.
Normal.
Specific.
Necessary.
We searched the cellars accessible from the courtyard. Not the cellars exactly, more the entrance before them, with a heavy door, an unreliable light switch, and a staircase descending into a cold smell.
"Could he go down there?" Liora asked.
"Yes."
"Could he get back up?"
I didn't answer.
Her father switched on the light.
It flickered.
Once.
Twice.
Then remained dim.
A very appropriate atmosphere for a disappearance.
All that was missing was ominous music and a neighbor saying, "No one has gone down here since last winter."
I descended two steps.

“Eugène?”

The sound fell farther down.

No movement.

Only a pipe.

A steady drip.

My heart, far too present.

Liora’s mother stayed at the top with the flashlight pointed toward the stairs.

“Don’t go too far. We don’t know whether any doors are open below.”

A rational sentence.

Not reassuring.

Her father descended with me.

Liora remained behind.

I could sense that she wanted to move ahead.

I could also sense that she wasn’t.

Halfway down, something scratched in one corner.

I froze.

So did Liora.

Her father raised one hand.

Silence.

The sound came again.

Small.

Dry.

I aimed the flashlight.

A rat?

A bag?

A monster?

Nothing.

Then a shadow passed beside a hole in the wall.

A mouse.

Probably.

I had never been so disappointed not to see a cat.

“We’re going back up,” her father said.

“Wait.”

I called again.

“Eugène?”

Nothing.

The silence answered with far too much diligence.

We went back outside.

The courtyard air felt almost warm.

A ground-floor neighbor opened her window.

“Are you looking for something?”

Liora turned.

“A gray-and-white cat. Have you seen him?”

The woman thought.

I wanted her to think faster.

Which was unfair.

No one was required to produce feline information under pressure.

“Not today,” she said.

Today.

The word struck me.

“You’ve seen him before?”

“The large one?”

I experienced a second of profoundly misplaced offense.

"Yes," Liora replied. "The magnificent one."
"He's been in the courtyard before, hasn't he?"
I straightened.
"What?"

The neighbor looked at me.

"I think so. A few weeks ago. On the wall. I saw him pass by from the window."

I looked at Liora.

She looked at me.

So did her father.

Fine.

New information.

Wonderful.

My cat had therefore been leading a clandestine outdoor life under my roof.

Under my roof.

An inaccurate expression for an apartment, but indignation required materials.

"Are you certain?" her father asked.

"Gray and white, large tail, looked like he thought the place belonged to him?"

"That's him," Liora said.

"Then yes. Maybe. Cats look alike."

An entirely useless sentence after describing his complete personality.

I took two steps toward the wall.

It ran along the back of the courtyard beside the bushes, then joined a small area between our building and the one next door. A kind of narrow service space with pipes, fencing, and the low roof of a bicycle shed accessible only from a difficult angle.

I had seen it a thousand times.

I had never actually looked at it.

Classic mistake.

The world contained far too many places you only noticed during a panic.

"Could he have gone there?" Liora asked.

She pointed toward the space behind the shed.

"Yes," her father said. "But the passage is narrow."

"For us."

He didn't answer.

Because she was right.

We moved toward the back of the courtyard.

The ground beside the wall was damp.

A mixture of dirt, leaves, and dust. I examined the marks as though I knew how to read an investigation.

I didn't.

Obviously.

I could identify a poorly adjusted digital brush from fifty feet away, but not a cat's paw print in mud.

Very useful, professional specialization.

Liora crouched beside the fence.

"Eugène?"

Her voice was low.

Actually low.

The name traveled into the narrow space.

Nothing.

Her mother shook the bowl of treats.

A tiny sound.

Again.

We waited.

Her father looked at the top of the shed.
“He could climb onto the roof from the bins, then the wall.”
I followed the route.
Trash can.
Wall.
Ledge.
Roof of the shed.
Then a gap between the shed and the neighboring wall.
Too narrow for us.
Not for him.
Obviously.
Liora shot upright.
Too quickly.
“I’ll check the other side.”
“Liora, wait.”
Her father and I spoke at the same time.
She stopped.
Her shoulders rose.
She wanted to leave.
Run.
Go around.
Check.
Do something forcefully enough to outrun the fear.
I understood that, in a different way.
I wanted to check the same places until I wore down the floor.
She wanted to expand the perimeter.
Two bad solutions that, together, perhaps made a decent search.
“We’ll go together,” her father said.
“Yes, but there’s a gate on the street side. I can go through the service entrance.”
“Not alone.”
“Dad.”
“Not alone.”
Definitive tone.
She clenched her teeth.
Then looked at me.
For one second, I thought she might ask me to decide.
A terrible idea.
I had no authority in this family.
I barely had authority over my own cat.
Current evidence: none.
“We can go around,” I said.
My voice sounded steadier.
Not because I felt better.
Because there was a direction.
A place.
An action.
That was already enormous.
We crossed the courtyard toward the gate.
Liora’s mother remained beside the wall.
“I’ll keep calling from here.”
She gently shook the treats.
“Eugène? Come here, sweetheart.”
Sweetheart?

More like heavyweight.
 Her father opened the gate.
 The street was louder than the courtyard.
 Scooters.
 Cars.
 Voices in the distance.
 Every sound became a threat.
 An engine, especially.
 An engine had suddenly gained the power to end everything.
 I looked under the cars parked along the sidewalk.
 Again.
 Flashlight.
 Wheel.
 Oil on the ground.
 Dust.
 No cat.
 Liora walked ahead, but more slowly than she could have.
 I could see it.
 Each time she moved two steps ahead, she slowed.
 Looked back.
 Not for long.
 Just enough to check that I was following.
 The argument was still there.
 It hadn't disappeared.
 It walked with us, slightly behind, silent, less urgent.
 "Does he know the street?" her father asked.
 "No."
 Then I remembered the neighbor.
 The wall.
 The courtyard.
 Everything I might not know.
 "I don't think so."
 More honest.
 Less reassuring.
 Liora didn't comment.
 We went around the building.
 The service entrance was a small metal gate between two walls, wedged beside an electrical room. It had a high latch.
 Liora reached through the bars.
 "I can open it."
 "Liora," her father said.
 "I've opened it before to retrieve a ball."
 He looked at her.
 "When?"
 "That isn't important right now."
 "It will be later."
 "Perfect. Threat recorded."
 She forced the latch.
 The gate gave way with a deeply unpleasant squeal.
 We entered a narrow passage behind the building.
 The smell of dust, metal, cold earth.
 Light barely reached inside.
 Liora took out her phone and turned on the flashlight.

Her father did the same.
“Eugène?” I called.
Nothing.
We moved in single file.
Liora in front.
Me in the middle.
Her father behind.
A concerning arrangement for someone whose emotional stability already depended on a missing cat.
I looked at the ground.
Then the pipes.
Then along the wall.
A piece of fur.
No.
Moss.
Fine.
I was going to end up detaining every stone for questioning.
The passage opened onto the rear of the bicycle shed.
From this side, its roof reached chest height. A flat surface covered in leaves, dust, and small stones.
Liora directed her light over it.
“There.”
I froze.
A mark.
Not a cat.
A mark in the dust.
Several.
Small.
Round.
I didn’t know whether they were paw prints.
I wanted them to be paw prints.
I didn’t want them to be paw prints.
Her father leaned closer.
“Possible.”
A cautious word.
Terrible.
Liora was already placing a hand on the edge of the roof.
“I can climb up.”
“No,” her father said.
“I’m the lightest.”
“No.”
“Dad, if he’s behind there...”
“No.”
The third time, it was fear.
She heard it.
So did I.
She removed her hand.
Not entirely.
Her fingers remained on the edge.
Ready.
“We can look without climbing,” I said.
I raised the flashlight.
At first glance, the roof was empty.

Leaves.
An old deflated ball.
A gutter.
A pipe against the wall.
And at the back, where the roof met the neighboring building, a dark space between two ducts.
Very narrow.
I called again.
“Eugène?”
Silence.
Then.
A sound.
Almost nothing.
Not a clear meow.
Not the kind of sound that allowed you to say, There he is.
More like a short cry caught somewhere between air and stone.
I stopped breathing.
Liora immediately aimed her flashlight toward the back.
“Did you hear that?”
“Yes.”
Her father moved closer.
“Again.”
I stepped toward the edge.
“Eugène?”
This time, there was a meow.
Weak.
Hoarse.
Coming from behind the ducts, or the hollow between the roof and the wall.
My body had a simple reaction.
It wanted to climb.
Immediately.
Without a plan.
Without thought.
Highly unusual.
Very bad.
I placed both hands on the edge of the shed.
Liora caught my wrist.
Not hard.
Enough.
“Wait.”
I looked at her.
She was pale.
Her eyes were wide.
She was afraid too.
But her hand was holding me back.
Not to prevent me from acting.
To prevent the action from becoming a fall.
“We’re going to get him out,” she said.
She spoke quickly.
Then corrected herself.
Lower.
“We’re going to get him out.”
The meow came again.

Fainter.
Or the same.
I no longer knew.
From the courtyard, Liora's mother called:
"Did you find something?"
Liora turned her head.
"We heard him!"
Then she left.
Immediately.
Too quickly.
Toward the other end of the passage, toward the courtyard, the wall, another way of
reaching the roof.
"Liora!"
Her father followed.
I remained in front of the shed for a fraction of a second.
The beam of my flashlight shook across the leaves, the marks, the black hollow.
I wanted to tell her to slow down.
Liora.
Me.
Everyone.
But Eugène meowed again.
And this time, I ran.

Chapter 19

Too high

I ran.

Very badly.

That should be clarified.

I wasn't someone who ran often, except perhaps mentally, and even then mostly toward imaginary catastrophes. My legs had not received the memo. They charged down the narrow passage with disorganized enthusiasm, my flashlight shaking in one hand, my keys in the other, my heart far too high in my throat.

Ahead of me, Liora was faster.

Obviously.

She wasn't even really running.

She moved with the natural efficiency of people whose bodies had always been used to do things, not merely carry anxiety from one place to another.

"Liora!" her father called behind us.

She barely slowed.

Not enough.

"I heard him!"

"So did we," he replied.

"Then he's there!"

"That isn't a reason to..."

She had already turned at the end of the passage.

I followed.

The courtyard reappeared all at once, darker now. The lobby light cast a yellow rectangle across the paving stones. Liora's mother was still beside the wall, bowl of treats in her hand, towel over one forearm. She saw us coming and immediately straightened.

"Where is he?"

"Behind the shed," Liora answered. "Or on top. Well, behind it. We heard him."

"Is he meowing?"

I tried to answer.

A sound came out.

Not a word.

Very useful.

Liora glanced at me.

Not to judge.

To check.

Then she turned to her mother.

"Yes. Faintly."

The word faintly sounded terrible coming from her. It didn't suit her energy. It seemed to force her to hold something delicately between two fingers when everything in her wanted to seize it with both hands.

Her father arrived behind us.

"We need to understand exactly where he is before doing anything."

"He's trapped," Liora said.

"Probably."

"Then we need to get him out."

"Yes. Methodically."

She closed her eyes for half a second.

I knew that expression.

Methodically had just become an obstacle.

I looked at the bicycle shed.

From the courtyard, its roof was higher than it had seemed from the back.

Not very high.

That was the problem.

Not high enough to immediately call dangerous.

Too high to fall from without consequences.

About six feet, perhaps. Six and a half with the ledge. A flat roof covered in dead leaves, pressed against the wall of the neighboring building. Behind it, a tangle of ducts, grates, and pipes formed a dark, narrow area forgotten by all architectural logic.

Exactly the kind of place a cat might consider an excellent decision.

I approached.

"Eugène?"

Nothing.

Then, a few seconds later, a meow.

Clearer this time.

Short.

Rough.

My body moved toward the wall.

So did Liora's.

Her father held one hand in front of her.

"No."

"I haven't done anything."

"You were about to."

"Yes, because he's up there."

"And you're staying down here."

"Dad..."

"Liora."

He was a father before anything else.

I raised the flashlight toward the roof.

The beam trembled over the leaves, the marks in the dust, the old deflated ball, then finally caught a shape.

Gray.

White.

Round.

My breath stopped.

"There."

Everyone froze.

Eugène was sitting behind a pipe on a slightly lower section of the roof, nearly wedged between the wall and a metal duct. He didn't appear trapped in the dramatic sense.

Not injured.

Not sprawled out.

Not crushed.

Sitting.

Very upright.

His ears were slightly lowered, admittedly.

But he sat with the insulting dignity of an animal who had mobilized four humans, interrupted an argument, compromised an evening, and probably believed the real problem was the absence of a cushion.

Relief struck me so violently it almost hurt.

Then another panic immediately took its place.

He was there.

Now we had to retrieve him.

Without making him fall.

Without letting him jump toward the street.

Without anyone getting hurt.

Without me, ideally, becoming a local news item.
 “Eugène,” I whispered.
 He turned his head.
 Looked at me.
 Then meowed.
 Once.
 As though slightly annoyed by the quality of the service.
 “He’s alive,” Liora said.
 Her voice broke on alive.
 Barely.
 Enough for me to hear.
 I kept my eyes on Eugène.
 “Yes.”
 The word contained nothing.
 And everything.
 I took one step toward the shed.
 “We need a ladder.”
 “The building manager has one,” Liora’s father said.
 “Is he here?”
 “Probably not at this hour.”
 “We can call him,” her mother said.
 “Or the fire department,” Liora added.
 Her father looked at her.
 “The fire department for a cat?”
 “People call the fire department for cats.”
 “The fire department has other emergencies.”
 “Fine. The building manager, then.”
 “I can also check the utility room,” he said. “There may be a stepladder.”
 I continued staring at Eugène.
 He was barely moving.
 Which was a good sign.
 Or bad.
 Very convenient.
 “We shouldn’t push him into moving,” I said.
 My voice was returning.
 Not entirely.
 But it had regained a shape.
 “If he gets scared, he might go farther behind the ducts.”
 “Or jump,” Liora said.
 No one answered.
 Thank you again.
 Useless certainties did not need confirmation.
 Her mother placed the bowl of treats on the ground beside the wall.
 “We can try to draw him over gently.”
 She shook it slightly.
 The sound made Eugène raise his head.
 Oh.
 Fine.
 Civilization still held together through appetite.
 “Eugène, come here, sweetheart.”
 Her mother had a gentle voice.
 Not syrupy.

Gentle in a practical sense. A voice that wasn't trying to persuade the entire courtyard, only the cat.

Eugène looked at the bowl.

Then at me.

Then at the pipe.

Then stayed where he was.

Of course.

He had to participate in the dramatic tension.

An animal with terrible taste.

Liora stepped toward the wall.

"He can climb down there."

She indicated a route.

Trash can.

Wall.

Edge of the shed.

Pipe.

A kind of absurd staircase only a cat, an athletic person, or someone who had completely lost all sense of caution could consider.

"Or someone could climb up that way," she added.

No.

The word appeared in my head before my mouth.

Her father said it aloud.

"No."

"Dad, I can just climb onto the wall. Not the roof."

"No."

"Look, it's low."

"It isn't low."

"For me, it is."

"That isn't an argument."

She turned toward me.

Mistake.

Terrible mistake.

I saw in her eyes that she was looking for an ally.

Or perhaps permission.

Or simply someone who understood that waiting was eating through her from the inside.

"Aurèl, I can reach him."

"No."

The answer came immediately.

Too sharply.

Liora remained still.

I almost felt guilty.

Then Eugène meowed again.

More weakly.

The guilt vanished.

"We're getting a ladder," I said.

"That'll take time."

"Too bad."

"He's there now."

"Exactly."

Her jaw tightened.

"If we wait, he might move."

"If you climb, he might panic."

"He knows me."

"He likes you, but he's allergic to common sense."

"Aurèl."

"Liora."

Her name came out unusually.

Lower.

Harder.

She heard it.

So did her father.

Her mother probably did too.

I heard it most clearly afterward.

Like an object dropped too hard.

Liora lowered her eyes, then looked at the shed.

"I want to help."

"I know."

"No, you think I only want to rush in."

I didn't answer.

Because that was partly true.

Because it was partly false.

Because I didn't know how to say both without knocking something else over.

She continued more quickly:

"I can climb onto the wall, hold the grate, and reach behind the pipe. I don't need to step onto the roof. Just get him to come toward me."

"And if you slip?"

"I'm not going to slip."

A dangerous sentence.

Extremely dangerous.

I recognized it immediately.

The physical version of every time she said she had it under control, that she could manage, that it would be fine, that her body would follow because it always had.

"You don't know that," I said.

"I know what my body can do."

That sentence.

It wasn't arrogant.

Not exactly.

It was built on years of practice, training, reflexes, exhaustion endured, and limits pushed often enough that they had begun to resemble suggestions.

I understood.

It didn't reassure me.

"Exactly," her father said.

Liora shot him a look.

"Not now."

"Yes. Now."

Liora's mother intervened gently.

"We're going to find something safe to climb with."

"By the time we find it, he could fall."

"And by the time you climb too quickly, so could you," her father said.

She inhaled sharply.

I saw that the sentence had struck her.

Too directly.

Not because it was unfair.

Because it wasn't unfair enough.

Eugène moved.

Everyone turned.

He edged his head out from behind the pipe, placed one paw on the flat section, hesitated, then moved backward again.

"No, no, no," I breathed.

As though the cat would understand repeated negation in a vertical emergency.

Liora stepped forward.

"We have to do something."

"We are doing something," I said.

"No. We're watching."

I turned toward her.

The argument was still in her voice.

Not the same one.

Not the exhibition.

Not the email.

But the same root.

Me wanting to hold the space.

Her unable to tolerate stillness when someone was hurting.

Even if that someone was an obese cat wedged behind a duct and not actually in pain.

"Finding a method is doing something," I said.

"Not quickly enough."

"For you."

She opened her mouth.

Closed it again.

Liora's mother bent down and picked up the bowl.

"I'll try from the other side."

She carefully moved around the wall, barely shaking the bowl.

Her father took out his phone.

"I'm calling the building manager."

Finally.

A stable decision.

Adult.

Appropriate.

He dialed.

Silence.

"Voicemail."

Fine.

Stability had just hung up.

Liora raised her eyes toward the roof.

I saw her change before she moved.

Her body made a decision.

Not her face.

Her body.

"Liora, no."

Too late.

She had already placed one foot on the lower part of the wall.

"I'm only climbing here."

"Get down."

"I'm just looking."

Her father took two steps forward.

"Liora."

"I'm stable."

She gripped the metal grate with one hand.

Her shoe found a hold between two stones.

The movement was fluid.

Too fluid.
 That was the problem.
 She didn't climb like someone taking a risk.
 She climbed like someone performing a familiar movement.
 An almost ordinary one.
 Her sleeve slipped slightly up her forearm.
 Her fingers tightened around the grate.
 The fabric of her pants brushed against the wall.
 Her left foot settled onto a tiny projection I wouldn't even have called a foothold.
 "Liora, get down," her father said.
 This time, his voice trembled.
 Very slightly.
 She didn't answer.
 "I can see him better from here," she said.
 She was on the wall now, level with the edge of the shed.
 Not on the roof yet.
 Not quite.
 Just high enough for my entire body to reject the scene.
 I calculated too late.
 The height.
 The distance.
 The hard ground.
 The angle of her ankle.
 The damp ledge.
 The flashlight shaking so badly in my hand that the beam moved from her shoulder to the wall, then Eugène, then the empty space.
 "Don't move too quickly," I said.
 Very useful.
 Telling Liora that was probably like advising rain to fall in moderation.
 But she nodded.
 "I know."
 No.
 She didn't.
 Or she knew something else.
 She knew her strength.
 Not what fear did to movement.
 She reached one hand toward Eugène.
 "Eugène... come here."
 Her voice was gentle.
 Too gentle for what she was doing with her body.
 Eugène looked at her.



An entirely absurd thought passed through me.
 If he came toward her, I would forgive many things.
 Him.
 Her.
 Possibly even the exhibition organizers.
 Eugène took one step forward.
 Then another.

Liora smiled.
Barely.
“There. Come here.”
Her mother shook the treats from the other side.
The sound traveled up to the roof.
Eugène hesitated.
He looked at Liora.
Then the bowl.
Then me.
I wanted to promise him anything.
Tuna.
A new cushion.
Temporary permission to sleep on my keyboard.
Limited territorial expansion.
Everything.
“Come here,” I said.
My voice was ridiculous.
Full.
He moved forward again.
Liora extended her arm a little farther.
“I can almost reach him.”
“Don’t grab him,” I said.
“I’m just going to...”
“Don’t grab him.”
She stopped.
Her fingers a few inches from Eugène.
He sniffed her hand.
Of course.
The most delicate moment of our week, and the gentleman was conducting an olfactory inspection.
Then Eugène did what cats always did when several humans invested their entire emotional stability in one simple trajectory.
He changed his mind.
Abruptly.
He turned around, slipped behind the pipe, slid along the duct, then jumped onto a lower section of the roof.
“Eugène!”
Everything happened in fragments.
Liora turning.
Her right foot searching for support.
The old ball rolling across the roof.
Her father saying her name more loudly.
Liora’s hand releasing the grate for one second.
Eugène jumping down with perfect control onto the trash can.
Me moving forward too late.
Liora trying to follow him with her eyes.
Her left shoe slipping.
The sharp scrape of the sole against stone.
Her body tipping.
Not far.
Not like in a movie.
Not enough for the world to truly slow down.
Only a mistake.

A bad angle.
One human second.
She tried to catch herself on the grate.
Her hand caught the metal.
Her right foot came down toward the ground.
But too quickly.
Too twisted.
Her ankle folded.
A sound escaped her mouth.
Not a full cry.
A short, strangled sound.
She fell onto her side, her knee striking the paving stone, one hand still gripping the wall.
I was beside her without understanding how.
“Liora.”
Her name had come out of me.
Not loudly.
Not gently.
Bare.
Her father arrived almost at the same time.
“Liora!”
“I’m fine,” she said immediately.
Obviously.
Obviously.
She was on the ground with one hand against the wall, her face white, saying she was fine.
I hated that sentence with immediate violence.
“Don’t move,” I said.
“I’m fine.”
“Don’t move.”
She looked at me.
Her eyes were bright.
With pain.
With anger.
Both.
“It’s nothing. I just landed badly.”
“You just fell.”
“Not really.”
I stared at her.
“Not really?”
Fine.
My voice had just entered new territory.
Too calm.
Far too calm.
Liora tried to bring her leg beneath her.
Her face tightened.
She stopped.
The silence that followed was much louder than any cry.
Her father crouched beside her.
“Where?”
“Ankle.”
“Which ankle?”
“Left.”
“Can you move your toes?”

"Dad."

"Answer."

She closed her eyes.

Moved her foot slightly.

Her face twisted.

"Yes."

Her mother arrived with the towel and the bowl of treats.

And Eugène.

Because while Liora had been falling, Eugène had calmly jumped from the trash can to the ground, then approached the bowl as though the entire operation had always been intended to organize outdoor catering.

He was eating.

He was eating.

I looked at my cat.

Then at Liora on the ground.

Then at my cat again.

Part of my brain noted that humor still existed somewhere, but very far away, inside a locked room.

"He's here," Liora's mother said gently.

I couldn't answer.

Eugène raised his head, crumbs of dry food beside his whiskers.

No remorse.

No awareness.

No moral participation.

Liora's father removed his jacket and placed it behind her so she could lean back.

"Don't put any weight on it."

"I know."

"You didn't know thirty seconds ago."

She gave him a look.

Then turned away.

Her breathing was fast.

She was trying to control it.

The effort showed.

That was new.

Or rather, it was the first time her body refused to support the official statement.

Liora's mother held the bowl out to me.

"Aurèl, take Eugène."

I finally moved.

I approached the cat.

"Come here."

My voice was still shaking.

Eugène allowed himself to be picked up with scandalous ease.

As though he had never considered escaping.

As though we were the strange ones in this story.

I held him against me.

He was warm.

Heavy.

Real.

His heart beat against my forearm.

The relief returned.

Then immediately collided with Liora sitting on the ground, one hand wrapped around her ankle.

I couldn't receive it completely.

Not now.

Eugène was alive.

And Liora was in pain.

The two facts refused to fit in the same place.

“Can you stand?” her father asked.

“Yes.”

“Without putting weight on it?”

She answered too quickly.

“Yes.”

“Liora.”

“I can.”

She placed one hand against the wall, the other on her father’s arm, and tried to stand.

She almost succeeded.

Then her left foot touched the ground.

Her face emptied.

Not for long.

One second.

But I saw it.

She sat back down immediately, despite herself.

And then, finally, she said nothing.

That was the worst.

I tightened my hold on Eugène.

He purred.

Of course.

Excellent timing.

“It’s probably a sprain,” her mother said.

Calm voice.

Practical.

“We need ice.”

“I don’t need ice,” Liora said.

“Yes, you do,” her mother replied.

“I only need to walk it off.”

“No,” her father said.

“I know my body.”

This time, I laughed.

Not really a laugh.

Something dry.

Ugly.

Everyone looked at me.

Liora especially.

I stared at her.

“You knew the wall too.”

Her mouth opened slightly.

Then closed.

The sentence had been too harsh.

I knew immediately.

I didn’t take it back.

Not yet.

The fear was still too close to my skin.

Her father looked at me too, but said nothing.

Maybe because he was thinking the same thing.

Maybe because he could see I wasn’t lecturing her.

I was holding a living cat against me so I wouldn’t shake.

Liora looked away.
“I wanted to help.”
Her voice was quiet.
Not defensive this time.
Or less so.
I closed my eyes for a second.
There.
That was the problem.
She had wanted to help.
It was true.
Entirely true.
And that was exactly why I was furious.
Because she hadn’t climbed to show off.
She hadn’t climbed to prove she was right.
She had climbed because she had seen my fear and wanted to stop it with her body.
The way she stopped everything.
Quickly.
Forcefully.
By putting herself in the middle.
I opened my eyes.
“I know.”
She looked up.
I continued more quietly:
“That’s what makes me sick.”
She didn’t answer.
Her mother stood.
“We’re going inside. Now.”
“To our apartment,” her father said.
“The studio is closer,” I said.
The words escaped before I could think.
Everyone looked at me.
I immediately hated having become someone who offered his apartment during a family situation.
But it was true.
My studio was five floors away by elevator or stairs, but closer to the building entrance than their apartment according to the route from the courtyard?
No.
Absurd.
It wasn’t closer at all.
Not remotely.
My brain had invented an emotional geography.
Fine.
I continued:
“I mean... I have ice. And Eugène needs to be put inside. But you also have ice. Probably. You’re a functional family.”
Silence.
Liora’s mother looked at me.
Then, unexpectedly, smiled very slightly.
“We have ice.”
“Yes. Of course.”
“But your apartment is directly beside ours.”
“Yes.”
“And she can sit at your place while we see whether she can get back to ours afterward.”

Liora's father looked ready to object.
 Then he looked at his daughter.
 Then her ankle.
 "Fine."
 Liora raised her eyes.
 "I can walk."
 Three voices answered at the same time:
 "No."
 Mine too.
 Too quickly.
 She looked at me.
 I didn't take the word back.
 Not this time.
 "You can't always repair things by climbing faster than everyone else," I said.
 The sentence fell.
 More gently than expected.
 More heavily too.
 Liora remained still.
 Her face changed.
 Not only hurt by her ankle.
 Struck somewhere else.
 I regretted the sentence and held onto it at the same time.
 Unfair in form.
 True at its center.
 A hateful combination.
 "I didn't want to scare you," she said.
 I looked at Eugène.
 Then her.
 "Too late."
 She lowered her eyes.
 Her father placed one arm beneath hers.
 "We stand slowly. No weight on the left."
 "Dad, I can..."
 "No negotiation."
 Liora's mother folded the towel, retrieved the bowl, then handed me the container of mackerel.
 "Keep this in case you need to lure him."
 "Now that he's in my arms?"
 She looked at Eugène, who was already turning his head toward the smell.
 "Especially now."
 I took the container awkwardly in one hand, Eugène in my other arm.
 Liora stood with her father's help.
 She made a small hop on her right foot.
 Her face remained closed.
 Too closed.
 She was in pain.
 She was trying to treat the pain like a logistical detail.
 Fortunately, her body was beginning to betray the official version.
 We crossed the courtyard very slowly.
 It was strange to see Liora move slowly.
 Not slowing by choice.
 Slowing because she had to.

Each movement seemed to cost her more than the pain itself. Her father supported her on one side. Her mother walked on the other, ready to intervene. I followed with Eugène against me, useless and necessary at the same time.

The cat continued purring.

Liora heard him.

She turned her head.

“Seriously?”

“Yes,” I said.

“He’s purring?”

“He thinks it was a successful outing.”

A tiny laugh escaped her.

Then she immediately grimaced.

“Don’t make me laugh.”

“I hadn’t planned to.”

“Your face can be funny on its own.”

“Thank you.”

“That wasn’t an insult.”

“Very reassuring.”

Her father gave us a look.

Not exactly stern.

Exhausted.

Perhaps slightly relieved too.

“Can we avoid absurd conversations while she is limping?”

“It’s my pain-management method,” Liora said.

“It isn’t working.”

“A little.”

“No.”

Liora’s mother pressed the elevator button.

We waited.

The lobby was too brightly lit.

Everything looked ordinary now.

Mailboxes.

Plastic plants.

A building notice reminding residents not to leave bulky waste in the trash room.

There was something indecent about buildings continuing to look like buildings after a fear.

The elevator arrived.

Small.

Obviously.

We entered with questionable coordination.

Liora’s father supporting Liora.

Her mother carrying the bowl and the towel.

Me carrying Eugène.

Eugène possessing no spatial awareness whatsoever.

He tried to place one paw on my shoulder to inspect the panel of buttons.

“No,” I murmured.

He insisted.

“Not now.”

Liora exhaled.

“Maybe he wants to choose the floor.”

“He has already chosen enough things tonight.”

She looked down at her ankle.

“Yes.”

Silence.
The elevator rose.
First.
Second.
Third.
The mechanical noise sounded too loud.
I looked at Liora in the spotted mirror at the back of the car.
Mistake.
Our eyes met in the reflection.
Not for long.
Enough.
Her eyes were bright.
Not actual tears.
But something trembled in her face, and it had nothing to do with the exhibition.
Or perhaps it did.
Maybe everything touched.
The email.
The wall.
The refusal to wait.
The desire to help.
The body moving faster than everything else.
Me asking for a second.
Her hearing an escape.
Her climbing.
Me panicking.
Fifth floor.
The doors opened.
The hallway received us.
My door was still partly open.
Fine.
Excellent pet ownership.
Studio open, cat missing, neighbor injured.
A complete file.
We entered my apartment.
The rabbit was still in his corner.
He raised his head.
Saw four and a half humans, one recovered cat, a bowl of treats, a towel, and a dramatic atmosphere.
He immediately retreated into his shelter.
A healthy reaction.
I placed Eugène on the floor.
Mistake.
He immediately tried to return to the door.
I caught him by reflex.
“No.”
This time, everyone said it with me.
Eugène stopped.
Perhaps surprised by the first coherent collective decision of the evening.
I placed him in the bathroom and closed the door.
Temporarily.
Very temporarily.
He immediately meowed behind it.
Scandalized.

"Complain," I told him through the door. "Please. You've suffered tremendously."
Liora was sitting on my couch.
Her father had helped her settle with her leg stretched out on a cushion. Her mother had already removed her shoe carefully.
The sock followed.
Her ankle was swollen.
Not enormously.
But too much.
Liora looked away.
"Is it ugly?" she asked.
Her mother gently felt around it.
"It isn't catastrophic."
"So it's ugly."
"It's swollen."
"Mom."
"Yes, it's a little ugly."
Liora closed her eyes.
"Great."
Her father straightened.
"You'll need to see someone if the pain doesn't improve, and no practice until..."
"No."
One word.
Immediate.
She opened her eyes.
"No. I can't stop."
No one spoke.
There.
We had arrived.
Not the fall.
Not only that.
The consequence.
Her body as a tool.
Her body as evidence.
Her body as the place where she stored her certainty when everything else moved too quickly.
"Liora," her mother said.
"The championship is coming up."
"Exactly."
"I can't show up after missing a week."
"You are not running tomorrow on a swollen ankle."
"We don't know whether it will still be swollen tomorrow."
Her father looked at her ankle.
"It's swollen now."
"Thank you for the observation, Dad."
"You're welcome."
She ran one hand over her face.
For the first time, she looked truly young.
Not weak.
Not small.
Only brutally returned to something she couldn't control.
I remained beside the kitchen, unable to find my place.
My studio was full.
Full of people.

Full of receding fear.
Full of Liora on my couch, leg extended, jaw clenched.
I took ice from the freezer.
Wrapped it in a clean dish towel.
Then looked at the towel.
Not clean enough?
Fine.
My brain had just considered starting a wash cycle during a crisis.
I took another towel.
Same problem.
Liora's mother appeared beside me.
"That one is perfectly fine."
She gently took it from my hands, as though she knew I was about to enter a textile dead end.
"Thank you."
"Breathe, Aurèl."
I looked at her.
She wasn't offering vague advice.
She was merely noting a functional omission.
I inhaled.
Not enough.
She returned to Liora with the ice.
I remained there for a second.
Then approached the couch.
Not too close.
Liora placed the ice over her ankle.
Her face tightened.
"You okay?" her father asked.
"Yes."
I looked at her.
She saw me.
"What?"
"Nothing."
"Say it."
"No."
"Aurèl."
My name.
Again.
Even injured, pale, and furious at her own ankle, she managed to say it like a direct grip.
I lowered my eyes to her leg.
"Stop saying you're fine when you aren't."
Silence fell.
Dense.
Liora stared at the ice.
"It's a habit."
"A bad one."
"You have those too."
"Many."
"There."
"This one is still bad."
She looked up.
We could have started again.
Argued.

Hurt each other neatly with precise sentences.

But she was on my couch with a swollen ankle wrapped in a dish towel, and Eugène was meowing behind the bathroom door like a supporting actor protesting his lack of screen time.

So she didn't answer.

Not really.

She only said:

"I wanted him to stop scaring you."

That sentence.

It found a precise place.

Very bad.

Very tender.

I sat on the coffee table facing her.

Her father was right there.

So was her mother.

No possibility of romance.

Thankfully.

Or not.

"He stopped."

She gave a breathless laugh.

"Not because of me."

I thought about the roof.

Her outstretched hand.

Eugène moving because she had climbed.

Eugène coming down because everyone was calling him, because treats existed, because he had suddenly decided the adventure was over.

"A little," I said.

She looked at me.

"Not enough to justify that."

I gestured toward her ankle.

She followed my gaze.

"No."

The word was small.

Almost inaudible.

But it was there.

Her father placed a hand on her shoulder.

Not for long.

She didn't pull away.

Liora's mother stood.

"I'm going to get a bandage and an anti-inflammatory from our apartment. Can you stay here for two minutes?"

"Of course," her father said.

"I'll come," he added immediately.

"No. Stay with her."

He hesitated.

Looked at Liora.

Then nodded.

"Fine."

She left the studio.

The door closed softly.

Behind the bathroom door, Eugène scratched.

Once.

Twice.

Deeply offended.
“He really does possess an extremely limited moral awareness,” Liora’s father said.
I turned toward him.
Surprised.
Then realized he might have made a joke.
In his own register.
Formal.
Measured.
Almost invisible.
“Yes,” I said. “But he compensates with remarkable consistency.”
Liora breathed out a laugh.
So did her father.
Barely.
The scene was absurd.
Eugène safe inside my bathroom.
Demitrius hiding in his shelter.
Liora injured on my couch.
Her father standing in the middle of my studio, jacket covered in dust, staring at a swollen ankle as though he might convince it to shrink.
Me sitting on my coffee table, still shaken by two consecutive fears that had not asked permission to coexist.
No one had won.
Not Eugène, despite his political-prisoner performance behind the door.
Not Liora, who looked at her ankle like a personal betrayal.
Not me, who had recovered my cat and lost something much simpler.
The ability to pretend Liora belonged inside a practical category.
Neighbor.
Girl next door.
Allergic to my cat.
Person who spoke too quickly.
Not anymore.
I had been afraid to see her fall.
Not a theoretical fear.
Not a sentence.
A fear that had passed through my body before thought.
And now that she sat there, alive, injured, doing a worse job of minimizing than usual, I didn’t know what to do with that information.
So I stayed.
I watched the ice slowly melt inside the towel.
Liora watched the bathroom door.
Her father watched Liora.
Demitrius watched no one, out of prudence.
And inside my studio, amid the disorder, dust, treats, and far too recent sentences, everyone seemed to be waiting for something to come back down.

Chapter 20

Doing nothing

The cold pack was already beginning to melt.

I looked at it as though it had just violated protocol.

The dish towel was damp. Two drops had reached the coffee table.

Liora sat on my couch with her leg extended, her ankle wrapped in cold. She stared at the ceiling with the concentration of someone attempting not to exist in the least natural position imaginable for her.

Doing nothing.

Even her body seemed to find it offensive.

Her father stood beside the window with his phone in his hand. Her mother had returned from their apartment with a bandage, a first-aid kit, and a calm efficiency that made you want to spontaneously entrust her with crises of a much older nature.

Eugène, confined to the bathroom, meowed at regular intervals.

Not from distress.

In protest.

He had just been found, fed, carried, rescued, and then deprived of the living room for more than four minutes.

An intolerable situation.

“He’s going to tear the door down,” Liora said.

Her voice was almost normal.

Too normal.

“He doesn’t possess that level of physical commitment.”

Behind the door, Eugène scratched once.

With impeccable timing.

Liora turned toward me.

“He heard you.”

“He enjoys contradicting me.”

She smiled, then her face tightened slightly.

She looked away immediately.

I saw it.

Of course.

I would have preferred to be someone who noticed fewer things when they hurt.

Her mother sat on the coffee table on the other side of her leg.

“We’ll keep the cold on a little longer. Then I’ll put on a light wrap.”

“I can do it.”

“No.”

Liora opened her mouth, looked at her father, then gave up.

A poor strategic choice.

“Your mother is right,” he said.

“I haven’t said anything yet.”

“You were going to say you know how to wrap an ankle.”

“I do know how to wrap an ankle.”

“Not your own in that position.”

She fell silent.

Factual.

The worst kind.

I stood too quickly.

“Water.”

Everyone looked at me.

Fine.

I had announced water as a philosophical concept.

"Do you want some water?" I asked Liora.

"Yes. Thank you."

I filled a glass, placed it beside her, then moved it a few inches.

Liora followed the movement.

"Are you positioning it according to the rules of an ancient ritual?"

"Yes."

"I won't disturb the ritual."

"Thank you."

I picked up a cushion.

"Would you like to elevate your problematic lower limb?"

"My lower limb thanks you."

I slid the cushion beneath her calf with excessive caution. Her father was watching my hands.

Which was entirely normal.

And extremely unsettling.

"There?"

"Yes."

"Not too high?"

"Aurèl."

"Yes?"

"You can let go of the cushion."

My hand was still beneath it.

"Yes."

Logistical victory.

The rabbit slowly poked his nose out of his shelter. Liora noticed immediately.

"Oh, Demitrius."

"Don't call him too much. He's already reconsidering his entire existence."

Demitrius moved forward an inch, then retreated.

A rational choice.

Eugène meowed again.

"Maybe you could let him out?" Liora asked.

"He'll come over to you."

"I can avoid touching him."

"You just fell off a wall for him. Your avoidance skills are questionable."

The sentence could have been funny.

It almost was.

Then it wasn't.

"Sorry."

Liora shook her head.

"No. It's true."

Her mother removed the cold pack.

The ankle had swollen.

Not enormously.

Enough.

Liora's face became very still.

"It isn't that bad."

No one answered.

Excellent group.

Her mother put the cold pack back.

"You aren't putting your foot down tonight."

"And tomorrow?"

"We'll see tomorrow."

"I have practice."

"You do not have practice tomorrow, Liora."

She looked at the window, then the rug. She was searching for an exit.

Not necessarily a physical one.

"It's ridiculous to get injured like this."

Her father answered too quickly.

"Yes."

"Dad."

He corrected himself.

"It was not prudent. But you are not ridiculous."

She didn't answer.

I remained beside the kitchen, my hands useless.

I wanted to replace the cold pack, move a cushion, repair the wall, reverse time, put Eugène in a box before he decided to become a community event.

None of those options were available.

Her mother put away the first-aid kit.

"We'll leave you here another ten minutes. Then we'll go home carefully."

"I can go now."

"No."

"I'm two doors away."

"And you can't walk without grimacing."

"I grimaced once."

Her father looked at her.

"Four times."

"You're counting my grimaces?"

"Yes."

"That's extremely strange."

"That's parenting."

He almost smiled.

Her mother stood.

"I'll prepare your bed and bring another cold pack. Your father will help me."

"I can stay alone."

The three adults in the room, unfortunately including me in that category, looked at her.

She rolled her eyes toward the ceiling.

"I'm not going to climb your couch, Aurèl."

"I prefer not to rule out possibilities."

Her father looked at me.

"If she tries to stand..."

"I tell her no."

The word came out simply.

He nodded.

"Good."

"Traitor," Liora said.

"On this subject, yes."

Before leaving, her father looked toward the bathroom.

Eugène meowed.

"That cat possesses a remarkable ability to create collective organization."

"It's his only consistent talent."

"Keep him inside."

"I'm planning to enroll him in a rehabilitation program."

He hesitated.

"A strict program."

Liora almost burst out laughing, then restrained herself.

"Dad just made a joke."

"I have always made jokes."

"They sound like formal notices."

Her parents left.

The door closed.

The studio became larger.

Not empty.

Larger.

As though her parents' presence had held the walls in a social shape, and once the door closed, everything returned to its real scale.

A couch.

A lamp.

An injured girl.

Me beside the kitchen, unable to decide whether my hands should remain visible.

Eugène in the bathroom.

Demitrius in his shelter.

The damp dish towel.

The glass of water.

The silence didn't yet know what it was allowed to become.

Liora rested her head against the back of the couch.

"Well."

"Well."

"Situation completely under control."

"Entirely."

She turned toward me.

"You can breathe."

"I am breathing."

"You look like you're waiting for medical test results on a houseplant."

I looked at the plant beside the window.

"It has survived worse."

"So have I."

The sentence came out too quickly.

It revealed more than she intended.

I moved closer.

"Does it hurt?"

"I'm fine."

I looked at her.

"Okay. Bad answer. Six. Seven when I move."

"Then don't move."

"Innovative solution."

I picked up the cold pack.

"I'm changing the towel."

"That isn't necessary."

"It's soaked."

"Save the furniture."

I returned with a dry dish towel and placed the cold pack back on her ankle. My fingers brushed her skin.

She inhaled.

I withdrew my hand.

"Sorry."

"It's cold."

"Yes."

"Not you."

Fine.

Absurd information.
My brain stored it with excessive care.
I sat on the coffee table.
Liora looked toward the bathroom.
“You can let him out.”
“He’ll come to you.”
“You can stop him.”
Behind the door, Eugène meowed again.
“Our relationship is founded on illusion.”
“Open the door.”
I stood.
“You don’t touch him.”
“Yes.”
“Even if he makes that face.”
“What face?”
I looked at her.
She smiled.
“Yes. I know.”
I opened the door.
Eugène emerged with the offended slowness of an aristocrat unjustly detained, then went directly toward Liora.
Of course.
I positioned myself in front of the couch.
“No.”
He tried the left.
I extended one foot.
He tried the right.
“Eugène.”
He sat one foot from the couch.
Exactly at the acceptable limit.
Liora lowered her voice.
“Hi, criminal.”
“Don’t encourage him.”
“I’m acknowledging his legal status.”
Eugène licked one paw as though bored by the hearing.
Liora laughed quietly.
This time, she grimaced less.
The sound changed something subtle inside the studio.
The rabbit poked his nose out of his shelter again.
“Your apartment is very lively for someone who claims to enjoy quiet,” she said.
I looked at the displaced couch, the crooked table, the guilty cat, the traumatized rabbit, the cold pack.
“It’s going through a difficult period.”
“Because of me?”
She was no longer smiling.
Her fingers played with the edge of the blanket.
“Mostly because of Eugène.”
“Aurèl.”
I lowered my eyes.
“Partly.”
She nodded, as though receiving a blow she had already dealt herself.
“I’m sorry.”
The words came softly.

Amid the cold, the water, and the cat.
I didn't want to answer with a prepared sentence.
"For what?"
She gave a humorless laugh.
"Do you want the list?"
"No."
"Yes, you do. You like lists."
"That's false."
"You wrote 'jumping capacity exceeds projections' about Eugène in a sketchbook."
I froze.
"How do you know that?"
"You left it open. The sentence was sitting by itself in the middle of a balcony diagram."
I closed my eyes.
"Fine. I sometimes like lists."
Her smile disappeared.
"I'm sorry about yesterday. About the email. About the wall. About the way I believe doing something quickly enough counts as helping."
She lowered her eyes to her ankle.
"I wanted to fix things."
Eugène lay on the floor with his chin on his paws.
Still between us, but in a less active way.
"Fix what?"
Liora breathed, then began again.
She was trying.
"The argument. Your face when I read the email. The fact that I hadn't understood. When I saw you in the hallway, I knew it wasn't only the exhibition. Then there was Eugène, and I could act. Search. Go downstairs. Climb. Grab him. That was better than standing there with what I had missed."
I remained still.
She was still struggling with silence, but she wasn't avoiding the sentence.
"I think I confused helping with doing it for you."
She didn't look at me when she said it.
I stared at the condensation on the dish towel.
"Sometimes I confuse thinking with waiting for the situation to disappear."
She looked up.
"Sometimes?"
"Let's not abuse honesty."
She genuinely smiled.
Small.
But real.
I rested my elbows on my knees.
"I was afraid when you climbed."
"I know."
"No."
The word came faster than expected.
"I think you know part of it. I didn't understand all of it immediately either. When Eugène was up there, I was afraid for him. It was simple. Terrible, but simple. One problem, one place, one solution."
I ran a hand over my face.
"Then you put your foot on the wall."
I saw the sleeve again.
The grate.
The sole of her shoe.

The drop.

"After that, it wasn't simple."

Liora didn't move.

"I asked you to wait. You said you had it under control. I thought about your ankle, the ground, your championship, your father behind you, Eugène, you falling. I don't know in what order."

My voice lowered.

"I was afraid for you before I had time to decide whether I had the right to be afraid like that."

The studio became very attentive.

Even Eugène didn't move.

Which was suspicious.

Liora swallowed with difficulty.

"You have the right."

I looked at my hands.

"It's new."

"What is?"

"Being afraid for someone outside the practical categories."

"What's a practical category?"

"Neighbor. Girl next door. Person allergic to my cat. Person who talks too quickly beside my coffee table."

"I speak normally."

"Of course."

I looked at her.

Mistake.

Her eyes were tired, bright, much closer than they actually were.

Or the studio had shrunk.

"I don't know where to put you."

The sentence came out almost by itself.

Liora remained still.

"You don't have to put me anywhere."

Obviously.

A simple sentence.

Impossible.

Demitrius began eating again.

A small, dry, regular sound.

The world was restarting in places.

Liora moved slightly, and her face tightened.

"Six and a half," she said before I could ask.

"Very precise."

"I'm speaking your language."

"My language has decimals?"

"Probably."

I stood.

"I'm putting the cold pack back."

"You just did."

"It's warming up."

"Do you really hate doing nothing that much?"

I stopped.

She smiled gently.

"Got you."

I took another pack from the freezer and struck it against the counter to loosen the ice.

Too hard.

The whole kitchen vibrated.

"Are you attacking it?" Liora asked.

"I'm negotiating."

"Is it going badly?"

"It's resisting."

I returned and placed the new pack on her ankle. She clenched her teeth, then relaxed.

"Thank you."

I remained standing.

"Sit down, Aurèl."

I sat on the floor with my back against the couch.

Lower.

Less medical.

"You know there's furniture?" she asked.

"I'm familiar with the concept."

"You're strange."

"You climbed a wall to retrieve a cat who came down because he was hungry."

"He came down because we created a motivating environment."

"A beautiful way of saying 'treats.'"

She laughed, then placed one hand on her ankle.

I straightened.

"It's throbbing a little," she said. "And no, don't call my mother. She'll be back soon."

There's nothing else to do."

I looked at her.

"Okay."

She seemed almost surprised that I agreed.

The silence returned.

Less rigid.

A silence containing a cold pack, a cat lying at the permitted limit, a rabbit chewing beside his shelter, and a lamp glowing in front of the bookcase.

Liora was trying not to move every thirty seconds.

She lasted approximately two minutes, then her fingers began tapping against the blanket.

One.

Two.

Three.

She stopped when I turned my head.

"You're allowed to move your fingers."

"Thank you for that generous permission."

"Not the ankle."

"We should write that down."

"I can make a chart."

Her gaze drifted toward the guitar beside the bookcase.

"Don't you play anymore?"

I followed her eyes.

"I do."

"I heard you sometimes. Through the wall."

I remained still.

"Not everything," she added. "A few chords. Usually in the evening."

"I play badly."

"No."

"You're injured. Your judgment is impaired."

"Maybe. But no."

The guitar was there.

In its place.
And my hands were empty.
Which was becoming difficult.
“Do you want me to play?”
Liora looked at her ankle, then Eugène, then me.
“Yes. Not to fill the silence. Only if you feel like it.”
The clarification touched me.
She was trying not to push.
Not even toward a song.
I picked up the guitar and sat on the edge of the coffee table.
“I’m not promising anything.”
“I won’t grade you.”
“Shame. I prepared an evaluation form.”
I placed my fingers on the strings.
I didn’t know what to play.
So I played the same thing as usual.
The incomplete melody.
A few simple, slow chords.
Not exactly for her.
So the air would stop trembling.
The first notes came out too hesitantly.
I began again.
The guitar took some of the noise inside me and transformed it into something that could remain outside my body.
Not better.
Less tight.
Liora didn’t speak.
Not a comment.
Not a question.
She listened.
I felt it before I looked at her.
She wasn’t still like someone forcing herself to be. She was receiving something without trying to seize it.
I played the passage where I always became stuck.
The missing transition.
Usually, I stopped there.
This time, I allowed the chord to last.
Then moved to another.
Not necessarily the right one.
Another.
The melody continued a little.
Enough.
When the last notes died, the studio retained a low vibration.
Liora was watching my hands.
“That’s where you usually stopped.”
I froze.
“What?”
“The passage. You always got stuck in the same place.”
“You really were listening.”
She raised her eyes.
“Yes.”
No humor.
No escape.

Only yes.

My heart behaved unprofessionally.

I placed the guitar beside me.

"I didn't know."

"I know."

"That's strange."

"A little."

"At first, you were only a sound behind the wall."

She smiled faintly.

"So were you."

"I made less noise."

"You made music."

"Not the same."

"No. It was quieter. But it stayed."

I immediately looked at the cold pack.

"It must be less cold now."

"Aurèl."

"What?"

"You can stay for two seconds before checking an object."

I lowered my eyes.

"I can try."

"Very ambitious."

I rested my hands on my knees.

One second.

Two.

Three.

"With the exhibition," I said, "I think it wasn't only the text that hurt."

I looked at the rug.

A strand of Eugène's fur was stuck beside the couch.

Obviously.

He participated in everything.

"It was what the text did to my quiet. I spent years building a place where I could breathe. The studio, the images, the habits. It isn't glorious. It isn't impressive. But it isn't a prison."

I raised my eyes.

"The text said, Look, he never goes outside. Look, his quiet is a symptom. If my images are presented like that, I become evidence against my own life."

Liora closed her eyes for a moment.

"I thought you were retreating. In my world, when you stop, you lose. At practice, at work, at college. If you don't move forward, someone takes your place. If you slow down, you fall out of the race."

She gave a brief laugh.

"Apparently, if you don't wait, you can also fall off a wall."

"New data."

"To be incorporated into the model."

"I'll make a diagram."

Her face became serious again.

"When you tried to set a boundary, I saw an exit. Not a boundary. A door."

I looked at the studio door.

"In my world, moving too quickly sometimes looks like getting lost."

She nodded.

Not quickly.

She allowed the sentence to exist.

Maybe that was listening.
“Our worlds are terribly out of sync,” she whispered.
“Yes.”
“That’s a problem.”
“Yes.”
“You could say something reassuring.”
“I could.”
“You aren’t going to?”
“I’m looking for a less terrible formulation.”
She laughed, then grimaced.
“Ow.”
“Even my formulations can cause injuries.”
“Very powerful.”
I leaned toward her ankle.
This time, she didn’t stop me.
I lifted the cold pack slightly and checked the skin around it.
Still swollen.
Not catastrophic.
Not good.
When I withdrew my hand, Liora placed her fingers around my wrist.
Not tightly.
For one second.
My body immediately forgot most of its secondary functions.
She seemed surprised too.
Her fingers were warm.
Mine were cold.
I looked at her hand.
Then at her.
She didn’t remove it.
The silence changed.
More precise.
Eugène sighed.
A genuine cat sigh, long and burdened, as though judging the general slowness of humans.
Liora looked down at him.
“He disapproves.”
“He wanted a more efficient scene.”
“With treats.”
“Probably.”
Her hand slid from my wrist toward my fingers.
Slowly.
As though asking through the movement.
As though she had learned that evening that not everything needed to be taken through speed.
I didn’t know who moved first.
Maybe her.
Maybe me.
For once, the question didn’t matter.
I moved closer.
She didn’t move quickly.
Not only because of her ankle.
Her face remained open, uncertain, surprised.
I stopped close enough to feel her breath.

Far enough for her to choose not to.
Liora looked at my mouth, then my eyes.
“You’re thinking too much now,” she whispered.
“Probably.”
“No need.”
“Are you sure?”
She barely smiled.
“No.”
Fine.
Absolute honesty.
Disastrous.
Perfect.
“Neither am I.”
And maybe that was why I kissed her.
Or she kissed me.
I didn’t know.
The kiss was light, almost a verification. Soft, careful, slightly awkward because I was sitting too low and she couldn’t move her leg.
Very romantic.
Very us.
I barely moved back.
Liora’s eyes were open.
Mine probably were too.
I had not received the manual.
She looked at me as though she had just discovered something that had been obvious for a long time. Her fingers tightened around mine.
So I returned.
More gently.
This time, the kiss lasted long enough for the studio to recede in layers.
The lamp.
The rug.
Demitrius.
Eugène.
The cold pack.
The argument.
The email.
The wall.
Nothing disappeared.
Everything remained slightly farther away.
We were inside that small space where neither of us moved faster than the other.
That was the strangest part.
The rhythm.
Finding it at the same time.
When we separated, neither of us spoke.
Thankfully.
I could have said something catastrophic.
Statistically, it was likely.
Liora looked down at Eugène.
“He saw.”
The cat was watching us.
Very calm.
Very round.
A completely uninvited witness.

"He won't testify for free."

She laughed, then grimaced.

"Ow. Still your fault."

"The ankle or the laughter?"

"Both."

The cold pack slipped.

I put it back in place.

A normal gesture.

After.

Before.

During.

I no longer knew.

"You know," Liora said, "I can't run away very quickly."

Half joke.

Half confession.

"A remarkably unathletic threat."

"Temporary."

"We'll see tomorrow."

She narrowed her eyes.

"You're with my mother now?"

"On this subject, yes."

"Confirmed traitor."

Then her smile slowed.

"I'll have to go home."

"Yes."

"Not yet."

"No."

We remained there.

Not long.

Or perhaps a long time.

The concept of duration had become unreliable.

Eugène settled beside my legs, as though the scene required his weight.

Liora looked at him.

"You're responsible for far too many things."

He blinked.

No remorse.

Her phone vibrated.

"My mother is asking whether I'm still alive."

"Tell her yes, under supervision."

She typed more slowly than usual.

"You're writing more slowly," I observed.

"My ankle is injured, not my thumbs."

"And yet."

"I'm slowing down to impress you."

"It's working."

A few seconds later, someone knocked.

Liora closed her eyes.

"Already."

Her mother entered with a new cold pack and a pair of crutches. Her gaze moved from my face to Liora's with terrifying maternal precision.

I did my best to look normal.

So probably guilty.

"You okay?" she asked.

“Yes,” Liora replied. “Really.”

Her mother checked the ankle, replaced the cold pack, and adjusted the bandage. She explained very calmly that Liora would go upstairs with help, keep her foot elevated, and that they would call the doctor the following day if necessary.

Liora protested three times.

Lost three times.

Her father returned.

“Ready?”

“No.”

“Fine. Let’s go.”

They helped her stand. She leaned against them, then briefly against me to move around the table.

Her hand settled on my arm.

One second.

Not like before.

Or slightly.

She looked at me.

Nothing enormous.

No declaration.

Only the certainty that what had just happened remained there despite her parents, despite her ankle, despite Eugène’s probable return to a career in domestic crime.

I walked her to the door.

Eugène tried to follow.

“No,” everyone said.

He stopped.

Surprised again.

On the threshold, Liora turned.

“Thank you.”

The word was too small to contain everything.

It did anyway.

“For the cold pack, the couch, the guitar. And for not letting me handle it.”

“That’s a lot of services.”

“I’ll invoice you for the inconvenience.”

“I was planning to charge you for intensive use of my emotional wall.”

“Terrible name.”

“I’ll revise it.”

Her father coughed with a certain delicacy.

Well, he interrupted with a certain delicacy.

Liora looked toward the ceiling.

“I’m coming.”

She looked at Eugène behind me.

“You and I will talk later.”

He sat.

Serene.

A cat.

She moved away down the hallway, supported by her parents.

Slowly.

The pace had been imposed on her. She didn’t like it. I could see it in her shoulders, in the way she tried to help the people helping her.

She moved forward.

Not quickly.

She moved forward anyway.

Before entering her apartment, she turned her head.

I vaguely raised one hand.
Minimal social gesture.
She smiled.
Then the door closed.
I remained on the threshold.
The hallway was quiet.
Not empty.
Not anymore.
I went back inside.
Eugène immediately rubbed against my leg.
“You are not forgiven.”
He purred.
A low strategy.
The coffee table was crooked. The blanket was crumpled. The glass was half full. The guitar rested against the table.
There were traces everywhere.
Of fear.
Of care.
Of Liora.
I straightened the table slightly.
Then stopped.
No need.
Not yet.
I sat on the couch beside the hollow left by her body. Eugène jumped up next to me and rested his head on the blanket.
Behind the wall, I heard voices.
Her father.
Her mother.
Then Liora.
I couldn’t make out the words.
Only the rhythm.
Slower.
Demitrius finally emerged from his shelter and approached his hay. The fridge hummed. So did the city below.
I remained there without turning on the main light.
The studio was quiet.
It had lost nothing.
It had simply kept something more.
A forgotten cold pack.
A chord that had continued.
A soft, slightly awkward kiss that had arrived without managing to explain everything.
And behind the wall, a sound that no longer felt like someone else’s life.

Chapter 21

The next day happens anyway

The next morning, I woke up with one very clear piece of information.

I had kissed Liora.

The ceiling above me didn't appear disturbed by this development.

Neither did the studio.

Light entered through the window with almost aggressive ordinariness. The fridge hummed. A car braked somewhere below. Demetrius ate his hay as though the world had not changed shape during the night.

Eugène was asleep at the foot of the couch.

I was still sleeping on the couch.

Well.

"Sleeping."

I had spent a reasonable portion of the night replaying three seconds of my life with disturbing precision, then reminding myself that my cat had nearly disappeared, Liora had been injured, the exhibition still existed, Mathilde had not answered yet, and Liora's father now had several reasons to regard my presence in the building as a case requiring supervision.

Very restful.

I turned toward Eugène.

He was curled into a perfect circle, one paw over his eyes.

No remorse.

No awareness of the human complexity he had just produced.

"Sleep well?"

He didn't move.

"Of course."

I sat up slowly.

My back immediately expressed its opinion on a night spent on the couch.

Unfavorable.

Strong grounds.

Possible appeal before a competent mattress.

I ran a hand over my face.

The scene returned.

Not the fall.

Not the wall.

Not the cold pack.

The kiss.

The first one, hesitant, almost too light to carry everything it had displaced.

Then the second.

Calmer.

Not confident.

Certain only that it didn't want to move faster than the other person.

I closed my eyes.

Mistake.

Better to keep them open.

Things without images were harder to control.

I picked up my phone from the coffee table.

The screen lit up.

No messages.

Fine.

Normal.

It was 8:12.

Normal people did not necessarily rush to clarify their relationship status upon waking after a cat-related ankle accident.

Or perhaps they did.

I had no statistics.

I unlocked the phone.

Apps.

Notifications.

Email.

Nothing from Mathilde.

Messages.

Nothing from Liora.

I opened our conversation.

The latest messages:

Are you there?

Yes.

Can I stop by for two minutes?

Yes.

Very restrained.

Very pre-kiss.

Nothing in that exchange indicated that less than an hour later, she would be sitting on my couch with a cold pack, her fingers intertwined with mine, and her mouth against mine.

Written conversations had that cruelty.

I began typing.

How are you this morning?

I looked at the sentence.

Too simple.

Perhaps too concerned.

Not concerned enough?

I deleted it.

How's your ankle?

Fine.

Medical.

Almost cold.

I deleted it.

Good morning. How is the compromised ankle?

I reread it.

No.

Too early.

Or too much like me.

I kept the sentence.

Then added:

And you, incidentally.

I looked at the whole thing.

Ridiculous.

Possibly acceptable.

My thumb hovered over Send.

Scenario one: she found it funny.

Scenario two: she found it too light.

Scenario three: she didn't answer because she was sleeping.

Scenario four: her father read over her shoulder, frowned, and added "legally compromised" to the file.

I sent it.

Placed the phone facedown on the table.

Then immediately picked it up again.
No change.
Obviously.
The rabbit raised one ear in his corner.
“Don’t start.”
He returned to his hay.
I stood to make coffee.
The studio still bore traces of the previous evening.
The coffee table not entirely straight.
The blanket half folded over the armrest.
The damp dish towel in the sink.
The guitar leaning against the bookcase, not quite in its place.
On the couch, the cushion where Liora had rested her leg still held a slight indentation.
Invisible to a normal person.
Highly visible to me.
I looked at it.
Then looked away.
Very adult.
The phone vibrated.
I almost spilled the coffee.
Eugène lifted his head, vaguely offended by the general instability of the staff.
A message from Liora.
“The ankle pleads not guilty. So do I. Both are probably lying.”
I stared at the message.
A smile appeared without authorization.
Then a second message.
“Good morning, by the way.”
Then a third.
“I don’t know whether people say good morning normally after last night or whether there’s a special procedure.”
I remained standing in the middle of the kitchen, empty mug in hand.
There.
She didn’t know either.
Which, strangely, helped.
I replied:
“I haven’t received any forms. We can begin with good morning.”
Three dots.
“Good morning, Aurèl.”
My name.
In writing this time.
Very dangerous.
I answered:
“Good morning, Liora.”
I immediately found it too simple.
Too loaded.
Too empty.
I added:
“Out of ten?”
She replied almost immediately.
“Do you mean the ankle or the awkwardness level?
They require separate scores.
Ankle: 5 at rest, 7 if I put weight on it. Awkwardness: variable depending on parental presence within a six-foot radius.”

I reread it.
Five at rest.
Seven when bearing weight.
My body tensed.
“You put weight on it?”
One second.
Two.
“Aurèl.”
“You put weight on it?”
“To go to the bathroom, not run a marathon.”
I looked at the screen.
Then wrote:
“Your decision-making scale is concerning.”
“Yours probably includes an Excel spreadsheet.”
“False. I also use sketchbooks.”
I knew that.
I took a sip of coffee.
Too hot.
Normal.
I probably deserved the mild burn for smiling like a defenseless person at a conversation about a swollen ankle.
A new message arrived.
“My mother wants to call the doctor if the swelling doesn’t go down. My father already wants to call the Olympic committee, the building association, your cat, and possibly the prefecture.”
A laugh escaped me.
Then caught slightly.
“Is your father angry with me?”
The three dots appeared.
Disappeared.
Reappeared.
“Not like that.”
A deeply unreassuring sentence.
She continued:
“He’s worried. So he becomes procedural. It’s his native language.”
I remained in front of the phone.
I wanted to answer lightly.
Impossible.
“I left the door open.”
This time, the answer took longer.
“Aurèl.”
I typed:
“It’s true.”
She replied:
“And I climbed.”
I looked at the words.
Then at the studio.
Then at Eugène, who had risen to inspect his bowl with the gravity of a diplomat discovering an international crisis.
“We may not be able to establish one guilty party without creating a commission.”
She sent:
“Shame. My father loves commissions.”
I smiled.

Then another message arrived.
“Do you want to come over for two minutes? He wants to talk to you. Nothing serious. Well, on his scale, everything is always serious.”
I looked at the door.
The hallway.
The wall.
My half-full coffee.
My hair was probably still in a negotiable state provided the lighting remained low.
I didn’t want to.
But I wanted to.
I very much wanted to see her.
Which complicated every rational strategy.
I wrote:
I’ll come over.
Then added:
“Should I wear a cardigan or bring a lawyer?”
She replied:
“Cardigan. A lawyer will be provided if necessary.”
Fine.
I put the phone down.
Looked at Eugène.
“You are staying here.”
He looked at me.
“Yes. Here.”
He blinked.
No guarantee whatsoever.
I checked the window.
Locked.
The glass door.
Closed.
The bathroom door.
Open.
The cupboard.
Closed.
The entire world was now a series of possible escape points.
I stepped outside.
The morning hallway smelled different. Coffee, laundry detergent, warmth from newly awakened apartments. Behind Liora’s door, I heard voices.
Her father.
Her mother.
Then Liora, quieter.
I raised my hand.
Knocked.
The door opened almost immediately.
Her mother.
“Good morning, Aurèl.”
“Good morning.”
She looked at me with that practical gentleness that seemed capable of seeing things without stripping them bare.
“Come in.”
I entered.
The apartment looked sharper in the morning.
More familial too.

Shoes lined up beside the entrance, a sports bag against the wall, a mug forgotten on a console, a stack of papers Liora's father had probably arranged according to some complicated and debatable system.

Liora sat in the living room on a chair, her leg resting on a stool, her ankle wrapped in a beige bandage.

She looked up.

The kiss returned.

Not inside the room.

Inside my body.

I stopped half a second too long.

She noticed.

Obviously.

Her smile appeared, very small, almost cautious.

"Good morning."

"Good morning."

There.

Two adults.

Highly advanced.

Her father stood beside the table, arms crossed, his phone in front of him.

He was wearing glasses.

Bad sign.

Glasses gave any conversation the potential to involve the reading of documents.

"Aurèl."

"Sir."

I still didn't know his first name.

At this stage, it had become absurd.

I couldn't ask anymore.

Or rather, I could, but not immediately after my cat had injured his daughter through narrative ricochet.

He indicated a chair.

"Sit down."

I looked at Liora.

She made a face that meant: welcome to the domestic tribunal.

I sat.

Very straight.

Too straight.

Her mother brought coffee.

"No one is on trial," she said.

I looked at her.

"I didn't say anything."

Liora lowered her head to hide a smile.

Her father sat across from me.

"First, I want to be clear. I do not consider you responsible for Liora's injury."

Oh.

A reassuring sentence.

Therefore concerning.

"Okay."

"However, yesterday's situation revealed several problems."

Liora looked toward the ceiling.

"Dad."

"Let me finish."

"He only just got here."

"Exactly."

I picked up the cup of coffee to occupy my hands.

It was warm.

Fine.

A stable object.

“First point,” he continued. “The cat.”

“Eugène,” Liora said.

“The cat, Eugène.”

“That sounds like his full legal name.”

“Liora.”

“Sorry.”

He returned his attention to me.

“He has already crossed your balcony. He has already gained access to ours. Now he appears to have left your apartment through the door. This is becoming recurrent.”

“Yes.”

The word came immediately.

No excuse.

No humor.

Yes.

Her father seemed almost surprised to encounter no resistance.

I continued:

“I’ll secure the balcony more thoroughly. And I’ll install a second barrier in front of the door whenever someone visits or when I need to leave it open for any length of time. He tends to slip through when attention is elsewhere.”

Liora murmured:

“He’s very good at choosing his moments.”

“That isn’t a talent,” her father said.

“I didn’t say it was morally acceptable.”

I looked at her mother.

She was doing a very poor job of hiding a smile behind her cup.

Her father continued:

“I can help you install stronger mesh if necessary.”

I blinked.

“You?”

“Yes.”

“You want to help me secure the balcony against the cat who indirectly caused your daughter’s injury?”

He stared at me.

“It is precisely because he caused it indirectly that I would prefer it be done correctly.”

Logical.

Implacable.

Slightly terrifying.

“Okay,” I said. “Thank you.”

He nodded.

“Second point. The injury.”

Liora stiffened.

Barely.

I saw it.

So did her father.

Her mother even more.

“We’ll have her examined this afternoon if the pain remains at seven when she puts weight on it,” her mother said.

“It won’t remain at seven,” Liora replied.

“You don’t know that.”

"I know my body."
The silence lasted one second.
Everyone thought about the wall.
No one said the wall.
Major collective progress.
Her mother answered gently:
"Exactly. Your body is giving you information. You need to listen."
Liora looked at her ankle.
"I'm listening. It's exaggerating."
"That is not listening," her father said.
She pressed her lips together.
The championship entered the room before anyone mentioned it.
Like someone who hadn't been invited but knew the address.
"How long until practice?" I asked.
Liora looked at me.
So did her father.
I regretted it immediately.
"Tonight," she said.
"No," her mother said.
"I didn't say I was going. I answered the question."
Her father crossed his arms more tightly, which seemed anatomically impossible.
"And the championship?"
She didn't answer immediately.
Her face changed.
More than it had for the pain.
"In three weeks."
I looked down at her ankle.
Three weeks.
Far enough away for hope.
Close enough for panic.
"Then we avoid turning a mild sprain into a serious injury," her mother said.
"We don't even know whether it's a sprain."
"We also don't know that it isn't."
"Great. We're making excellent progress."
Her father turned toward me.
"You see the problem."
I raised my hands slightly.
"I'm not sure I'm qualified to referee."
"No one is asking you to referee," Liora said.
Then, more quietly:
"At least, I hope not."
Her father didn't answer.
Her mother looked at me with an almost amused expression.
"We're mainly asking you not to encourage her if she claims she can walk normally."
"I can do that," I said.
Liora stared at me.
"You are officially joining the opposing side."
"There were forms."
"I want to see them."
"Too late. I signed."
She tried to hold back a smile.
Failed.
That small thing between us traveled through the living room.

Unnamed.
Unclear.
Present.
Her father watched us.
One second too long.
Oh.
Fine.
He had noticed something.
Not necessarily the kiss.
Nothing precise.
But fathers seemed capable of detecting certain atmospheric changes without admissible evidence.
He straightened.
“Third point.”
Liora groaned.
“How many are there?”
“As many as necessary.”
“Terrifying sentence.”
“Liora.”
He looked at me.
“Last night, you kept Liora at your apartment while she rested.”
My face became entirely useless.
“Yes.”
“Thank you.”
I looked up.
“You’re welcome.”
There was a silence.
Different.
Less procedural.
“You were very worried about her,” he added.
I didn’t know how to answer.
Liora’s mother looked at her cup.
Liora looked at her father.
I looked at the coffee.
Beautiful coffee.
Coffee-colored.
Coffee surface.
Absolutely fascinating.
“Yes,” I said.
The word was too exposed.
I put down the cup.
“I was afraid when she climbed.”
Liora lowered her eyes.
Her father said nothing.
So I continued, because perhaps this was precisely the moment not to disappear.
“And I know he’s my cat. It was my apartment. I left the door open. I should have planned better. But she climbed on her own. Well, not alone in the sense that we were there, but...”
I stopped.
Very clear.
Truly.
An outstanding performance.
Liora raised her head.

"I decided to climb."
I looked at her.
She was looking at her father.
"No one told me to do it. Aurèl told me to wait. You did too. So did Mom. I decided to do it anyway."
Her father inhaled slowly.
"I know."
"Then don't make him carry it."
"That is not what I'm doing."
"A little."
"No. I am trying to understand how to prevent it from happening again."
"By tying me to a chair?"
"I have not ruled out that possibility."
Liora opened her mouth.
Then, unexpectedly, laughed.
So did her mother.
Me too, slightly.
Her father remained serious for two more seconds.
Then his face gave way by a fraction.
He had done it intentionally.
Perhaps.
Difficult to prove.
He turned toward me.
"I am not accusing you, Aurèl. I simply want you to understand that when she decides to help someone, she sometimes forgets she has a body."
Liora sighed.
"I'm right here."
"I know."
"You're talking about me like I'm a file."
"To prevent you from becoming a medical file."
She fell silent.
Point scored.
Her mother placed one hand on her shoulder.
"We're going to call the clinic. Only to ask for advice."
"Okay."
The word came from Liora more quietly than expected.
Her father looked at her.
"Okay?"
"Yes."
"Without negotiation?"
"Don't ruin the moment."
He nodded.
Moment recorded.
I took a sip of coffee.
Cold.
I probably deserved that too.
My phone vibrated in my pocket.
My entire body tensed.
Liora noticed.
"Mathilde?"
I took out the phone.
Email.
"Subject: Re: Wall Text / Exhibition Series"

“Yes.”

I remained still.

Liora’s father frowned.

“Mathilde?”

“The exhibition organizer,” Liora said.

He looked at me with new attention.

“Oh.”

Oh.

The oh of a father discovering the existence of another file.

I unlocked the phone.

I didn’t open it immediately.

Very adult.

Very cowardly.

Liora didn’t lean over.

She didn’t ask, “What does she say?”

She remained seated.

Silent.

That detail touched me more than expected.

She was waiting for me to choose.

Yesterday, she might already have been standing behind my shoulder, prepared to read with me, react, find a solution, push the air ahead of her.

Now she didn’t move.

Fine.

Yes, her ankle helped.

But not only that.

I could feel it.

“Do you want to read it?” she asked.

Not show me.

Not open it.

Do you want to.

I nodded.

I opened the email.

“Hi Aurèl,

Thank you for your message. I understand your concern, and I’m sorry the text gave you that impression. That was obviously not the intention. The ‘generation trapped inside’ angle comes from the overall cohesion of the section and the curatorial approach, but I understand that the wording may direct the interpretation of your series too strongly.

I suggest we revise the label and the paragraph devoted to your pieces so that your intention is clearer within the exhibition without challenging the entire wall text. Could you send me a short artist statement, between 800 and 1,200 characters, in your own words, about the series? That would help us adjust the presentation.

We can also discuss it by phone if you prefer.

Thank you,

Mathilde”

I reread it.

Once.

Twice.

No refusal.

No cancellation.

No visible offense.

No “Aurèl problem.”

I breathed.

Only then.

Liora was watching me.
Still without asking.
I held out the phone.
She looked at me before taking it.
“Are you sure?”
“Yes.”
She read.
Her face changed slowly.
No triumph.
No “See?”
No energy pouncing on the solution.
Only attentive relief.
“That’s good,” she said.
“Yes.”
“She listened to you.”
I took back the phone.
“She mainly asked for an artist statement.”
“That’s good too.”
I made an unconvinced sound.
Liora smiled.
“What?”
“Writing about your work is an activity designed to humiliate people who work with images.”
“You draw because you don’t want to write?”
“I draw because certain things become worse when they’re explained.”
“And sometimes?”
I looked at her.
She waited.
Without pressing.
A deeply irritating new skill.
“And sometimes they remain wrong if you don’t explain them at all,” I said.
She nodded.
“Yes.”
Liora’s father leaned forward slightly.
“You need to write something for the exhibition?”
“A short statement, yes.”
“About your intention?”
“Yes.”
“That’s important.”
Liora closed her eyes.
“Dad, don’t hold a meeting with him now.”
“I’m only saying it’s important.”
“With you, ‘only saying’ often lasts thirty minutes.”
He ignored her with remarkable elegance.
“Do you already have a starting point?”
I thought about the email.
My sentences.
The traces.
The chosen spaces.
The way my work had defended itself better than I had for years.
“A little.”
“Then start from there.”
I looked at him.

Simple advice.
Strangely correct.
He added:
“And be precise.”
Liora opened one eye.
“Ah, there we are.”
“Precision has never hurt anyone.”
“It has hurt certain conversations.”
“Not exhibition texts.”
I almost smiled.
“I’ll try.”
“Without apologizing in every sentence,” he added.
This time, I truly looked up.
He watched me seriously.
Not harshly.
Seriously.
“If you ask to be read correctly, you must accept writing like someone who has something to say.”
Silence.
Even Liora didn’t comment.
Perhaps because she too heard that the sentence went beyond the text.
I lowered my eyes to my phone.
“Yes.”
The word didn’t tremble too much.
Acceptable.
Her mother returned with her own phone in her hand.
“The clinic can see her at two thirty.”
Liora groaned.
“Already?”
“Would you prefer before or after the imaginary worsening?”
“Very funny.”
“Thank you.”
Her father stood.
“I’ll take her.”
“You both have work,” Liora said.
“And we also have a daughter with a swollen ankle.”
“I can go alone.”
No one answered.
She sighed.
“Fine. Message received.”
I checked the time.
I needed to leave.
Not because they were throwing me out.
Because boundaries also existed in other people’s living rooms.
And because I had a text to write.
And because if I remained much longer, I might end up looking at Liora long enough for her father to mentally draft a fourth point.
I stood.
“I’ll let you get ready.”
Liora looked up.
“Already?”
The word came too quickly.
She realized.

So did I.
Her father probably did too.
“I mean, yes, you have your statement,” she added.
“Yes.”
“And I have my medical trial.”
“It’s only an appointment,” her mother said.
“With the three of you, it feels like a hearing.”
“Three?” her father asked.
Liora indicated me with her chin.
“He’s part of the prosecution now.”
“I’m more of an expert witness in poor feline decisions,” I said.
“Excellent title.”
I moved toward the entryway.
She picked up her crutch to stand.
Everyone said:
“No.”
She froze.
Then glared at me.
“You too?”
“Especially me.”
“You’re abusing your new power.”
New.
The word remained between us.
Not power.
New.
I didn’t know what it referred to.
I only knew it had found something.
I approached again, just enough.
“Don’t stand.”
“I wanted to walk you to the door. It’s approximately twelve feet.”
“A highly dangerous distance.”
“I hate you.”
“You’re lying.”
She looked at me.
One second.
Too full.
Then she turned toward her parents with an expression far too innocent.
“I will neither confirm nor deny anything in the presence of witnesses.”
Her mother coughed lightly.
Her father looked at the window.
Fine.
The entire living room now knew without any specific fact having been declared.
I stepped back toward the entrance.
“See you later?”
I didn’t want the sentence to become an enormous question.
It did anyway.
Liora smiled more gently.
“Yes. See you later.”
Her father opened the door.
Because, obviously, he was standing now, very near the exit, in a position to control the flow of human traffic.
“Aurèl.”
“Sir.”

"The balcony, whenever you're ready. This afternoon or tomorrow."

"Yes. Thank you."

He paused.

"And your text. Write it before answering too quickly."

I looked at him.

"Do you often give advice to neighbors involved in feline incidents?"

"Only when they exhibit their work."

Liora burst out laughing.

"Dad, that was almost elegant."

He appeared satisfied.

Barely.

I stepped outside.

The door closed.

The hallway seemed very quiet.

Like the previous day.

I returned home.

Eugène was waiting behind the door, sitting with his tail wrapped around his paws.

Exactly as though he were the primary victim of my ten-minute absence.

"No," I said.

He meowed.

"No to that too."

I closed the door behind me.

The studio was quiet.

The cold coffee on the counter.

The blanket still crumpled.

The guitar now back in its place.

The morning light had advanced across the rug.

I placed my phone on the desk.

Mathilde's email was still open.

This time, I reread it on the computer screen.

A short artist statement, 800 to 1,200 characters, in your own words.

In your own words.

Very funny.

My words were generally either too numerous, entirely absent, or hidden inside drawings of empty tables.

I reopened the exhibition folder.

The images appeared.

The table.

The window.

The hallway.

The studio.

The traces.

The places afterward.

I looked at them one by one.

Not to check whether they were good.

Not to guess what someone else would see in them.

To remember what I had made.

My phone vibrated.

Liora.

"Don't write a statement that apologizes for existing."

I stared at the message.

Then a second arrived.

"I'm not interfering. I'm only saying that. Now I'm returning to disciplined inactivity."

I replied:
“You have literally just interfered.”
“Yes, but slowly.”
I smiled.
“I’ll let you write. Really.”
I looked at the screen.
Typed:
“Thank you.”
The three dots appeared, then disappeared.
Then:
“For yesterday too.”
I remained still.
What did you write to that?
Thank you for the kiss?
Thank you for the ankle?
Thank you for slowing down?
Thank you for remaining inside the silence without trying to transform it into an exit corridor?
I replied:
“Me too.”
It was incomplete.
Obviously.
But she answered:
“I know.”
I placed the phone facedown on the desk.
It was time.
I opened a blank document.
The white page looked at me with the same quiet cruelty as the cursor on bad days.
Except this time, I wasn’t writing for a client who wanted an eggplant to be more emotionally engaging.
Nor was I writing to withdraw.
I was writing to say what I wanted people to see.
A terrifying distinction.
Eugène jumped onto the desk.
“No.”
He sat beside the keyboard.
Not on it.
Progress.
Perhaps the previous day had served an educational purpose.
Probably not.
I looked at him.
“If you touch a key, I’m listing you as coauthor.”
He blinked.
The rabbit scratched softly in his corner.
Behind the wall, I heard footsteps.
Slower.
Perhaps the sound of a crutch.
Then Liora’s muffled voice.
Not the words.
The rhythm.
It had not become calm.
Not really.
Only constrained.

Temporarily.
But it still existed.
I looked at my images.
Then the blank page.
I placed my fingers on the keyboard.
The first sentence was bad.
I knew immediately.
“My series examines domestic space as a site of presence.”
Terrible.
It sounded as though I had swallowed a press release.
I deleted it.
Second attempt.
“I draw quiet places.”
Too thin.
I didn’t delete it.
I looked at the sentence.
Quiet places.
It wasn’t false.
Only insufficient.
I added:
“I draw quiet places, but I don’t see them as empty places.”
I stopped.
There was a but.
Fine.
The world would survive.
I continued.
“A table, a window, a hallway, or a studio often keeps more traces than it appears to. Gestures pass through them. Habits settle there. A presence can remain inside a cup, a displaced chair, or light across the floor.”
I reread it.
Not perfect.
Not terrible.
I thought about Liora on my couch.
The cold pack.
The blanket.
The guitar.
Eugène on the floor, legally compromised.
The studio after she left.
Quiet.
Not empty.
I continued.
“My work is not intended to show confinement. Instead, it looks at the ways we inhabit a place, sometimes quietly, sometimes through very little. The calm in these images is not an absence. It is a way of allowing the traces to appear.”
I stopped.
My heart was beating harder than necessary.
Writing three sentences should not have produced this feeling.
And yet.
I had not resolved the exhibition.
Liora was still in pain.
Her championship might be compromised.
Her father still existed, with his glasses and dangerous sense of precision.
We had kissed, and no forms had been provided.

Everything remained open.
But I wasn't retreating.
Not that morning.
I looked at the sentence.
"The calm in these images is not an absence."
I thought about the wall.
The sounds.
Her.
The traces a person could leave inside a place without even being there.

Chapter 22

Running differently

At 2:37 p.m., Liora sent me a message.

“Official diagnosis: dramatic ankle, but not tragic.”

I replied:

“Medical translation?”

The three dots appeared.

“Mild sprain. No fracture. No forced weight-bearing for two or three days. Gradual return if the pain is manageable. Ice. Wrap. Rest. Boredom. Humiliation. Social death.”

I replied:

“No fracture is good.”

She answered almost immediately.

“Response from someone who slept properly.”

False.

“Response from someone who doesn’t know how to say he’s relieved without making a chart.”

She took slightly longer.

“You make charts when you’re relieved?”

“Mentally, yes.”

“I knew it.”

It was good.

Really.

And it solved almost nothing.

Liora needed her body the way I needed my studio. Not for appearances. To hold together. To find herself again. To know what to do with herself when the world became too large.

Asking her to slow down wasn’t asking her to sit with a cold pack.

Well, yes.

Technically.

But underneath, it was much more violent.

My phone vibrated before I chose another sentence.

“The doctor said I can walk a little as long as I don’t force it. My father heard ‘strict immobilization in a supervised environment.’ My mother heard ‘we observe.’ I heard ‘maybe the stadium tomorrow.’”

I stared at the last part.

Maybe the stadium tomorrow.

I put down the phone.

I didn’t answer immediately.

That was the problem with worry.

It disguised itself as authority very quickly.

It arrived with a valid reason, put down its belongings, opened the cupboards, and suddenly you were explaining to someone how to live inside their own body.

I picked up the phone again.

I wrote:

“What does your coach think?”

A cautious message.

Relatively.

She replied:

“He wants to see me tomorrow morning. Test session. Nothing intense. I’m putting that in writing before you develop an allergy.”

I smiled despite myself.

“Too late. Initial symptoms.”

"Breathe into a paper bag."
"I only have bags of cat food."
"Even better. Eugène will approve."
Then:
"Do you want to come?"
I remained still.
The question looked simple.
It wasn't.
Come to the stadium.
Watch her run.
Or try to run.
Be there somewhere that wasn't my studio, the hallway, an accident, or an emergency.
Be there after the kiss.
With her injured body and my concerning tendency to transform fear into a list of recommendations.
I began typing:
"Sure."
Deleted it.
Old reflex.
I typed:
"Yes."
Then added:
"If I become unbearable, you're allowed to tell me."
She replied:
"You already were. It was just less medical before."
I smiled.
Then she added:
"Thank you."
A simple thank you.
Very dangerous.
I put down the phone.
Then looked at Eugène.
"Tomorrow, you are doing nothing."
He blinked.
"Nothing whatsoever."
He placed one paw on my mouse.
The cursor moved.
"That is exactly what I mean."
The next day, I left too early.
Obviously.
Liora's session was at ten.
By 9:20, I was already ready.
Before leaving, I checked Eugène.
Window closed.
Balcony locked.
Interior door pulled shut.
Bowl filled.
Rabbit protected.
Eugène sitting in the middle of the rug, looking insulted by the level of surveillance.
"You are the reason for this prison atmosphere."
He meowed.
"Complaint denied."
I stepped outside.

Liora was already waiting on the landing.
Leaning on one crutch.
Only one.
Sports bag over the opposite shoulder.
Hair tied back.
Jacket open.
She looked prepared to enter a competition and murder anyone who offered her a chair.
A black ankle brace supported her left ankle.
I looked at the brace.
Then her face.
Too late.
She had seen.
“Good morning to you too.”
“Good morning.”
“It’s fine.”
“I didn’t say anything.”
“Your gaze wrote a report.”
“It’s still a draft.”
“Delete it.”
Her cheeks were slightly pink.
Probably from the effort.
I looked down at the crutch.
“Do you want me to carry your bag?”
She looked at me.
“Are you asking because it’s heavy or because you need to manage something?”
A scandalously precise question.
I took a second.
A real one.
“Both.”
She smiled.
“Answer accepted at fifty percent.”
“Better than expected.”
“You can carry it on the stairs. Not the entire way.”
“Deal.”
She handed me the bag.
Our fingers brushed.
Nothing spectacular.
Just enough for my heart to demonstrate, once again, its lack of professional training.
Liora looked down at our hands, then turned toward the elevator with an expression that was far too innocent.
“Shall we?”
“Yes.”
In the lobby, her father appeared beside the mailboxes.
Of course.
Or perhaps he now lived in transitional spaces to supervise human traffic.
“You’re leaving?”
Liora stopped.
“Dad.”
“I’m getting the mail.”
He held an envelope.
One.
A thin alibi.
“Of course,” she said.

He looked at the crutch.

Then me.

Then the sports bag over my shoulder.

"Test session?"

"Yes."

"Nothing intense."

"Yes."

"If the pain exceeds five, you stop."

Liora closed her eyes.

"Did you speak to my coach?"

"Yes."

She opened them.

"Dad."

"He called me."

"You called him."

"Then he called me back."

"Because you called him."

"Liora, the chronology is irrelevant."

I looked at the floor.

Excellent floor.

Neutral floor.

A floor that did not participate.

Her father turned toward me.

"You're going with her?"

"Yes."

"You do not need to intervene."

"I know."

Liora turned toward me.

"You do?"

"Theoretically."

Her father didn't smile, but something passed through his expression.

"Good. Remain theoretical."

"I'll do my best."

Liora sighed.

"I am standing right here."

"We know," her father said.

She stepped closer and kissed his cheek with almost aggressive speed.

"I'll text you afterward."

"During."

"After."

"Before you begin, then afterward."

"You're really negotiating with an injured person?"

"Yes."

She stared at him.

Then yielded.

"Before and after."

"Thank you."

He looked relieved.

Not satisfied.

Relieved.

Then I saw what Liora might have seen all her life without ever being able to tolerate it completely: her father wasn't only trying to control things. He was searching for some kind of grip on fear.

I knew the technique.
Mine involved more sketchbooks.
We went outside.
The air was cool.
Liora moved with frustrated speed. Even with one crutch, she gave the impression of finding the sidewalk too slow.
I walked beside her.
Not too close.
Then slightly closer whenever she avoided an uneven patch of ground.
She noticed.
“Are you watching for holes?”
“No.”
“Lie.”
“Holes, grates, slippery leaves, dogs, suspicious pigeons.”
“Suspicious pigeons?”
“All pigeons are suspicious.”
She laughed.
Then looked ahead.
“You’re going to be unbearable at the stadium.”
“Probably.”
“I’m warning you, if you make your second-father face, I’m sending you home.”
“Okay.”
“Seriously.”
“Okay.”
She slowed slightly.
“You aren’t going to argue?”
“No.”
“That’s concerning.”
“I’m learning.”
She looked at me.
Her expression changed.
Barely.
“I think I am too.”
Then she resumed walking.
Slightly less quickly.
The municipal stadium was a fifteen-minute walk away.
Twenty with a crutch.
Twenty-two with Liora refusing to behave like someone using a crutch.
There was nothing spectacular about it.
A slightly worn red track.
Low bleachers.
A field in the middle.
Gray locker rooms.
Bags placed beside a bench.
Several people were already warming up, silhouettes in motion, smooth strides, light legs.
I felt Liora watching them.
Not only with envy.
With hunger.
Her body wanted to rejoin the rhythm before she had even put down her bag.
She stopped at the entrance to the track.
Her hand tightened around the crutch.
“You okay?” I asked.
She didn’t look at me.

"Yes."

I said nothing.

She exhaled.

"No. Fine. It feels strange."

I looked at the track.

"Coming back?"

"Coming back like this."

Like this.

With a monitored ankle.

A crutch.

A bag carried by someone else.

A body that had not arrived in full possession of itself.

I nodded.

"Where do you want me to stay?"

She finally looked at me.

An important question.

I understood that after asking it.

Not I'm coming with you.

Not I'll keep an eye on you.

Where.

At what distance.

What kind of presence she could tolerate.

Liora looked at the bleachers.

Then the bench beside the track.

Then me.

"There," she said, pointing to the bench. "Not too far. And not on the track."

"Bench. Not track."

"And no catastrophe face."

"I'll use a neutral face."

"Your neutral face sometimes looks like a repair estimate."

"I can work on it."

"Thank you."

A man in his forties approached. Tall, lean, blue tracksuit, whistle around his neck. He had the quick gaze of someone accustomed to seeing when a footfall was lying.

"Liora."

"Samir."

He looked at the crutch.

Then the ankle.

Then her face.

"You look terrible."

"Thank you. I'm happy to see you too."

"Did you sleep?"

"Trick question."

"So no."

He looked at me.

"And you are?"

An interesting moment.

Very bad.

"Aurèl."

Liora added:

"The neighbor."

Then almost froze.

The neighbor.

Fine.
A practical category.
Old.
Not false.
Not sufficient.
I saw the same thought cross her face.
She continued:
“I mean, Aurèl.”
Samir looked from one of us to the other.
With unpleasant intelligence.
“Okay.”
An okay that believed very little.
I contemplated the track.
Beautiful track.
Very red.
Samir returned his attention to Liora.
“We’re keeping it simple. Mobility, walking, a few very gentle drills if nothing pulls. No speed. No starts. No hard pressure through the bends. If it hurts, you stop.”
“Yes.”
He raised his eyebrows.
“I mean actually.”
“Yes.”
“Not your competition yes.”
“I have several yeses?”
“At least four. That was the wrong one.”
I lowered my eyes to hide a smile.
Liora saw.
“Do not form an alliance with him.”
“I’m on the bench.”
“Stay there.”
Samir gave me an amused look.
“Good place.”
I handed over the bag.
Liora immediately took it.
“I can carry my own bag for ten feet.”
“Yes,” I said.
She looked at me, almost surprised that I didn’t fight her.
Then placed the bag on the bench herself.
A small victory.
Very local.
I sat down.
She walked toward Samir, removed her jacket, then put the crutch against the bench with controlled aggression.
The stadium had its own sounds.
Shoes against the track.
Breathing.
A whistle in the distance.
Jackets rubbing.
A few voices.
Nothing like the studio.
Here, the body was everywhere.
Inside the painted lines, the stopwatches, the bags, the way everyone shook out a leg, checked a shoelace, rotated an ankle.

I wasn't in my element.
Not badly.
Simply elsewhere.
Liora belonged there, even injured.
It was immediately visible.
The others greeted her. A boy asked if she was okay. A girl grimaced when she saw the brace. Liora answered too quickly, joked, minimized.
Classic.
Then her gaze moved toward me.
I did nothing.
I didn't raise my eyebrows.
I didn't point at the brace.
I only remained there.
On the bench.
Without a catastrophe face, hopefully.
She looked away.
But I thought I saw her mouth relax slightly.
Samir began by making her walk.
Slowly.
One length of the straightaway.
Then back.
Liora looked humiliated by the activity.
Walking on a track seemed, to her, like an insulting use of the infrastructure.
She completed the length anyway.
Then returned.
Samir watched her.
"Pain?"
"Three."
"Honest?"
"Four."
"Good."
She sighed.
"I love this system where I'm rewarded for hurting more."
"You're rewarded for not lying."
"Very new for me."
"I know."
He had her perform ankle movements, very low knee raises, and a few gentle weight shifts.
She obeyed.
Badly.
Well, technically well.
Emotionally badly.
Every reduced movement seemed to remind her of everything she wasn't doing.
No acceleration.
No drive.
No start.
None of the sensation of the body suddenly aligning, the breath finding its place, the world becoming a line to cross.
At one point, another group began a series of strides.
Liora watched them.
Her body moved half a step forward without permission.
Samir said:
"No."

She froze.

"I didn't do anything."

"You were about to."

"Everyone says that to me now."

I almost smiled.

I didn't.

Spectacular maturity.

Samir crossed his arms.

"Do you want to run at the championships?"

"Yes."

"Then you don't run today as though you have something to prove."

She rolled her eyes.

"I know."

"No. You hate knowing it."

She didn't answer.

He continued more gently:

"You can compete. If you respect the return. If you accept losing a few sessions now so you don't lose three weeks afterward. That means no hard sessions this week. Modified strength work. Cycling if there's no pain. Gentle straightaways in a few days. No fast bends until you're cleared. And if it swells, we stop."

Liora looked at the track.

"So I'll arrive underprepared."

"You'll arrive with different preparation."

"That's a coach sentence."

"Yes. I'm a coach."

"It's irritating."

"It's true."

She turned slightly and looked toward me.

Not to ask for help.

Perhaps to check whether I had heard.

I had.

Everything.

I felt the sentence arrive inside me.

I told you so.

It was there.

Perfectly available.

Well constructed.

With several arguments.

A documented history.

A wall-related appendix.

I let it pass.

Without saying it.

A tremendous achievement.

Invisible.

No one applauded.

Scandalous.

Liora returned to the bench a few minutes later. Samir walked away to retrieve a resistance band from another bag.

She sat beside me, not too close, then too close anyway because stadium benches had a loose understanding of personal space.

Her shoulder almost touched mine.

Almost.

Then she shifted slightly.

Our shoulders touched for real.
She didn't move away.
Neither did I.
"You have your neutral face," she said.
"Is it working?"
"You look like a man trying very hard not to have an opinion."
"That is exactly what's happening."
She stared ahead.
The others were running.
Smooth strides.
Easy.
"I feel like I'm being punished."
I didn't answer immediately.
Because the wrong response was ready:
This isn't punishment. It's adaptation.
An accurate sentence.
Useless.
I took more time.
"Because you can't do what you normally do?"
"Yes."
"Or because you have to do it differently in front of everyone?"
She turned her head toward me.
Direct hit.
Not pleasant.
"Both."
I nodded.
"I know it isn't serious. I mean, it's a sprain. People have real problems. I can walk. I'll run again. Maybe. Probably. So I know I'm being ridiculous."
"You aren't ridiculous."
She looked down at her brace.
"I feel like crying because I'm not allowed to run bends."
"That's quite specific."
A small laugh escaped her.
"This is my place. Here. My body, the track, the sessions, all of it. Even when everything else is unclear, I know how to do this."
She swallowed.
"And now I don't."
I looked at the white lines across the track.
They seemed simple.
Straight.
Even the bends knew where they were going.
"You still know," I said.
"You just watched me walk like a cautious retiree."
"Cautious retirees probably have excellent longevity strategies."
"Aurèl."
"Sorry."
I placed my hands between my knees.
"You still know. You just can't use the same version of what you know."
She remained silent.
I felt the next sentence.
Held it back.
Simplified it.
"You can change the way you run without deciding the race is ruined."

Liora stared straight ahead.
For a long time.
I almost regretted it.
The possibility that I had said too much.
Then she breathed:
“I don’t like it when you’re right so calmly.”
“Neither do I.”
“Why don’t you?”
“Because then I have to be consistent.”
She turned toward me.
“With the exhibition?”
I looked at the track.
“A little.”
“You weren’t refusing to move forward.”
“No.”
“You were refusing to move forward inside a sentence that twisted your ankle.”
I looked at her.
She also seemed surprised by her comparison.
“Sorry. Medical imagery too close to home.”
“No.”
I smiled slightly.
“It’s fairly accurate.”
She lowered her eyes.
Her shoulder was still pressed against mine.
Now we both knew it.
Neither of us moved.
“I think I confused slowing down with disappearing,” she said.
No grand music.
No confession.
Almost irritated.
“It happens,” I said.
“To you too?”
“In the opposite direction.”
She smiled.
“Of course.”
Samir returned with a resistance band.
He looked at us.
Looked at our shoulders.
Looked at the band.
Very professionally, he chose not to say anything.
“Light strength work.”
Liora stood.
Too quickly.
She grimaced.
Samir raised his eyebrows.
I didn’t move.
It was extremely difficult.
“Four,” she said before either of us could ask.
“Good,” Samir replied. “See? The truth hasn’t killed anyone.”
“It injured my pride.”
“It’ll survive.”
The rest of the session was slow.
Very slow.

Resistance band around the ankles.

Small lateral steps.

Rest.

Mobility.

Rest.

A few ridiculously short strides, according to Liora's visible opinion.

Samir asked her to run twenty meters at a very easy pace, only to feel the weight-bearing.

She took her place on the line.

Without the crutch.

Without speed.

My whole body tensed.

I breathed before she could notice.

She started.

Not quickly.

Not truly running.

More like a controlled jog.

But it was already something other than walking.

Her face changed.

No spectacular joy.

No victory.

Total concentration.

Every footfall mattered.

Every sensation.

She reached twenty meters.

Stopped.

Not abruptly.

Samir asked:

"Pain?"

She closed her eyes.

I watched her struggle.

Not against the pain.

Against the lie.

"Four."

Samir nodded.

"One more. No more than that."

She opened her eyes.

"That's all?"

"That's already a lot."

"It's twenty meters."

"It's twenty intelligent meters."

She grimaced.

"Terrible phrase."

"I stand by it."

She returned to the start.

This time, before setting off, she looked at me.

I didn't raise my thumb.

I didn't gesture.

I stayed there.

She gave an almost imperceptible nod.

Then started again.

Twenty meters.

Slow.

Controlled.

Extremely frustrating.
Entirely real.
When she returned to the bench, her cheeks were red.
Not from intense physical effort.
She sat down.
“I hate maturity.”
“It’s a fairly new discipline.”
“I’m terrible at it.”
“You’re progressing quickly.”
“Don’t be proud of yourself.”
“I’m being careful.”
She picked up her water bottle.
Then leaned back slightly.
“Four.”
“Still?”
“Yes. It isn’t increasing.”
“That’s good.”
“I know.”
She looked at the track.
“I hate that word a little.”
“Good?”
“Yes.”
Samir gave the final instructions.
Rest that afternoon.
Ice.
Gentle mobility in the evening.
No normal practice until further notice.
Two days before testing a slightly faster pace.
Above all, stop if it hurts.
He repeated that three times.
Liora rolled her eyes three times.
On the fourth, he said:
“If you want to run a good race in three weeks, you need to accept not having a beautiful session today.”
She didn’t answer.
Then, more quietly:
“Okay.”
Samir looked at her.
“A real okay?”
“Yes.”
“Which one?”
“The second.”
“Acceptable.”
He left to see another group.
Liora remained seated with the crutch against her knee and her track shoes still on her feet.
“An intelligent race,” she said.
“Sorry?”
“I’m going to run an intelligent race. There. I said it.”
She immediately grimaced deeply.
“My God.”
“What?”
“I feel like I’ve aged thirty years.”

I looked at her.

Her hair had partially escaped its tie, the wind had marked one cheek, a black brace wrapped her ankle, her expression was profoundly annoyed, and her eyes were bright with the look of someone who had yielded without surrendering.

"You look deeply irritated by your own maturity."

"I am."

"It suits you rather well."

She turned toward me.

The silence changed.

Very slightly.

The stadium surrounded us.

The others.

Samir.

Shoes against the track.

The wind.

Nothing intimate, normally.

And yet her hand settled on the bench between us.

Not on mine.

Beside it.

I looked.

Then placed mine close enough for our fingers to touch.

A tiny gesture.

Ridiculous.

Absolutely considerable.

She smiled without looking at me.

"What are we doing?"

"Touching fingers on a public bench."

"Very technical."

"I'm describing the facts."

"And yesterday?"

I breathed.

Her finger didn't move.

Neither did mine.

"Yesterday, we went beyond the public-bench stage."

She gave a low laugh.

"Survivor's answer."

"My specialty."

She looked at our hands.

"I don't know how to do this."

I felt my heart calm slightly.

Because she had said it.

Because I wasn't alone with the sentence.

"Neither do I."

"Does it scare you?"

"Yes."

She nodded.

"Me too."

I looked at her.

"You?"

"Yes."

"You seem less..."

"Less what?"

"Less me."

She smiled.

"I become terrified faster. It gives the impression of courage."

I laughed softly.

"That's possible."

She moved her finger against mine.

Real contact now.

Simple.

"Can we do this slowly?"

The question seemed to cost her something.

Slowly was not her usual language.

"Yes," I answered.

"Without disappearing?"

I looked at her.

She wasn't joking.

Not entirely.

"Yes."

She nodded.

"Okay."

Then added:

"But not too slowly either. I'm still me."

"I had gathered."

"Good."

Her phone vibrated.

She picked it up.

"My father."

She read.

Then sighed.

"Report?"

"He included a question mark?"

"Yes."

"Then he's making progress."

"I'll send him: alive, annoyed, not worse."

"Precise."

She typed.

Then stopped.

"What are you doing this afternoon?"

"Exhibition statement."

"Have you made progress?"

"A little."

"Do you want to talk to me about it?"

The question was gentle.

More importantly, it remained a question.

"Later."

"Okay."

No visible disappointment.

No insistence.

A small victory.

She put away her phone.

"See? I can avoid climbing onto the wall too."

"Beautiful metaphor."

"Thank you. I injured it myself."

The wind lifted Liora's hair slightly.

Her finger was still against mine.

Nothing was resolved.
Her ankle existed.
The championship existed.
My statement existed.
So did the kiss.
Without instructions.
Without declarations.
Without a category.
But Liora had run twenty meters without cheating, which, in her world, might have been
a greater achievement than a record.
And I had not said I told you so.
No one had applauded that either.
Important progress was consistently short on spectators.
When she put her jacket back on, she leaned on the crutch without pretending she didn't
need it.
I picked up her bag.
She didn't protest.
Not immediately.
Then, after three steps, she said:
"I'm only letting you carry it because I'm running an intelligent race."
"That's consistent."
"And because you look pleased."
"I have excellent control over my face."
"None whatsoever."
We left the stadium.
More slowly than we had arrived.
She didn't become angry with the pace.
Well.
Less.
At the entrance, she stopped for a second to look back at the track.
Then continued walking.
"I'm going to run differently," she said.
It sounded as though she were announcing it as much to herself as to me.
"Okay."
"Intelligently."
She immediately grimaced.
"Terrible."
"Very mature."
"Shut up."
I smiled.
So did she.
Her crutch struck the sidewalk softly.
A new rhythm.
Not hers.
Not yet.
But she was moving forward.
Without disappearing.

Chapter 23

The right caption

The first sentence was still there.

I draw quiet places, but I don't see them as empty places.

It wasn't elegant. It had the stiffness of people entering a room while being careful not to touch anything.

Still, I hadn't deleted it.

I remained in front of the screen, my hands near the keyboard. Eugène slept on the couch. Lapin chewed something in his corner with exemplary discretion.

I reread the sentence.

It held.

A little.

Not enough.

I scrolled down through the document.

"A table, a window, a hallway, or a studio often retains more traces than it appears to. Gestures pass through them. Habits settle there. A presence can remain inside a cup, a displaced chair, or light across the floor."

That part resembled my images.

Not me attempting to sound intelligent in front of people drinking white wine from clear plastic cups.

Important progress.

Then came:

"My work is not intended to show confinement. Instead, it looks at the ways we inhabit a place, sometimes quietly, sometimes through very little. The calm in these images is not an absence. It is a way of allowing the traces to appear."

I read it aloud.

Mistake.

In writing, the sentences seemed almost acceptable. In the air, they entered wearing dirty shoes.

Eugène lifted his head.

"That wasn't for you."

He blinked slowly, then went back to sleep.

Fine.

Indifferent literary critic.

I saved and created a new version.

Version 4 semi-final.

My process inspired limited confidence.

I reread the earlier attempts.

"My work examines domesticity as a paradoxical space of withdrawal and persistence."

No.

That sentence needed to be taken far into a forest, then abandoned with a little water.

I deleted it.

"Through silent compositions, I seek to reveal the quiet poetry of everyday life."

Quiet poetry.

Very serious.

I deleted that too.

The third version began by denying confinement, forced solitude, and a generation cut off from the world. It sounded like someone entering a meeting and immediately announcing:

"I'm not guilty."

Bad strategy.

The anger wasn't false.

Only badly placed.

I didn't want my text to be a response to the wrong text. I wanted it to hold without it.

An unbearable distinction.

I opened the images at full size on the other half of the screen.

The table. The window. The hallway. The chair. The ledge where a plant leaned toward the light.

Ordinary things. Not spectacular enough to defend themselves if someone stuck the wrong sentence beneath them.

I zoomed in on the hallway drawing. A strip of light came from a half-open door. No one was visible. You could only sense that someone had passed through.

Or was about to.

Or lived there without being required to appear in order to prove they existed.

I thought about Liora on the stadium bench.

"You were refusing to move forward inside a sentence that twisted your ankle."

She had accidentally phrased something I already knew better than I had, which remained deeply irritating.

My phone vibrated.

"I am officially respecting your process and not writing 'well?' every ten minutes. I want this maturity formally recognized."

I smiled.

"Official recognition granted. Remarkable level."

"Do you want me to read it?" she asked.

The message remained on the screen.

Not send it.

Not I'll help.

Do you want.

I could send it to her. She would probably say something intelligent.

Or too direct.

Both were possible.

I looked at the document.

"Not yet."

"Okay. I'll struggle against myself in silence. Well, relative silence."

A laugh escaped me.

She had accepted without becoming offended, without entering, without trying to do it for me.

A small gesture.

Enormous.

I returned to the keyboard.

"I draw quiet places, but I don't see them as empty places."

The but already placed the sentence on the defensive, as though emptiness were the natural accusation.

I deleted it.

"I draw quiet places. I see them as inhabited spaces, even when no one appears in the image."

Better.

I continued.

"A table, a window, a hallway, or a studio retains the traces of very ordinary gestures. A displaced chair, a cup, light across the floor, a half-open curtain: these details indicate a presence without showing it directly."

A colon.

A list.

Very clean.

It worked.

"This series is not about confinement. It is interested in chosen spaces, modest refuges, habits that repeat and construct a way of inhabiting. The calm in these images is not an absence. It allows us to see what remains."

I read it aloud.

This time, I didn't want to leave my own body.

An encouraging sign.

I kept working.

I cut the words that wanted too badly to be noticed.

"Domesticity" became "places."

"Residual presence" became "what remains."

"Suspended temporality" disappeared, to general relief.

The statement eventually held together as one short block.

Eight hundred and ninety characters.

I had counted.

Obviously.

I reread it.

"I draw quiet places. I see them as inhabited spaces, even when no one appears in the image. A table, a window, a hallway, or a studio retains the traces of very ordinary gestures. A displaced chair, a cup, light across the floor, a half-open curtain: these details indicate a presence without showing it directly.

This series is not about confinement. It is interested in chosen spaces, modest refuges, habits that repeat and construct a way of inhabiting. The calm in these images is not an absence. It allows us to see what remains. I am less interested in showing bodies than in drawing the places where their passage continues to exist."

I remained in front of it for a few seconds, then picked up my phone.

"Do you want to read it?"

The reply came immediately.

"Yes. Wait, I'm assuming the posture of a responsible reader. There. I look unbearable. Send it."

I copied the statement.

My thumb hesitated. Showing it to Liora was no longer the same kind of exposure. She had seen the studio, the table, the cup, the blanket, the guitar. She knew the quiet wasn't decoration.

I sent it.

The three dots appeared.

Disappeared.

Reappeared.

A terrible system.

I put down the phone.

Then immediately picked it up again.

Still nothing.

The phone vibrated.

"I recognize you in this."

I remained still.

Not It's beautiful.

Not You won.

I recognize you in this.

A second later, she added:

"And I recognize the images. They aren't apologizing. Neither are you."

I looked at the message, then the screen, then my hands. A low warmth rose inside my chest.

Something settled.

"Thank you. Really."

"You're welcome. Really too. I am proposing no comma changes. Admire my restraint."

I smiled.

She added:

"Fine, there is one I would move, but I'm remaining silent out of love for progress."

I stared at the word.

Love.

Turn of phrase.

Humor.

Breathing room.

"Your maturity is fragile."

"So is my ankle. We manage."

The phone vibrated again.

Mathilde was calling.

Oh.

So we were here.

My heart straightened like an employee caught taking an unauthorized break.

I let it ring twice, then answered.

"Hi, Aurèl. It's Mathilde. Am I interrupting you?"

"Not at all."

Lie.

She was interrupting me enormously.

Existentially.

"I wanted to follow up about your email and the artist statement. I reread your message, and I understand more clearly what was bothering you. The general text may have been slightly too encompassing."

A beautiful way of saying it swallowed my work without chewing.

"Okay."

"We still need to maintain some cohesion across the section. We won't be able to completely remove the angle involving generation, withdrawal, and domestic space. That is part of the project."

"I understand the general framework. I'm not asking for everything to be rewritten around me."

She seemed relieved.

I continued before that relief could close the door.

"But I don't want my series presented as work about confinement. It directs the viewer too strongly. I can't control everything people will read into the rooms, but I want the first sentence beneath my name not to say the opposite of what I made."

A silence.

Long enough for my nervous system to establish a crisis unit.

"Yes," Mathilde said. "That's clear."

Two words.

Not It's complicated.

That's clear.

I straightened.

"And your statement? Do you have something?"

"Yes."

"Can you send it to me after the call?"

I looked at the text.

"I can read it to you now."

Why had I offered that?

Reading your own sentences over the phone.

An activity prohibited by every convention of personal protection.

"Of course," Mathilde replied.

Too late.

I inhaled and read.

Slowly.

Not too slowly.

I heard the table, the window, the hallway, the modest refuges, and what remained leave the studio for someone who might place them beside my images.

When I finished, Mathilde didn't answer immediately.

I hated silence again.

"It's good," she finally said. "It's simple. It situates your work without closing it down. I can see how to incorporate it."

I mentally noted without closing it down and chose not to become unbearable.

Effort.

"Can it replace the current paragraph?"

"The one devoted to you, yes. We might adjust the length slightly to fit the format, but not the substance. For the label, I think a very short version of your sentence about inhabited spaces and traces would work well."

"Okay."

The word came too quickly. I tried again.

"I want to read the revised version before approving it."

"Yes, of course."

My hand was barely trembling.

"Thank you."

"You were right to tell me clearly."

A strange sentence.

Almost too simple.

"I was afraid it would complicate everything," I admitted.

Very clever.

Mathilde gave a small laugh.

"It complicates things a little. Mostly for my schedule. But it's your work. And mine too."

I lowered my eyes.

It's your work.

Yes.

"I'll send you the statement right away."

"Perfect. I'll send you a revised version tomorrow."

I hung up.

Eugène jumped onto the desk and placed one paw on the printed copy of the first version.

"That one, you can have."

He sat on it.

Fine.

Editorial opinion delivered.

The silence returned.

Not empty.

That distinction again.

I had just read my statement to Mathilde without dying, without having the exhibition canceled, and without a secret committee declaring me a difficult artist.

Well, the committee might be meeting later.

I copied the statement into an email, asked to review the label before approval, and sent it.

Message sent.

Those two words were less cruel this time.

I wrote to Liora:

"She's going to replace the paragraph about my series. I'll review it before approval."

"That's really good," she replied.

Then:

"You said it."

Those three words remained.

Not You won.

Not They agreed.

You said it.

"Yes. My voice barely required medical evacuation."

"Very proud of the surviving voice."

I could accept her being proud of the voice.

Almost.

"What are you going to do now?" she asked.

I looked around the studio, at the images, Eugène sitting on an old version, Lapin cautiously emerging from his corner.

"Probably remain still for five minutes without editing the text."

"Ambitious. Can I come over later? Not to correct it. To see the printed version. And maybe steal a place on the couch. Medically."

I looked at the couch.

The hollow in the cushion was no longer visible.

Or perhaps it was.

"Yes. Medically."

"Excellent. I'm still walking slowly, so you have time to panic."

I put down the phone.

Then genuinely left the text untouched.

Four and a half minutes.

Approximately.

I reread the statement anyway.

Without editing it.

That was different.

Allowing the sentences to remain imperfect because they were accurate enough.

The calm in these images is not an absence.

I couldn't prevent someone from seeing solitude, confinement, or sadness. People brought their own rooms into other people's. No one's gaze arrived empty.

I could only place the first sentence.

The right caption.

The one that opened in the right place.

It didn't make the opening simple. My body would probably want to hide behind a plant the first time someone said, "I really like your work."

But my words would be there.

Slightly trembling.

Straight enough.

I walked to the printer. It made a highly dramatic noise for a single sheet of paper.

The paper emerged warm.

A few lines.

Not a manifesto.

Only a way of no longer letting my work enter alone into a sentence that didn't care for it.

Someone knocked.

I startled.

Very dignified.

Liora was already standing on the landing, crutch beneath one arm, ankle brace visible, oversized jacket, hair tied back with no discernible method. She looked irritated by the existence of gravity.

And happy to be there.

"I walked slowly," she said.

"False."

"By my new standards."

Her gaze dropped to the page.

"Is that it?"

"Yes."

She didn't reach for it immediately.

"Can I?"

I handed her the statement.

She entered and moved toward the couch with her crutch, making less of an effort to pretend everything was easy.

I noticed that too.

She read the entire statement.

Once.

I remained standing until I realized it resembled an interrogation technique, then sat on the coffee table.

Not too close.

Then too close.

I decided not to move.

With Liora, silence always contained something active. It didn't fill emptiness.

It looked at it.

When she raised her eyes, she wasn't exactly smiling.

Or not only.

"Now," she said, "we know where to look."

An old tension lowered inside me.

"Is it too simple?"

"No."

"Not too thin?"

"Aurèl."

She placed the page between us.

"You don't need to make it bigger for it to matter. This is exactly your work. The things that remain when no one forces the room to speak more loudly."

I looked at the statement.

"You're going to become unbearable if I let you produce sentences like that."

"Too late."

She smiled, then grimaced as she adjusted her leg.

"You okay?" I asked.

She looked at me for a second.

"Four."

I stopped.

"Thank you for not saying you're fine."

"See? I'm progressing too."

"Athlete of maturity."

"Terrible discipline."

We remained there with the statement between us, Eugène at a controlled distance, and light across the rug.

"You're going to be nervous at the opening," she said.

"Probably in innovative ways."

"Will you want me there?"

The question caught me off guard because the answer was too obvious.

"Yes."

She nodded.

"Not to push you."

I looked at her.

"I know."

"To be there."

"Okay."

She seemed satisfied.

Or touched.

Or both.

Then she picked up her crutch.

"I need to go home before my father issues a missing-person alert for an injured individual within a twenty-five-foot radius."

"Should I walk you back?"

"To the door. We need to preserve a minimum of territorial sovereignty."

She stood slowly, the paper in one hand.

"Can I keep this?"

"Why?"

"To read it again. And not move a comma."

"You need physical support in order not to edit a text?"

"Everyone has weaknesses."

On the threshold, she raised the page.

"You wrote the right caption."

"It isn't a caption. It's an artist statement."

"I don't know the difference."

"A caption goes beneath an image."

"Exactly. You wrote what needed to go beneath yours so people wouldn't begin in the wrong place."

I didn't answer.

"And I'm not correcting you. I'm observing."

"Thank you."

"Really?"

"Really."

She leaned forward and placed a very brief kiss at the corner of my mouth.

Quick enough to remain herself.

Gentle enough to render me useless for several seconds.

"See you later, Aurèl."

She crossed the landing with her crutch, holding my statement like a fragile medical document. The door opposite opened before she could knock.

Her father appeared.

Obviously.

He looked at Liora, the page, then me.

"Everything all right?"

"Yes," she said. "He wrote a good text."

Her father nodded very seriously.

"And did she walk slowly?"

"Relatively," I replied.

Liora gave me a scandalized look. Her father deemed the answer acceptable and allowed her inside.

Before the door closed, she waved the page in my direction as though she had won something.

I returned to the desk.

The document was open.

The email sent.

I still needed to review, adjust, approve, attend the opening, stand beside the images, answer people, and avoid hiding behind a plant.

Far too many stages.

A new email arrived.

Mathilde confirmed that she could use the statement as the basis for the label and the paragraph devoted to the series. She would send me the layout the next day. The substance felt right to her, more faithful to my work.

I read it.

Then reread it.

The substance feels right.

More faithful to your work.

I wasn't euphoric.

I had not suddenly transformed into a man capable of speaking in front of a room.

Only slightly straighter somewhere inside.

Enough.

I wrote to Liora:

"It's been accepted."

She replied almost immediately.

"I knew you could say it."

Through the wall, I heard her voice answering her father.

"Unbearable," I typed.

"Yes. And?"

I smiled, which slightly undermined the credibility of my annoyance.

I put down the phone.

The page was still there on the screen.

So were my words.

Chapter 24

Two laps

On the morning of the championships, I checked the time seven times in twenty minutes.

Which was pointless.

Extremely pointless.

Time did not change according to the amount of attention you gave it. I had already tested that with client deadlines. It had always maintained an irritating independence.

It was 9:16 a.m.

Liora's race was at 3:40 p.m.

So naturally, my body behaved as though I had twelve minutes before leaving for a military summons.

I stood in front of my open closet.

Jeans.

T-shirt.

Sweater.

Jacket.

A simple question: how did one dress to attend the regional championships of a girl you had kissed, who had been injured because of your cat through narrative ricochet, whose father now regarded you with a form of supervised tolerance, and who had asked you to come without officially specifying which category you were coming in?

Answer: no outfit had been designed for that.

I picked up a gray sweater.

Too neutral.

Another one.

Too black.

A shirt.

Ridiculous.

I was going to a stadium, not defending a dissertation on the social consequences of low walls.

Eugène sat on the mezzanine bed, watching me with perfect calm.

"You don't have an opinion."

He yawned.

"Yes. Fine. You have an opinion on the human condition, but it lacks precision."

I eventually chose the gray sweater.

Acceptable.

Not athletic.

Not conspicuously unathletic.

I looked like a man who could stand beside a track without being immediately detained by security.

Enough.

I had prepared a bag on the coffee table.

Water bottle.

Tissues.

Portable charger.

Sketchbook.

Pen.

Two granola bars, because the first one looked lonely.

A small flexible cold pack, removed from the freezer and placed inside an insulated pouch.

I looked at the last item.

Too much.

Very clearly too much.

I removed it from the bag.
Then put it back.
You never knew.
That kind of sentence had justified far too many objects throughout human history.
My phone vibrated.
Liora.
“Are you already checking whether the bleachers have emergency exits?”
I smiled.
“Not yet. I’m choosing a non-threatening spectator outfit.”
Immediate reply.
“Impossible. You are naturally threatening when considering the safety of an ankle.”
I looked at the screen.
Deleted a “Does it hurt?”
“How is the defendant?”
She replied:
“The ankle pleads moderate insolence. Coach says okay. Father says heightened surveillance. Mother says breathe. I say everyone talks too much.”
She sounded alive.
Too alive for someone who was supposed to conserve her energy.
Very reassuring.
Very concerning.
“What time do you want me there?”
“The race is at 3:40. If you arrive at 3:39, I won’t have time to see your panicked face. So 3:00?”
“My face isn’t panicked.”
“Aurèl.”
“3:00.”
“Thank you.”
Then, a few seconds later:
“I’m glad you’re coming.”
I stared at the message.
There was nothing to analyze.
So naturally, I analyzed it anyway.
I’m glad you’re coming.
Not glad you’ll be there.
Not glad to see you.
Coming.
The choice.
“Me too.”
Incomplete.
Not false.
“I mean, I’m glad to come. Not to run. Clarifying.”
“Shame. I entered you in the 400-meter hurdles.”
I looked around my living room.
My plants.
My cat.
My entire existence.
“I refuse.”
“Predictable.”
Then:
“See you later.”
I put down the phone.
The rest of the morning was a very poor imitation of work.

I opened a client file.
Drew one line.
Deleted it.
I checked the stadium address three times, even though Liora had sent it the previous day
and a map possessed a better memory than I did in that specific area.
At 2:10, I decided it was reasonable to leave.
The trip was supposed to take thirty-five minutes.
So I would arrive at 2:45.
Early.
But not criminally so.
I made a circuit of the studio.
Window.
Balcony.
Door.
Food bowl.
Eugène.
Demitrius.
Window again.
I was becoming the man Liora's father might have hoped for from the beginning.
A concerning thought.
I left.
The tram ride was brief and far too long.
Around me, people lived lives that had nothing to do with an 800-meter race, which
seemed almost indecent.
I held my bag on my knees as though it contained an organ.
At the stadium stop, several groups got off.
Teenagers in tracksuits.
Parents.
Sports bags.
Club jackets.
Clean sneakers.
Dirty sneakers.
I followed the movement with the feeling of entering coded territory.
The stadium was larger than the one where they practiced.
Not enormous.
But large enough to make every sound seem official.
Red track.
Concrete bleachers.
Flags.
Organization tables.
A crackling microphone.
Volunteers with walkie-talkies and the appearance of people who had understood
something about the logistics of the world.
I stopped beside the entrance.
Fine.
I was there.
Next step: avoid looking like a man who had wandered into a sports competition while
searching for the stationery section.
My phone vibrated.
"Where are you?"
"Main entrance. Beside a sign that says CALL ROOM, which seems concerning."
"Don't move. My mother's coming."
Her mother.

Fine.

I was immediately relieved.

Then slightly offended that I was relieved.

Two minutes later, Liora's mother appeared through the crowd, pale cardigan, bag over one shoulder, calm expression. She spotted me with unsettling ease.

"Aurèl."

"Hello."

"Did you find the place without any trouble?"

"Yes."

"You look as though you found trouble anyway."

"That's my standard face."

She smiled.

"Come on. We're sitting near the top, beside the bend."

The bleachers were half full. Clubs grouped by color, parents standing with cameras, bags everywhere. The smell of warm plastic, coffee, damp grass, and muscle cream.

Liora's father sat in the second row from the top, back straight, program folded into quarters in one hand.

He stood when he saw me.

"Aurèl."

"Hello."

He shook my hand.

Actually.

Not for long.

But long enough for me to mentally record the event.

Handshake from Liora's father.

Status: non-hostile.

Continue monitoring.

"You're early," he said.

"Yes."

"Good."

So I had been approved by the scheduling committee.

Liora's mother sat down.

"He's mainly nervous."

"I'm not nervous," I said.

Liora's father looked at me.

"You're holding your bag like evidence."

I looked down.

Accurate.

I loosened my grip.

"There's water inside."

"Only one bottle?"

I looked at him.

He remained serious for one second.

Then his wife sighed.

"Don't encourage his anxiety."

"I'm asking a logistical question."

"You already have three bottles in your bag."

"Exactly. You never know."

A silent agreement passed between us.

Terrible.

We were two versions of the same problem with different tools.

Liora was not yet visible on the track.

I searched for her despite myself.

“She’s warming up behind the locker rooms,” her father said.
“Is she okay?”
His wife answered before he could.
“She’s going.”
Perfect answer.
Not reassuring.
Not worrying.
She’s going.
“Her coach cleared her?” I asked.
Liora’s father unfolded his program.
“Under conditions. Reduced warm-up. No pain while bearing weight. Taping. Controlled race. If she feels sharp pain, she withdraws.”
He pronounced withdraws with the difficulty of a man who knew his daughter would hate the word even in her absence.
“She agreed verbally,” he clarified.
“That’s already a great deal,” her mother said.
Then, more quietly, he added:
“She looked serious.”
His voice changed on the final sentence.
Less administrator.
More father.
I looked at the track.
Girls ran along the opposite straightaway, light and fast, as though their bodies had never negotiated with fear.
“She said she was going to run an intelligent race,” I said.
Her father slowly turned his head.
“She said that?”
“Yes.”
“Voluntarily?”
“She grimaced afterward.”
Her mother smiled.
“That sounds like Liora.”
The microphone crackled.
I didn’t understand what was being announced.
The entire stadium seemed to operate according to codes in which people knew when to look, when to applaud, and when to worry.
I knew nothing.
So I observed.
At least that was a transferable skill.
At 3:10, Liora finally appeared beside the track.
Hair tied high.
Number pinned to her jersey.
Black shorts.
Ankle brace discreet but visible, tape beneath her sock.
She was walking without a crutch.
Her step was almost normal.
Almost.
A barely perceptible caution on the left foot.
Nothing an outsider would have noticed.
So naturally, I noticed it with the force of a police spotlight.
She was talking with Samir.
More slowly than usual.
Listening.

Samir pointed toward the track, the bends, a place at the end of the opposite straightaway.
She nodded.
Once.
Then twice.
No visible argument.
Liora's father exhaled very slowly through his nose.
"She's listening."
"Yes," her mother said.
"That's new."
"Enjoy it without commenting."
He fell silent.
Liora ran a few short strides along the side of the track.
My entire body began assessing her footfall with imaginary expertise.
Terrible.
I had no idea what I was looking at, and yet every movement seemed to carry a medical announcement.
Then her gaze rose toward the bleachers.
She searched.
Found her parents.
Then me.
Her face changed.
Not much.
Enough.
She raised two fingers.
A small, quick gesture.
Her mother responded.
So did her father, far too seriously, as though approving a document from a distance.
I raised one hand.
A simple gesture.
Almost normal.
Liora smiled.
Not for long.
Then she looked away and resumed warming up.
At 3:28, she came up to the railing at the bottom of our section.
Her father immediately stood.
Her mother placed one hand on his arm.
"Let her breathe."
He remained standing anyway.
Paternal compromise.
I went down two rows, then stopped.
Maybe she wanted her parents.
Not me.
She looked up.
"You can come down, Aurèl. I'm not going to make you run."
Fine.
Message received.
She stood directly below me, on the other side of the railing.
"Hi," she said.
"Hi."
"Do you have your survival bag?"
"Yes."
"Cold pack?"

I froze.
She smiled.
“I knew it.”
“It’s a precaution.”
“It’s a declaration of love to logistics.”
I didn’t answer quickly enough.
The word love remained in the air half a second too long.
She noticed.
Her cheeks turned very slightly pink.
Or it was the warm-up.
Almost certainly the warm-up.
“You okay?” she asked.
I nearly laughed.
“You’re asking me?”
“Yes.”
“Interesting concept.”
“Answer.”
I truly looked at her.
Her shoulders were low.
Her jaw slightly clenched.
Her eyes alert, but more focused than bright.
The energy had gone inward.
Contained.
Not extinguished.
I searched for a useful sentence.
A terrible idea.
“Don’t fight your own foot,” I said.
She stared at me.
I closed my eyes for half a second.
“Sorry. That sounds like a motivational calendar for podiatrists.”
“No.”
“Yes.”
“A little.”
She looked down at her left shoe.
Then back up.
“It isn’t wrong.”
Around us, the stadium continued living.
Runners passed behind her.
A volunteer shouted a number.
Her father sat in the bleachers pretending not to listen.
Her mother wasn’t even pretending.
Liora rested her hands on the railing.
“Samir said the first lap should be positioned, not endured. No stupid start. No wide move on the bend. If it pulls, I let them go. If it feels okay, I only accelerate in the final two hundred.”
“I only understood ‘no stupid start.’”
“That’s already the most important part.”
“Can you do it?”
She looked at me.
A stupid question.
She inhaled.
“I’m going to run today’s race.”
I felt the sentence return to me.

Changed.
Hers.
“Okay.”
She smiled.
“See? I remembered.”
“I’m impressed.”
“You should be.”
She hesitated.
Very briefly.
Then her fingers touched mine against the railing.
Not holding hands.
Not in front of everyone.
Only two fingers.
One second.
“Thank you for being here.”
“I’m glad I’m here.”
“Even with the noise?”
“Even with the noise.”
“Even with my father?”
I glanced toward him.
He was studying the program with unconvincing intensity.
“Your father is part of the regional experience.”
“He would be delighted by that phrasing.”
“I’ll refrain from telling him.”
Samir called her.
She stepped back.
“I have to go.”
“Yes.”
She took two steps.
Then returned half a step.
“If I start too fast, you’re allowed to think something extremely judgmental. But discreetly.”
“That’s my field.”
“I know.”
She left.
I climbed back toward the bleachers.
Liora’s father looked at me.
“What did she say?”
“That she was going to run today’s race.”
He remained silent.
Her mother placed one hand on his knee.
“That’s good.”
“Yes.”
He watched Liora join the other girls beside the call room.
“That’s very good.”
His voice said something else.
Worry.
Pride, perhaps.
A fear looking for a chair to sit in.
The minutes before the race lasted an illegal length of time.
Liora disappeared behind one group.
Reappeared with the other competitors.
Eight girls.

Maybe ten.
I counted badly because my attention kept returning to her.
They lined up beside the starting line for the 800 meters.
Two laps.
That was all.
Two laps of the track.
Eight hundred meters.
A ridiculously short distance to contain that much tension.
Liora's father murmured:
"She's in lane five."
"I see," her mother said.
"Her footfall looks fine."
"Yes."
"Her shoulders are too tight."
"She'll relax them."
"You think so?"
"Yes."
He inhaled.
"Okay."
I didn't know whether she would relax her shoulders.
I didn't know whether her footfall looked fine.
I only knew that from far away, she looked very alone among the others.
Not alone because she had no one.
Alone because running, at the moment of the start, seemed to return everyone to their own body.
The starter raised his arm.
The stadium seemed to lower in volume.
Not really.
My body cut out everything else.
The gun fired.
The girls started.
The sound of their spikes reached us a fraction later.
Liora did not move to the front.
I saw it immediately.
She could have.
Her body seemed to want to spring forward harder, claim the space, drive the frustration out through the first straightaway.
But she remained positioned.
Fourth or fifth.
On the outside of a girl in a blue jersey.
Not trapped.
Not free either.
"Good," her father breathed.
Very quietly.
Then, as though remembering he wasn't the coach:
"I think."
First bend.
I wasn't breathing properly anymore.
Every one of Liora's footfalls seemed to land somewhere inside my chest.
She remained in place.
No pointless acceleration.
No wide detour.
Her arms moved quickly, but not too quickly.

I didn't know whether that was good.
 It felt good.
 At two hundred meters, the group stretched out.
 Two girls in front.
 Three together behind them.
 Liora inside that group.
 "She could pass now," her father murmured.
 "You said you weren't going to comment," her mother said.
 "I'm observing internally out loud."
 "That's a comment."
 Liora seemed ready to move to the outside.
 A space opened on the right.
 She could take it.
 Her body appeared to say yes.
 Then she didn't.
 She stayed.
 Half a second of restraint.
 Almost invisible.
 But I saw it.
 "She held back," I said.
 Liora's father looked at me.
 "Yes."
 His tone had changed.
 Maybe because I hadn't said something stupid.
 Or because we had seen the same thing.
 The first pass in front of us.
 The group arrived with the sound of breathing, spikes, jerseys, bodies in motion.
 Liora passed.
 Fast.
 Far too fast for someone running an "intelligent" race, according to my personal criteria based on the speed of an average human inside a grocery store.
 Her face was focused.
 Not closed.
 Not suffering.
 Jaw clenched, yes.
 Eyes fixed on the line.
 She didn't look at the bleachers.
 Obviously.
 She passed us in fourth place.
 Or fifth.
 I lost count because my brain had decided numbers were secondary to the continued existence of her left ankle.
 The bell rang.
 I immediately hated the sound.
 It announced an ending.
 Or a catastrophe.
 Or simply the final lap, which was already excessive.
 The first two accelerated along the opposite straightaway.
 Liora remained behind the smaller group.
 She didn't move immediately.
 I felt her father shift beside me.
 His knee was moving rapidly up and down.
 Very dignified.

Very discreet.
Not at all.
“She needs to wait,” he said.
“She’s waiting,” her mother replied.
“Yes.”
“Then breathe.”
He inhaled.
Loudly.
Far too loudly.
A man in front of us turned around.
Liora’s father gave him a look that discouraged any comment.
Three hundred meters remaining.
A girl ahead of Liora slowed slightly.
Or Liora accelerated.
I didn’t know.
But the distance changed.
Liora moved to the side.
This time, she passed.
Not violently.
Not by throwing her whole body outward.
She slipped alongside the other girl, took the space, and returned to the line.
A clean movement.
Even I understood that.
“There,” her father said.
Her mother’s hands were clasped now.
Very calm in appearance.
A poor actress after all.
The final bend arrived.
I didn’t know why bends were permitted at the end of a race involving a recently injured ankle.
Questionable concept.
Liora entered it third in the chasing group.
Perhaps fourth overall.
A girl behind her moved closer.
My throat tightened.
Liora accelerated.
Slightly.
Not too much.
I thought I saw her left foot protect the landing.
Not obviously.
Only a caution in the angle.
She wasn’t fighting it.
She was running with it.
The thought passed through me as she came out of the bend.
Running with it.
Not against it.
Final straightaway.
The stadium changed.
Voices rose.
Parents.
Coaches.
Teammates.
Names.

Shouts of “Come on.”
Cries overlapping until they no longer meant anything.
Liora’s father stood.
“Come on, Liora.”
Not shouted.
Not really.
Well, yes.
In his way.
Her mother stood too.
I remained seated half a second too long, then got up.
Liora was moving forward.
Fast.
Less quickly than the girl in front.
More quickly than the one behind.
Or the opposite.
I understood nothing anymore.
There was only her face, her arms, her shoulders finally low, her foot holding, her whole
body wanting to go farther than it should.
With fifty meters left, she appeared ready to launch harder.
I saw it.
That desire to give everything.
To prove.
To burn whatever remained.
Then her face changed.
Not much.
A tiny choice.
She accelerated anyway.
Not recklessly.
Not with rage.
Not against her ankle.
With what she had.
She crossed the line fourth.
Or fifth.
I had to wait for the announcement to know.
She continued for several steps.
Slowed.
Didn’t fall.
Didn’t immediately grab her ankle.
She breathed, bent forward with her hands on her thighs.
Samir joined her.
He placed one hand briefly between her shoulders.
She nodded.
Then straightened.
I heard nothing.
I only saw her face.
Frustrated.
Extremely frustrated.
Alive.
Liora’s father remained standing.
“Fourth,” he said.
Her mother was looking at the scoreboard.
“Fourth.”
“She didn’t force the final bend.”

"No."
"She could have taken third."
"Maybe."
He fell silent.
For a long time.
"She ran well."
His wife looked at him.
"Yes."
He nodded, as though accepting a complicated result.
"Very well."
On the track, Liora was walking now with Samir beside her.
She was limping slightly.
Very slightly.
Or I wanted it to be very slight.
Samir spoke to her.
She replied with an irritated gesture.
He smiled.
She shook her head.
Then finally, she smiled too.
Not broadly.
Not victoriously.
An annoyed smile.
A smile that said she hated having done the right thing.
"Should we go down?" her mother asked.
Liora's father had already begun.
We descended toward the athletes' exit.
My bag struck my hip.
I had forgotten it existed.
Deeply insulting after such comprehensive preparation.
Liora reached the railing a few minutes later, towel around her neck, breath still high,
cheeks red, hair escaping everywhere.
She looked exhausted.
And furious.
And beautiful in a way that caught me off guard.
Beautiful like someone returning from a place where she had been forced to choose while
still in motion.
Her mother hugged her briefly.
"How are you?"
"Fine."
Then she corrected herself.
"Four. Maybe five."
Her mother's smile became enormous.
Not because of the number.
Because of the correction.
"Good."
Her father placed his hands on Liora's shoulders.
She raised one finger.
"Dad, no."
"I haven't said anything."
"You were about to."
"I was going to say you ran very well."
She froze.
The sentence entered.

You could see it.
She probably wanted to push it away.
Too much praise.
Too paternal.
Too difficult to receive when she hadn't won.
"I came fourth."
"Yes."
"So not very well."
"Yes, very well."
"Dad."
"You ran with an injury without becoming disorganized, without forcing when you shouldn't. You stayed inside your race. It was very good."
Liora lowered her eyes.
She looked more affected by that sentence than she would have been by a medal.
Which probably irritated her.
Samir arrived behind her.
"Your father is right."
"Please, not both of you at once."
"Intelligent race," Samir said.
She closed her eyes.
"I am going to burn that phrase."
"You're going to keep it. It stopped you from ending up on a treatment table."
He looked at her ankle.
"Ice when you get home. No running cooldown. Gentle walking. And you come see me tomorrow."
"Yes."
"Which yes?"
"The second."
"Good."
Samir left.
Liora's father followed him to ask something, probably for a complete verbal report in four sections.
Her mother walked away to find something to drink.
Very discreetly.
Too discreetly.
Liora and I remained beside the railing.
Everything continued around us.
The following races.
Announcements.
Bags.
Laughter.
Shouts.
The athletic world did not stop because one girl had just finished fourth.
She looked at me.
"So?"
"So what?"
"Was it slow?"
Her tone was light.
Her face wasn't entirely.
She wanted a joke.
Perhaps she wanted the truth.
Both.
I thought about the first lap.

The moment she had held back.
Her final bend.
The controlled acceleration.
Her body refusing to break itself in order to prove something.
“No,” I said. “It looked difficult.”
She stopped moving.
Then lowered her eyes.
A small laugh escaped.
Not happy.
Not sad.
“Yes.”

I continued because sometimes one sentence called for another before my brain could prevent it.

“You didn’t run less. Well, perhaps by time. I don’t know. I have no expertise. But it didn’t seem like less. It looked more... held together.”

She looked up.
“Held together?”
“Yes.”

“Are you giving my race an art critique?”
“I can say ‘well done’ instead.”
“No.”

She wiped her forehead with the towel.
Her hands were trembling slightly, probably from the effort.
“Keep doing it badly.”
I smiled.

“You wanted to go several times.”
“Was it obvious?”
“A little.”
“Great.”

“And you didn’t. Well, you did go, obviously. It was a race. But not recklessly.”
She looked at me.

The noise around us seemed to recede.
“You watched that?”
“I didn’t understand much else.”
She smiled.

Then her face folded for one second.
“I wanted the podium.”
“I know.”

“I could have taken it without the ankle.”
I didn’t answer.
Because maybe.
Because maybe not.

Because there was no point arguing over a reality that had not happened.
She continued:
“I nearly went for it in the final bend.”
“I saw.”

“I nearly told myself, screw it.”
She exhaled.
“And then I heard Samir. And my father. And you, a little. A lot.”
I froze.
“Me?”

“Don’t fight your own foot!”
I closed my eyes.

“So that will be my verbal legacy.”

“It was terrible.”

“Yes.”

“But useful.”

I opened my eyes.

She was watching me with a very gentle exhaustion now.

“I wanted to prove I was still myself.”

“And?”

“And I think I was still myself anyway.”

She seemed almost annoyed by the discovery.

“Very inconvenient,” I said.

“Extremely.”

Then she rested her forehead against my shoulder.

Simply.

Without warning.

Not for long.

Her body was warm, still feverish from the race.

I didn’t move immediately.

I didn’t dare.

Then I raised one hand and placed it against her back.

Very gently.

Not to hold her there.

To be there.

She stayed.

One second.

Two.

People moved around us.

The microphone crackled.

Liora’s father could return at any moment with a performance analysis and a bottle of water.

And yet the scene remained small.

Protected by its brevity.

Liora murmured against my sweater:

“I’m still really disappointed.”

“Yes.”

“And a little proud.”

“Yes.”

“It’s unpleasant being two things at once.”

“I know.”

She lifted her head.

Her eyes were bright.

Not tears.

Or not only.

“Did you bring a cold pack?”

I stared at her.

“No.”

She narrowed her eyes.

“Lie.”

“Yes.”

She burst out laughing, then corrected herself with a grimace.

“Ow. Fine. Give it to me.”

I took the insulated pouch from the bag.

She looked at it as though she had just discovered deeply embarrassing evidence of affection.

"You're impossible."

"Prepared."

"Impossible and prepared."

"I'll accept that."

She sat on a bench beside the railing and placed the cold pack against her ankle.

I sat beside her.

Not too close.

Then, as at the other stadium, her shoulder touched mine.

This time, neither of us pretended.

Her father returned with Samir.

He saw the cold pack.

Then me.

Then Liora.

Then how close we were sitting.

He stopped for a fraction of a second.

Very briefly.

Long enough for me to mentally prepare three explanations, two apologies, and an escape route through the bleachers.

He said nothing.

Nothing at all.

He merely held out a water bottle to his daughter.

"Here."

"Thank you."

He looked at the cold pack.

"Good initiative."

I didn't know whether he was speaking to her or me.

Perhaps both.

"Thank you," I said.

Her mother returned a few seconds later with granola bars.

She looked at us, smiled gently, then pretended she hadn't seen anything.

Which was very different from seeing nothing.

Liora drank.

Then looked at me.

"You realize he is now going to officially associate you with medical supplies."

"It's a stable position."

"Not very romantic."

"We began with a missing cat and a sprained ankle. The standard was unusual."

She laughed more gently this time.

Her father was speaking with Samir about recovery, returning to training, a lighter week.

Liora watched them.

"They're going to make a battle plan."

"Yes."

"Are you going to participate?"

"I can take notes."

She nudged my shoulder lightly.

"Don't look so happy."

"I'm neutral."

"You're delighted."

"A little."

She shook her head.

Then her smile returned.

Tired.
Real.
“Two laps,” she said.
“Yes.”
“That’s short, isn’t it?”
I looked at the track.
The lines.
The bend.
The finish.
“No.”
She turned toward me.
“It didn’t feel short to me.”
She remained silent.
Then placed her hand over mine on the bench.
Not hidden.
Not announced.
Simple.
I gently closed my fingers around hers.
The stadium continued around us.
I didn’t understand everything about that world.
The times.
The strategies.
The points.
The heats.
The movements.
The precise words.
But I understood that Liora had run with something more difficult than speed.
She had accepted a race that did not resemble the one she wanted.
Without breaking herself to correct the difference.
Perhaps that was what a narrow victory looked like.
Not reaching the podium.
Not proving that nothing could affect her.
Running two laps with her real body, her real frustration, her real fire, and crossing the line without lying to any of it.
She squeezed my hand.
“So, Mr. Sports Art Critic?”
“Yes?”
“Will you come again?”
I looked at her.
The answer was simple.
This time, even I didn’t need to complicate it.
“Yes.”
She smiled.
“Even if I don’t win?”
“Especially when you run difficult races.”
She looked away.
Perhaps because the sentence had found too precise a place.
Then she looked at the track, the cold pack against her ankle, my hand inside hers, her parents a few feet away, her coach talking about recovery.
“Fine,” she said. “But next time, I’m winning anyway.”
I smiled.
“Obviously.”

End

On the day of the exhibition, I changed T-shirts three times.

The first was black.

The second was also black, with a slightly different cut, which could justify a crisis if the anxiety cooperated hard enough.

The third was gray.

I kept it.

A decisive choice.

The rabbit calmly chewed his hay, untouched by the violence of human wardrobe decisions. Eugène sat on the couch, watching me lose with dignity to a clothes hanger.

“What?”

He blinked.

“It’s an exhibition. You wouldn’t understand.”

He licked his shoulder.

Fine.

Contemporary art had no influence over his schedule.

I returned to the mirror.

The gray T-shirt worked.

So did the jacket.

My shoes were clean.

I still had enough time to flee, change my identity, or become a lighthouse keeper.

None of those options were adult.

Several had a certain logistical appeal.

My phone vibrated.

Liora.

“Are you still home, or are you already hiding under a table at the gallery?”

I smiled.

“Haven’t left yet. I’m looking for an outfit that says ‘artist present, but unavailable to explain his relationship with light.’”

“I recommend gray. Black says ‘I suffer in silence.’ Gray says ‘I suffer, but I submitted my artist statement.’”

I looked at my T-shirt.

Deeply concerning.

“Are you inside my apartment?”

“No. I’m reading your textile soul.”

Then:

“Do you want me to stop by first?”

I remained there with the phone in my hand.

She could come in, sit on the couch, joke about my jacket, perhaps kiss me.

Then we would need to leave.

And part of me would want her to stay here instead of going into a room full of people looking at my work with lukewarm white wine in their hands.

“No. I’m going to go alone.”

The three dots appeared.

“Okay. I’ll meet you there. Reasonably late, to preserve your dramatic autonomy.”

“Thank you for this highly structured support.”

“I’m improving.”

I put down the phone.

My heart was beating too quickly.

Not only because I was about to show my drawings.

Because she would see them there.

Out in the world.

The artist statement had been approved. The general text still discussed domestic spaces, withdrawal, and inner worlds. Certain words made me want to cough slightly.

But beneath my name were my words.

A shortened version.

The right one.

“Aurèl draws quiet, inhabited places, even when no one appears in the image. A table, a window, a hallway, or a studio retains the traces of ordinary gestures. His work is concerned with modest refuges, habits, and what remains after bodies have passed through.”

It wasn't perfect.

It was faithful.

A major distinction.

I checked the balcony, the window, the door.

Demitrius.

Alive, suspicious, motionless.

Eugène.

Drinking with the appearance of an innocent animal.

I picked up my keys.

Then returned to check the balcony.

Closed.

The window.

Closed.

Eugène watched me come back with the weary expression of someone witnessing an unnecessary administrative procedure.

“I'm really leaving this time.”

He sat down.

Fine.

Vote of no confidence.

In the hallway, Liora's door was closed.

At the beginning, there had been that wall.

Quick footsteps.

Laughter.

A life beside mine without a face.

Now there were messages, injuries, kisses, and sentences that still hadn't been properly put away.

And tonight, she would come.

Not to push me into the room.

To be there.

I went downstairs.

The subway seemed louder than usual.

Or perhaps I had less skin.

A man was watching a video without headphones, a contemporary crime punished far too lightly.

I kept my phone in my pocket.

Major victory.

At the next stop, I almost checked my messages.

I didn't.

Second victory.

No one applauded.

Every conversation brushed against me. A woman loudly explained to her friend that she no longer wanted to “waste her energy on unaligned relationships.” A child asked every thirty seconds whether the subway had arrived yet, despite clearly already being inside it.

The world had decided to be especially present.

The exhibition space occupied a former storefront beside the canal. A large window, polished concrete floors, white walls, and a table where the cookies would probably become soft before 8:15.

Through the glass, I could already see people moving.

Mathilde.

Two artists I had met during installation.

A man in a beige jacket.

A woman wearing enormous red earrings.

Very brave earrings.

I remained on the sidewalk long enough for the door to notice my cowardice.

Then I went inside.

Warmth closed around me.

Soft light.

Voices.

The smell of fresh paint, wine, and printed paper.

Mathilde saw me immediately.

“Aurè! You’re here.”

A strange sentence.

Obviously I was there.

Except no.

That was precisely it.

Several versions of me would not have come.

“Yes.”

Brilliant answer.

“A little bit no, but mostly yes?” she asked.

“Exactly.”

“Perfect. That’s often the normal state at an opening.”

She gestured for me to follow.

“Your pieces are in the back. The label has been printed with the approved version.”

I saw them before I was ready.

Which was logical.

Artwork did not wait.

They hung in an uneven line, with enough space between them to breathe.

The table.

The window.

The hallway.

The corner of the studio.

The displaced chair.

And the last one.

The one I had added later.

A room seen from inside, the glass door open onto a railing. Warm light across the floor. A pair of running shoes beside the entrance. A crumpled blanket on the couch. A forgotten glass on the coffee table.

No figure.

No one.

But something had just entered.

Or left.

Or stayed.

I only knew I would not have drawn that image before Liora.

Not like that.

Mathilde stopped beside me.

“They look good.”

My images were there.

Under lights.
Not on my screen.
Not inside my studio.
Not protected from me.
I looked at the label.
My name.
Aurèl.
Then my words.
The sentence was still accurate.
It had not transformed into betrayal during printing.
Technical relief.
“Thank you.”
“You were right to insist,” Mathilde said. “The text is more accurate.”
Spoken there beside the images, the sentence carried more weight than it had in an email.
“Thank you for changing it.”
“It was only right.”
She looked at the series.
“People find their way into them easily. They’re accessible without being easy. Well, not simplistic.”
“I’ll take accessible and not simplistic.”
“Very reasonable.”
Someone called her from the entrance.
I remained alone in front of my work.
Mistake.
Or not.
I didn’t know where to put myself.
Beside the images looked pretentious.
Far from them looked cowardly.
Between the two, I obstructed traffic.
Fine.
I had become a badly positioned piece of furniture.
The room filled.
Glasses.
Coats.
Laughter.
Shoes on concrete.
I immediately identified several categories of visitor: those who read every label with religious seriousness, those who nodded at every piece as though art were a meeting requiring approval, and those searching primarily for the drinks table with poorly concealed affection.
I didn’t yet know which category I belonged to.
Probably the artist pretending to be a visitor in order to avoid being the artist.
Two women stopped in front of my series.
I pretended to look at my phone without turning it on.
Very subtle.
“It’s gentle,” the first said.
“A little sad too.”
I stiffened.
Sad.
Possible.
Not forbidden.

"I don't think so," the other continued. "More like after someone has left. But not abandoned."

I breathed.

Not abandoned.

I wanted to offer her a soft cookie in gratitude.

The man in the beige jacket arrived next.

He looked at the table for a long time.

"It's very post-lockdown generation."

Oh.

The old monster.

My stomach tightened.

The person beside him read the label.

"Maybe. But I think it's more intimate."

The man shrugged.

"Yes, well, it's the era."

A useful phrase.

You could place any work that refused to defend itself immediately inside it.

He had the right to see that.

I couldn't enter every person's gaze holding a red pen.

This time, my words were beneath my name.

He could project something else.

He couldn't erase me completely.

I remained standing.

Slightly straighter.

Not much.

Enough.

My phone vibrated.

"I'm outside. Walking slowly for a responsible dramatic entrance."

I looked toward the window.

Liora was there.

Dark jacket.

Hair tied back.

No crutch.

She looked through the glass, saw me, and smiled.

Then she entered.

The sound in the room changed.

Not because everyone noticed her.

Because I did.

She walked toward me more slowly than she had at the beginning.

Her body hadn't lost its energy.

She held it differently.

"Hi."

"Hi."

In the middle of a room full of people, we had to decide how two people who had kissed several times without receiving any relationship forms said hello.

The answer was: awkwardly.

She hesitated between hugging me, kissing me, nudging me with her shoulder, or giving me a military salute.

I did nothing useful.

Eventually, she placed two fingers against my wrist.

Briefly.

Discreetly.

Enough.

“You’re here.”
“Yes.”
“Actually here.”
I looked around the room.
“For now.”
“It counts.”
She wasn’t joking.
I lowered my eyes toward her ankle.
“And you?”
“Three.”
She smiled.
“See? I answer directly now.”
“Major progress.”
Her gaze moved behind me.
Toward the work.
The speed left her face.
She said nothing.
Rare.
Therefore important.
She moved toward the wall.
I remained slightly behind her.
It was difficult.
Watching her look.
A new category of discomfort.
She read my name, then the label.
Quiet places.
Inhabited spaces.
Traces of ordinary gestures.
Modest refuges.
What remains.
She moved from one image to the next.
In front of the window, she tilted her head slightly.
In front of the hallway, her face softened.
In front of the corner of the studio, she almost smiled, as though recognizing the lamp,
the table, and something else without a precise name.
I watched her read the images.
An activity far too intimate for a public place.
Then she reached the last one.
The glass door.
The shoes.
The blanket.
The glass.
The light.
She remained motionless.
For a long time.
Long enough for my heart to rise into my throat.
She had understood that she was there without being there.
Not a portrait.
A trace.
The way the world had shifted after she passed through it.
Liora turned toward me.
Her eyes were bright.
Not dramatically.

Enough to make me immediately want to check the label.
“Is that my mess?” she asked softly.
“It isn’t a mess.”
“My shoes.”
“Shoes inspired by shoes.”
“My blanket?”
“It’s my blanket.”
“Moved by me.”
“Probably.”
She looked at the image again.
“There’s no one there.”
“No.”
“But you know.”
I didn’t answer.
She had found the sentence again.
Deeply irritating.
Extremely important.
“You know someone just came in too quickly,” she said.
“Maybe.”
“And that the room didn’t hate it.”
She was looking at the drawing.
Thankfully.
“No,” I said. “It didn’t hate it.”
Liora reread the label.
“This works.”
“What?”
“The text. It begins in the right place.”
I looked at my name, the images, the words.
“Yes.”
Her fingers searched for mine between us.
Briefly.
Long enough for me to feel their warmth.
Her parents arrived a little later.
Her father wore a dark jacket, held perfectly straight, obviously. Her mother wore a colorful scarf and possessed the quiet gaze of people able to cross a room without trying to control it.
“Good evening, Aurèl.”
“Good evening.”
Her mother kissed me on the cheek.
I hadn’t anticipated it.
I survived.
“Congratulations.”
“Thank you.”
Her father went directly to the series.
He read the label, then examined each image with greater seriousness than some clients who had possessed the power not to pay me.
In front of the last one, he noticed the shoes.
Of course.
His eyes lowered toward Liora’s ankle, then returned to me.
“It’s precise.”
Two words.
From him, possibly a complete embrace.
“Thank you.”

He reread the text.
“It’s easier to understand what you meant.”
I chose not to laugh, minimize, or hide.
“That was what I hoped.”
His wife looked at him.
“He was right to ask for the text to be changed.”
He nodded.
“Yes. You were right.”
Liora didn’t say anything.
I felt her presence anyway.
She was allowing me to receive it.
Without translating the approval for me.
Her father then asked a genuine question about technique.
About the lines, the gray values, and the way I removed certain details rather than adding them.
I answered badly at first.
Then better.
He listened without interrupting, which was almost more impressive than his compliment.
“So it’s very constructed, despite the calm appearance,” he concluded.
“Yes.”
“You can see that.”
Another simple sentence.
It counted.
His wife smiled.
“With him, ‘constructed’ and ‘precise’ are practically enthusiasm.”
“I know how to formulate a compliment,” he replied.
Liora murmured:
“You said ‘precise.’”
“Precise and constructed.”
“Oh, yes. That’s almost obscene.”
I smiled.
A little.
The evening continued.
I spoke to people.
Actually.
Not many.
Not well every time.
But I answered.
A woman asked whether the places were real. I explained that some began with the studio, while others came from memories or reconstructed places.
A man spoke to me about solitude.
I didn’t close myself off.
I said there could be solitude in them, but not necessarily as an absence. Sometimes as a space where traces became visible.
Perhaps he understood.
Perhaps he mentally noted: slightly complicated young man.
Both were acceptable.
Another visitor stopped in front of the final image.
“It looks like someone has just put down their things and is going to come back.”
I looked at the drawing.
“Yes.”
Simple.

Enough.
Some people passed quickly.
Others stood too close.
Someone mistook a window for a photograph.
Someone brought up lockdown again.
One woman remained in front of the hallway for a long time, then stepped backward to see it from farther away. She said nothing. Strangely, that silence reassured me more than a comment would have.
Gradually, the room became warmer and louder.
The glasses emptied.
The cookies did, in fact, grow soft.
Mathilde moved from one group to another wearing a professional smile that must have exhausted her cheeks.
I lost sight of Liora inside the room.
Not really.
I always knew where she was.
Beside the sculptures.
With her mother.
In front of my series with a girl I didn't know.
She pointed at the label and said something.
I couldn't hear her.
She wasn't explaining for me.
She was saying what she had seen.
A distinction.
Again.
Around nine, I needed air.
Not escape.
A break.
Important.
I stepped outside into a small courtyard between two buildings. One high window, stacked crates, a potted plant, two stone steps.
The gallery noises passed through the closed door.
Muffled.
Glasses.
Voices.
Laughter.
Not entirely against me.
I sat on one of the steps.
The air was cool.
My body remembered it existed after two hours spent maintaining an approximate social posture.
The door opened.
Liora.
Obviously.
"Can I?"
"Yes."
She descended the steps carefully.
I stood by reflex.
"I can handle two steps."
I remained standing until she sat down.
"You can sit again now."
"Thank you."
Our shoulders did not touch.

Not yet.

"You okay?" she asked.

I considered it.

"Yes. Tired. Nervous. But yes."

"A real yes?"

"A real yes."

She smiled.

"You didn't run away."

"I technically left the room."

"To breathe. That doesn't count."

"Thank you for that regulatory decision."

Silence arrived.

Calm.

Not empty.

Liora looked at her shoes.

The real ones.

"It was strange seeing them."

"The shoes?"

"The piece. The blanket. The light. It isn't me, but it's after me."

I looked across the courtyard.

"Yes."

"When did you draw it?"

"After the cold pack."

She laughed softly.

"A great romantic moment."

"The condensation was interesting."

"Obviously."

I raised one shoulder.

"And everything else too."

She didn't fill the silence.

I was grateful.

Through the door, someone laughed too loudly. A glass clinked.

The world continued.

"I like seeing your world here," she said. "Even with the noise, I recognize your quiet."

The sentence could have been too beautiful.

It wasn't.

She said it like an observation.

"I wasn't sure it could be recognized outside."

"It can."

Only that.

Dangerous confidence.

I breathed.

"I think I like it when you're here."

She immediately turned her head.

Fine.

The sentence was out.

I like it.

I ran a hand over my face.

"No. Wait."

She waited.

I hated and loved that.

"I like it when you're here," I said. "And now, when you aren't here, I notice."

I kept my eyes on the plant.

"Not only as one less sound. Not only because the wall is quieter. I actually notice."
My voice was low.
Not steady.
Acceptable.
"There."
A sweeping emotional conclusion.
There.
Liora placed her hand over mine.
"I think I stopped pretending I only came over because of the cat a long time ago."
I turned my head.
Her eyes were gentle.
Still bright.
Still her.
"Even when it was because of the cat," she added.
"He'll be unbearable if he finds out."
"He already is."
She moved her shoulder closer to mine.
"I notice you too. Even when you barely make any noise."
The sentence entered softly.
It found room.
I turned my hand beneath hers and took her fingers.
At our scale.
"What are we?" she asked.
"You're really asking that now?"
"Yes."
"In a courtyard during my opening?"
"It's good neutral territory. The crates aren't judgmental."
I smiled.
Then she became serious again.
"I'm not asking for a perfect label. I just don't want to pretend it's nothing because we don't know how to do everything yet."
She had slowed down all the way to this.
To a difficult question.
Without running ahead of the answer.
I tightened my fingers around hers.
"I don't want to pretend it's nothing."
"Okay."
"And I don't know how to do everything yet."
"Neither do I."
"It shows less with you."
"That's because I speak faster."
"Yes."
Her gaze lowered toward my mouth.
I noticed, obviously.
I moved closer.
So did she.
That kiss wasn't checking whether a door existed.
It opened it gently.
It remained awkward because we were sitting on uncomfortable steps beside a tired plant while thirty people drank wine next to my drawings.
But it was more certain.
Not spectacular.
Only enough to confirm what the sentences had left standing.

When we separated, Liora remained close.
“For a declaration, ‘I notice’ is extremely you.”
I closed my eyes.
“I know.”
“I like it.”
“Is ‘like’ permitted now?”
“For me, yes. For you, I’ll monitor it.”
She rested her forehead against my shoulder.
Inside, someone opened the door.
We moved apart slightly.
A man appeared holding a glass.
“Oh, sorry.”
He hesitated.
“Do you know where the bathroom is?”
A truly grand romantic scene.
“On the left, down the hallway,” I said.
“Thank you.”
He disappeared.
Liora burst out laughing.
“Perfect.”
“Very consistent with the general tone of my life.”
We remained outside a little longer.
Then we had to go back in.
Together.
Inside, the noise struck me less forcefully.
Dense.
Warm.
Imperfect.
Liora’s mother was speaking to an artist beside the photographs. Her father stood in front of my final image again, as though conducting one last inspection of the world’s precision.
Mathilde crossed the room carrying a stack of cups.
No one had stopped because we had spoken in a courtyard.
The opening had continued without us.
That was reassuring.
Liora walked beside me.
Not ahead.
Not behind.
Beside me.
Her shoulder brushed my arm.
I returned to the work.
A young man was reading the statement.
“Are you the artist?”
I still felt that movement inside me toward the exit.
Less strongly.
“Yes.”
“I really like this one,” he said, pointing at the last image. “It looks like something just happened, but we’ve arrived afterward.”
I looked at the image.
Then Liora.
She didn’t say anything.
She let me answer.
“Yes. That’s something like it.”
“It’s calm, but it isn’t still.”

I felt Liora smile.
“Thank you.”
He moved on to the next piece.
I remained there.
Present.
Still uncomfortable.
But present.
A little later, Mathilde stopped beside me.
“Still doing okay?”
I looked around the room.
“Mostly, yes.”
“A perfect opening answer.”
She followed my gaze toward the series.
“See? The text doesn’t close down the responses. People go elsewhere, but they begin from somewhere more accurate.”
I nodded.
Perhaps that was exactly what I had wanted without managing to say it.
Not to control the interpretation.
Only to prevent its direction from being decided too soon.
“Thank you,” I said.
“You already told me that.”
“I can stop.”
“No. It makes a change from artists who discover the existence of deadlines on installation day.”
She left before I found an answer.
The evening continued.
I didn’t always answer well.
I lost track of a question about my influences.
I said “um” too often.
Someone asked why no bodies appeared in the series.
I replied that they might already have passed through, or were simply outside the frame.
The answer seemed to satisfy them.
It satisfied me too.
I drank a glass of water believing it was apple juice.
A disappointing experience.
Sometimes Liora remained beside me.
Sometimes she was elsewhere.
She didn’t hold on to me.
She didn’t push me.
She talked, laughed, came back. Sometimes she looked at the images as though they still had something to tell her.
Each time she returned, the noise did not become quieter.
Only less against me.
Toward the end, the visitors began to leave.
Empty glasses accumulated on the table.
The other artists spoke to one another with the strange exhaustion of important evenings, that mixture of relief and an inability to immediately understand what had just happened.
My images remained on the wall.
They looked calmer than I felt.
Liora’s parents left before she did.
Her father shook my hand.
“Good exhibition, Aurèl.”

“Thank you.”
He paused.
“And a good text.”
Her mother kissed me on the cheek again.
This time, I almost anticipated it.
“Get some rest,” she said.
“Are you saying that to me or Liora?”
“Both of you.”
“I’m in perfect condition,” Liora protested.
Her mother looked at her.
“Four?”
“Three and a half.”
“Then not perfect condition.”
“You are all extremely irritating.”
“Precise,” her father corrected.
They left.
Liora turned toward me.
“Do you want to go home?”
I looked around the room.
My images would remain there after I left.
Without me being able to control who looked at them tomorrow.
Or how.
The thought still frightened me.
It no longer made me want to take them down.
“Not yet.”
“Okay.”
We stood in front of the series.
The gallery was nearly empty.
Mathilde was clearing glasses. A chair scraped against the floor. The street shone beyond the window.
Liora stood in front of the final image.
“Eugène should receive credit.”
“Absolutely not.”
“With the involuntary participation of a legally dubious cat.”
“Too long for the label.”
“Shame.”
She slid her hand into mine.
Naturally.
As though the gesture had found its place.
I looked at our fingers.
Then the wall.
Then the images.
I thought about the beginning of all this, though life never properly announces its beginnings.
A sound behind a wall.
A cat on a drawing tablet.
A girl’s voice.
Footsteps moving too quickly.
A balcony.
A hallway.
A father standing in a doorway with Eugène in his arms.
Back then, my world had seemed small because I had built it to fit me.
I believed making it larger would mean losing it.

Tonight, my images hung on a public wall.
People sometimes read them incorrectly.
Sometimes accurately.
Liora was holding my hand in a room that wasn't my studio.
Her laughter existed beside my silence.
And nothing had collapsed.
The noise had not disappeared.
It was in the room, the street, the glasses being cleared away, Liora's footsteps beside me,
my own still deeply unprofessional heart.
It was no longer only something that entered my home without asking.
It had a face.
A rhythm.
A choice.
Liora rested her head against my shoulder.
"So?"
"So what?"
"Is it over?"
I looked at the images.
Then her.
"No."
She smiled.
"Good answer."
We left the gallery a little later.
Out in the cool street, she walked at my pace for several yards.
Then I slowed to hers.
Neither of us commented.
The canal reflected the city lights.
Someone laughed farther away.
Liora slipped her hand into mine.
I kept it.
We walked without speaking.
That silence asked for nothing.
It didn't try to protect the evening, define what we were, or transform the opening into a
perfect victory.
It simply moved forward with us.
And for the first time in a long while, I didn't think of my world changing size as a threat.
It was growing.
Simply.
With noise.
With quiet.
With someone beside me.

Epilogue

Taking Eugène for a walk

Six weeks after the exhibition, Liora discovered that certain cats could be walked in a harness.

The problem lay in the word certain.

I pointed this out.

Several times.

Calmly, at first.

Then with visual documentation, because Liora possessed the rare ability to listen to a reservation, nod, say, "Yes, I understand," and then continue in precisely the opposite direction with renewed energy.

"Certain cats," I repeated, "does not mean all cats."

She was sitting on my couch with one leg folded beneath her and the other stretched across the rug. Her ankle was better. Not perfect, according to her. Perfect, according to her desire to run too quickly. The current compromise was to call it "functional," which had the advantage of satisfying no one.

She held her phone in front of me.

On the screen, an orange cat walked along a sidewalk in a green harness, looking as though it had understood democracy.

"Look," she said.

"I'm looking."

"He looks happy."

"He looks suspiciously cooperative."

"Eugène might like it."

At the sound of his name, Eugène raised his head from the armchair.

He looked at us.

For a long time.

Then went back to sleep.

A clear response.

"Eugène has already expressed his opinion," I said.

"He doesn't know what we're offering yet."

"That is precisely what concerns me."

Liora placed her phone on the coffee table and leaned toward the cat.

"Eugène, do you want to discover the world?"

Eugène opened one eye.

Only one.

Not even the correct one.

"See?" she said. "He's thinking."

"He's preparing a complaint."

"He needs enrichment."

"He has already enriched our building with a disappearance, a sprained ankle, and several family discussions."

"Exactly. He has potential."

I looked at her.

She smiled at me.

Not the way she had at the beginning.

Well, yes.

A little.

Still that smile that arrived before caution did.

But now she knew how to wait for my answer.

Sometimes.

When the idea did not involve a cat harness.

"You already bought the harness?"

She froze.

Barely.

Too barely.

"No."

"Liora."

"I ordered it."

"Is that different?"

"Legally, perhaps."

I covered my face with one hand.

Eugène, who had no access to the concept of online shopping, stood and climbed down from the armchair with insulting heaviness.

He came over, climbed onto the couch between Liora and me, then settled on my right knee.

He was never neutral.

Liora lowered her voice.

"He has just given emotional consent."

"He has just immobilized me."

"Close enough."

The rabbit chewed a stalk of hay in his corner with the wisdom of an animal who had always known to avoid grand adventures.

I looked at him.

"At least you have ethics."

His nose moved.

Liora followed my gaze.

"Demitrius doesn't want a harness?"

"Demitrius wants this conversation to end."

"I respect that."

"So did Eugène."

"Eugène doesn't know what's good for him."

I stroked the cat, who was now purring with a remarkable lack of moral consistency.

"No one in this room knows what's good for Eugène. Especially Eugène."

The harness arrived two days later.

Red.

I had not been consulted about the color.

Liora claimed red looked very good with gray and white.

I replied that Eugène was not a couch requiring coordinated accessories.

She said that was exactly what someone opposed to aesthetic progress would say.

So the following Sunday, we organized Eugène's first official outing.

The word organized was important.

It was not a walk.

It was an operation.

Liora's father had come.

At first, I hadn't understood why.

Then I saw him remove a small flashlight, a roll of plastic bags, a bottle of water, and a handwritten sheet titled "Cat Outing" from his pocket.

At that point, I stopped questioning his presence.

Her mother had come too, naturally.

She had brought cookies.

For us.

Not for the cat.

A necessary clarification, since Liora had asked.

We were all inside my studio.

Me, Liora, her parents, Eugène, Demitrius, and the red harness resting on the coffee table like a ceremonial object.

“We need to begin calmly,” Liora’s father said.

I looked around.

Four humans standing around a cat, one of them holding a written plan.

“We may already have moved beyond calm.”

“We must not transmit stress to him,” he continued.

Liora looked at me.

“Aurèl, stop transmitting.”

“I’m standing still.”

“You’re transmitting internally.”

Her mother smiled into her tea.

“She isn’t wrong.”

“Thank you, ma’am.”

“You can call me Marianne, you know.”

I froze.

She had offered her first name several times since the exhibition.

Each time, my system had filed the information under “process later.”

Liora looked toward the ceiling.

“Mom, you’re going to kill him.”

“With my first name?”

“He wasn’t ready.”

Liora’s father folded his sheet slightly.

“You can call me Alain as well.”

Silence.

I looked at them.

Marianne.

Alain.

Fine.

Parents had first names.

Logical information.

Destabilizing.

“Okay,” I said.

Liora smiled.

“You’ll use them in 2029.”

“Possibly.”

Eugène jumped down from the coffee table before anyone could begin.

The harness remained alone.

Very dignified.

“He understood,” Alain said.

“He’s anticipating.”

“That’s a sign of intelligence.”

“Or contempt.”

Liora crouched in front of Eugène, who had settled beside the bookcase.

“Come here, sweetheart.”

He looked at her.

He loved Liora.

In his way.

Meaning that he accepted existing near her whenever there was some tactile or nutritional benefit.

She pulled a treat from her pocket.

Betrayal.

“You had treats?”

"Of course."

"Since when?"

"Since I decided to succeed."

Eugène stood.

Bought.

Very quickly.

We managed to put the harness on him in three stages, two negotiations, one lie, and a remark from Alain about the importance of not twisting the straps.

Eugène immediately froze.

Completely.

Legs spread apart.

Body low.

Head upright.

Eyes fixed on me.

That look said:

You allowed this.

I lowered my eyes.

"I'm sorry."

Liora, meanwhile, was emotional.

"He's magnificent."

"He looks like he's wearing a debt."

"He's discovering a new sensation."

"He has lost the use of his convictions."

Eugène attempted one step.

The rest of his body followed late, as though the harness had altered the laws of feline coordination.

He stopped.

Looked at the floor.

Then at us.

Then the floor again.

"We need to give him time," Marianne said.

"Yes," Alain said. "Adaptation phase."

I looked at him.

"There are phases?"

He raised his sheet.

"Three."

Liora burst out laughing.

Eugène flattened himself slightly.

"Don't laugh," I said. "He's undergoing an institutional crisis."

Leaving the apartment took eight minutes.

Reaching the elevator took three.

Eugène walked as far as the doormat, then sat on it firmly.

Liora held the leash.

Not taut.

She had learned that from a video, probably.

"He needs to choose," she said.

"He has chosen to remain here."

"He's assessing."

"The doormat?"

"His territory."

Alain crouched beside the cat.

"Eugène, you need to move forward."

I looked at the scene.

An adult man, once feared as the administrator of emotional building regulations, was negotiating with my cat in a hallway.
Life had taken several turns.
Eugène turned his head away.
Alain stood.
“He does not respond to verbal instruction.”
“What a surprise,” I said.
Marianne placed one hand on my arm.
“Perhaps he responds to the atmosphere.”
“The atmosphere already owes him a great deal.”
Eventually, Eugène agreed to leave the doormat because Liora placed a treat six feet away.
Manipulation.
Effective.
We took the elevator.
Five people, one cat in a harness, a red leash, a folded instruction sheet, a package of cookies, and me in the middle holding the carrier in case of emergency.
The third-floor neighbor joined us.
He looked at Eugène.
Then at us.
Then at Eugène again.
“Hello.”
“Hello,” Liora replied with perfect seriousness.
He pointed toward the cat.
“A walk?”
“An attempt,” I said.
Eugène sat on my shoes.
The neighbor nodded as though that answered everything.
“Good luck.”
He left on the ground floor before we did.
Very wise.
In the lobby, Eugène regained some mobility.
He walked as far as the mailboxes.
Stopped.
Sniffed the base of an umbrella stand.
For a long time.
A very long time.
“He’s discovering the world,” Liora whispered.
“He’s discovering a piece of furniture that has existed for seven years.”
“It’s new to him.”
“It’s humiliating to us.”
Alain consulted his sheet.
“First outings should be brief. We aren’t aiming for distance.”
“Good news,” I said. “Neither is he.”
Marianne laughed softly.
The rabbit had remained in the studio.
Before leaving, I had seen him sitting peacefully in his corner, exempt from all modernity.
The thought reassured me.
The studio still existed.
Its quiet had not been invaded by the world.
It was waiting.
With the hay.
The rug.

The drawings on the desk.
An open life did not necessarily mean everything had to go outside at once.
We finally crossed the building's front door.
The street was mild.
A clear afternoon, neither warm nor cold.
Pedestrians, bicycles, a stroller, an extremely small dog wearing a disproportionately large coat, a car parked too close to the crosswalk.
Eugène placed one paw on the sidewalk.
Then a second.
Then stopped.
He looked left.
Right.
Then behind him.
Like a property owner inspecting a neighborhood before investing.
"He's impressed," Liora said.
"He's judging."
"That's how he expresses being impressed."
We remained motionless in front of the building.
For a very long time.
A man passed, walked around us, looked at Eugène, and smiled.
"Is that a cat?"
I looked down at the gray-and-white animal wearing a red harness at the end of the leash
Liora was holding.
"We believe so."
The man laughed and continued walking.
Eugène took three steps.
Three.
Then stopped in front of a stone.
Small.
Gray.
With no visible appeal.
He lowered his head.
Sniffed it.
Walked around it.
Returned.
Sniffed it again.
"A historic moment," Liora said.
"Contact with mineral matter."
"Don't make fun of him."
"I'm documenting."
Alain leaned forward.
"He appears uncertain about the direction."
"He's uncertain about everything," I said. "It's his ethical position."
Marianne opened the package of cookies.
"Would anyone like one?"
Liora took a cookie.
So did I.
Alain declined, then took one two seconds later, which made his wife smile in an extremely married way.
Eugène suddenly decided to walk left.
We followed.
Well.
We took two steps.

Then he changed his mind.
Right.
Liora turned gently with him.
“We need to respect his rhythm.”
“His rhythm resembles a parliamentary debate.”
“You’re being unfair.”
“He has covered four feet in four minutes.”
“It’s a beginning.”
“It’s a cadastral survey.”
She laughed.
Her shoulder touched mine.
Naturally.
Without a question.
Alain walked six feet behind us, prepared to intervene if the outing turned into an incident.
Marianne walked beside him, cookie in hand, fully aware of the general absurdity but happy to inhabit it.
Eugène reached the base of a tree.
He appeared overwhelmed.
The tree maintained a professional attitude.
The cat placed one paw on a root.
Then another.
Sniffed the bark.
Looked up.
For one second, I saw a vertical project in his eyes.
“No,” I said.
Liora pulled very gently on the leash.
“Not the tree.”
Eugène looked at us.
“Not after everything we’ve been through,” I added.
Alain approached.
“He might try to climb.”
“Thank you, Alain.”
The name came out.
Everyone turned toward me.
Terrible.
I had used it.
Alain looked satisfied, almost imperceptibly.
Liora stared at me with an enormous smile.
“You did it.”
“Accidentally.”
“Too late.”
Marianne smiled too.
“Remarkable progress.”
I looked at Eugène.
“This is all your fault.”
He ignored the comment and stepped down from the root.
We resumed the walk.
The word remained generous.
Eugène advanced in twelve-inch sequences, interrupted by lengthy field studies.
A leaf.
A water stain.
A cigarette butt.

A ventilation grate.
The last caused a complete halt.
He stared into the openings as though they contained a fundamental answer.
Liora crouched beside him.
“Do you hear something?”
Eugène didn’t move.
“Maybe pipes,” I said.
“He’s sensitive to the city.”
“He’s sensitive to places he shouldn’t enter.”
A scooter passed along the street.
Eugène immediately lowered himself, belly close to the ground.
I stepped forward.
Liora raised one hand without looking at me.
Not now.
She didn’t say the words.
She made me feel them.
She remained crouched.
Calm.
“It’s okay, sweetheart.”
Her voice was low.
Not the voice that pushed.
Not the voice that wanted to move the world more quickly.
A voice that stayed with him.
Eugène raised his head after a few seconds.
I looked at Liora.
Her hair fell beside one cheek, the leash in one hand, her coat slightly open, her ankle still cautious when she stood.
She was still herself.
Quick.
Sometimes impatient.
Capable of deciding that a cat needed to discover outdoor civilization.
But now she knew how to wait three seconds longer.
Sometimes, that was enormous.
She stood.
“See? He handled it.”
“He’s recovering from a scooter.”
“Everyone has their traumas.”
“He has mainly traumatized other people.”
Alain checked the time.
“We should not exceed ten minutes outside on the first attempt.”
Liora looked around.
“How long have we been out?”
“Seventeen minutes,” he replied.
Silence.
“Why didn’t you say anything?”
“I was observing.”
“You have a sheet.”
“Exactly. I’m collecting data.”
Marianne laughed openly this time.
“Alain, let the cat have his achievement.”
“I am letting him have it. Within a framework.”
“Naturally.”
Eugène walked another six feet.

Then sat in the middle of the sidewalk.
 Abruptly.
 Definitely.
 Body upright.
 Tail wrapped around his paws.
 Gaze fixed on the street.
 The walk was over.
 Not because we had decided.
 Because he had decreed it.
 A woman carrying a shopping bag stopped.
 "Oh, he's beautiful."
 Eugène didn't react.
 "Thank you," Liora said, as though she had produced him.
 "Is he good at walking?"
 I looked at the motionless cat.
 Liora replied:
 "He's a beginner."
 A charitable formulation.
 The woman smiled and continued on her way.
 The four of us remained gathered around Eugène.
 Alain assessed the situation.
 "We can try calling him."
 "Eugène," Liora said. "Come on."
 Nothing.
 "Eugène," I said.
 Nothing.
 Marianne suggested:
 "Perhaps carry him?"
 Alain frowned slightly.
 "We should avoid responding to every refusal by carrying him, or he'll learn that immobility produces results."
 I looked at him.
 "Do you think he doesn't already know that?"
 Alain considered Eugène.
 "Valid point."
 Liora crouched in front of the cat.
 "Sweetheart, if you walk to the door, I'll give you a treat."
 Eugène blinked.
 "He's negotiating," she said.
 "No. He's waiting for the offer to increase."
 "Two treats."
 Eugène licked himself.
 "He drives a hard bargain," Marianne said.
 I crouched too.
 "Eugène."
 He looked at me.
 I adopted a very serious tone.
 "We need to go home before you discover freedom."
 Liora turned toward me.
 Her smile arrived slowly.
 "Too late. He discovered a stone. That's already a lot."
 "He'll never recover."
 "Neither will we."

Alain finally bent down carefully.

"I'll carry him to the lobby."

"Watch his back legs," Liora said.

"I know how to carry a cat."

She looked at me.

"Does he?"

"I cannot answer without creating family tension."

Alain picked Eugène up.

Eugène allowed it with offended dignity, as though the idea had been his and we were merely carrying out his instructions.

The leash hung down.

The red harness shone in the sunlight.

An adult cat, perfectly capable of walking but morally unavailable, was carried twelve feet by a serious man while his daughter laughed and his wife ate a cookie.

I looked at the scene.

Absurd.

Ordinary.

Exactly the right size.

Liora moved beside me.

Her hand searched for mine.

I took it.

Not to mark anything.

Because it was there.

The street continued around us.

A bicycle passed.

A door slammed.

A conversation drifted down from a window.

Alain was explaining to Eugène that a walk needed to include a return journey, not only exploration.

Marianne smiled in silence.

Liora laughed softly beside me.

The neighborhood made its ordinary noise.

There had been a time when I would have heard all of it as an invasion.

Proof that the world did not know how to remain in its proper place.

Now I heard it differently.

Not always easily.

Not without fatigue.

Not without occasionally wanting to go home, close the door, and return to Demitrius, my desk, the lamp, the quiet of the studio.

But I didn't need it to stop.

That was new.

And rather good.

Inside the lobby, Alain placed Eugène on the floor.

The cat immediately walked toward the elevator with scandalous confidence.

"Oh," Liora said. "Now he knows how to walk."

"He was conserving his strength," Alain replied.

"To press the button?"

Eugène sat in front of the doors.

I sighed.

"He's going to demand to be carried all the way to the couch."

"He has high standards," Liora said.

"He's judging us."

"Of course. He has always judged us."

She rested her head against my shoulder for one second.

Very quickly.

The way she sometimes did now, in the middle of a sentence, a hallway, a noise.

I looked at Eugène, the red harness, the leash, Liora's parents, and the reflection of all of us in the elevator doors.

The rabbit was waiting for us upstairs.

So was the studio.

With its quiet.

With enough room now for other presences to enter without displacing everything.

The elevator arrived.

Eugène entered first.

Obviously.

We followed him.

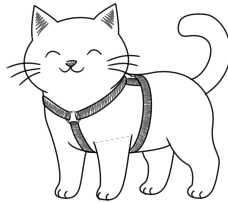
Beside me, Liora was still laughing. Alain was explaining something about the optimal duration of future outings. Marianne was telling him they would see. The city continued beyond the glass doors.

I didn't need it to stop.

I tightened my hold on Liora's hand.

She squeezed mine in return.

And Eugène, in the middle of the elevator, looked deeply satisfied for an animal who had just taken four humans for a walk.



Nos étés sous la pluie

The rain had this very personal way of falling in Port-Luhan.

Elsewhere, it simply fell.

Here, it seemed to have intentions.

It came in sideways, sometimes worked its way up under hoods, got inside sleeves, found the back of your neck with fairly humiliating precision. You could go out equipped; umbrella, waterproof jacket, decent shoes; it won anyway.

Always.

That Wednesday, it had won before I even reached the convenience store.

My socks were damp, my jeans stuck a little around the knees, and a plastic bag that was too thin was cutting into my fingers with the determination of an object holding a grudge.

I'd bought bread, tomatoes, a pack of coffee, two yogurts, a sponge, and dish soap.

Absolutely dizzying program.

At twenty-three, I still sometimes thought my life would eventually look like something clean. A trajectory. A mood. A decent soundtrack.

Then I'd find myself under horizontal rain with lemon-scented dish soap and had to admit existence still had a certain sense of humor.

I stopped under the pharmacy awning to rearrange the bag.

Bad idea.

The bread was sticking dangerously out one side. The tomatoes were threatening to escape through the bottom. The coffee had gotten wet, which seemed profoundly unfair to me. Coffee was precisely supposed to fix this kind of situation, not participate in it.

A car drove through a puddle.

I stepped back just in time.

Not enough to save my right shoe.

Obviously.

"Fine!"

Nobody answered...

That was the problem with small daily humiliations. They often lacked an audience.

I looked up at the main street.

Port-Luhan in the middle of August usually had something noisy about it. Families in colorful raincoats. Children running around holding crêpes much too big for them. Couples on vacation quietly arguing over the GPS. Wet dogs visibly regretting their trust in humanity.

Now, the rain had emptied the sidewalks.

The café terraces were folded back against the buildings. Awnings snapped in the wind. The newsagent had put a mop in front of his entrance, already doomed to failure. Farther down, the Rialto sign trembled in the wind, its red letters a little blurred behind the curtain of water.

I looked at the movie theater for a few seconds.

For no reason.

Well.

For a reason, probably.

I did a lot of things for no official reason.

It was very convenient.

The bag slipped in my hand again.

I caught it against me, crushing the tomatoes with my chest in the process.

A soft noise.

Sinister.

I didn't have the courage to check the damage.

"What exactly did you just do?"

The voice came from my left.

I turned my head.

Alizée was standing under the same awning, two meters away from me, her hair soaked all the way to the ends, a gray sweatshirt under a jacket that was too light, and that very particular expression she had when she was hesitating between laughing and judging me.

Often, she did both.

“Nothing.”

She looked down at my bag.

“Malo.”

“I secured the tomatoes.”

“With your sternum?”

“Traditional method.”

She pressed her lips together.

Her shoulders were barely shaking. She was trying not to laugh.

I really hated when she tried not to laugh, because it made me want to keep being ridiculous. Which was not a good long-term strategy.

She came closer and took the bag without asking for my opinion.

“Show me.”

“I’ve got it under control.”

“Yes. That’s the general impression.”

She opened the bag.

The tomatoes had, indeed, met a difficult end.

Not a total catastrophe. More like a low-speed traffic accident.

Alizée took out the coffee, the sponge, then contemplated the split tomatoes with the seriousness of a medical examiner.

“They’re still usable.”

“Thank you.”

“For a sauce.”

“I was planning to eat them normally.”

She looked up at me.

“You just murdered them against your sweatshirt. There is no more ‘normally.’”

Hard to argue with that.

The rain kept falling in front of us, thick, loud, almost solid. A drop ran from the end of her hair down to her jaw. She wiped it away with the back of her hand, annoyed.

“What are you doing here?” I asked.

Stupid question.

She was in a street.

People were still allowed to be in streets without submitting paperwork.

“I was going to the bookstore.”

“In this rain?”

“No, Malo, I was participating in a historical shipwreck reenactment.”

I nodded.

“Ambitious.”

“Thank you.”

She put the groceries back into the bag with much more order than I had. Which didn’t mean much, since a panicked seagull probably would have done better than me.

“The bookstore’s closed,” she added.

“Oh.”

“Extended lunch break. Or the bookseller died behind his counter. Impossible to confirm through the window.”

“Want me to help you investigate?”

“With your bag of traumatized tomatoes?”

“They can testify.”

She smiled.

Not for long. But just enough.

I looked down at the sidewalk, because sometimes looking directly at her required an amount of energy I hadn't anticipated when leaving the house to buy dish soap.

We stayed there for a while.

Under the too-short awning of a pharmacy closed between noon and two, with a damaged grocery bag, the rain in front of us, and that kind of comfortable silence that didn't always exist.

With Alizée, silences often changed nature.

There were the ones that rested.

The ones that waited.

The ones that already said too much.

That one was somewhere between all three.

She held a hand out beyond the shelter to test the rain, as if it might have changed its mind in the past two minutes.

It hadn't.

"I'd forgotten Port-Luhan was this shitty in summer too," she said.

"It's a conceptual seaside resort."

"What's the concept? Catching a romantic ear infection?"

"Probably."

She laughed a little.

Then she looked across the street, toward the Rialto.

"They're showing *At the Time Time Stopped* again on Friday."

I followed her gaze.

The poster was stuck crookedly in the movie theater window. The colors seemed brighter than everything else around it, almost aggressive in all that gray.

"Makes sense."

"Very subtle programming."

"They could've shown *Titanic*."

"Too dry."

I smiled.

So did she.

The rain made that constant noise around us, on the roofs, the gutters, the hoods of parked cars. It filled the blanks for us. Sometimes it was comfortable, letting something speak louder than you.

Alizée folded her arms against herself.

"You cold?"

"A little."

I looked at her jacket.

Clearly useless.

"You want mine?"

She turned her head toward me.

"You already look like a survivor."

"That doesn't prevent generosity."

"No, it just makes it less credible."

I started opening my jacket.

She put her hand on my wrist.

A brief gesture.

Almost nothing.

Except my brain didn't know "almost nothing."

It took the gesture, isolated it, lit it up, probably added some discreet background music, then presented it to me as vital information.

I stayed still.

Alizée took her hand away a second later.

"Keep it," she said. "We're crossing."

"Now?"

"Unless you want to start a family under this awning"

I looked at the rain.

"That's a little fast."

"I meant a family of mushrooms."

"More realistic."

She adjusted the bag on her shoulder, took mine in one determined movement, then handed it back differently, with the weight better distributed.

"Here. And don't hold the tomatoes against your heart this time."

"They needed it."

"They needed distance."

I took the bag.

Our fingers brushed.

This time, it was even less than a gesture.

An error in passing.

A microsecond.

My brain applauded anyway.

I was starting to resent it.

"Where are we going?" I asked.

"I'm walking you home."

"Why?"

"Because you're carrying wet coffee and injured vegetables. Clearly, you're vulnerable, Malo."

"I'm almost touched."

"You should be."

She went first.

I followed her into the rain.

Obviously, within three seconds, the awning became a distant idea. Water got everywhere. In my hair, inside my collar, down my back. Alizée walked fast, head lowered, without trying to avoid the puddles. She had this way of going somewhere as if the world had to move aside or deal with the consequences.

I was still calculating where to put my feet.

Result: I stepped into the biggest puddle in the street.

Up to my ankle.

Alizée turned her head.

Normally, she couldn't have heard anything.

Impossible.

The rain covered everything.

And yet, she knew.

"Did you do that on purpose?"

"To strengthen my connection with the Atlantic."

"Beautiful."

"Thank you."

We crossed the market square. The tarps over the empty stalls snapped in the wind. An overturned crate slid a few centimeters, pushed by the water. In front of the bakery, a little girl in yellow boots was jumping in puddles while her father kept telling her to stop with the fragile authority of a man who already knew he had lost.

Alizée slowed down a little.

"Look," she said.

"At what?"

"At least she owns it."

The little girl jumped again.

Huge splash.

Her father closed his eyes, defeated.

"She's five," I said. "It's easier to own things when nobody expects you to have a coherent career plan."

"You think?"

"I hope."

"I think kids have more courage than we do."

I looked at her.

She kept walking, eyes on the street.

"They want to jump in a puddle, they jump," she added. "We stand at the edge for three hours wondering whether our socks are going to dry."

I didn't answer right away.

It was the kind of sentence Alizée threw out almost randomly, looking like she wasn't touching anything important, and then it landed exactly in the right place.

Or the wrong one.

I'd never known.

"Wet socks are serious," I finally said.

She gave me a look.

"There."

"What?"

"Exactly."

I almost asked what she meant.

Then I didn't.

There were days when I tired myself out by showing up too late to my own conversations.

We turned onto Rue des Tamaris.

Well, the old Rue des Tamaris. The new name still hadn't managed to enter my head. Some changes needed more time than others. Or better signage.

The house wasn't far now.

I felt a stupid disappointment rising with the end of the walk.

We had simply crossed Port-Luhan in the rain with groceries. Nothing more. No scene. No confession. No moment clear enough to tell someday without sounding like someone who exaggerates.

And yet, I wished the street were longer.

Maybe that was the most dangerous thing about Alizée.

She didn't only transform the big moments.

She also made ordinary journeys hard to leave.

At the gate, she stopped.

Rain ran down her face. Her cheeks were red from the wind. Her gray sweatshirt was darker at the shoulders. A strand of hair stuck near her mouth.

I held the bag against me.

Less tightly than before.

Out of respect for the surviving tomatoes.

"Thanks for the humanitarian escort," I said.

"You're welcome. Try not to die making sauce."

"I promise nothing."

She looked at the house behind me.

"Your parents here?"

"No. Tomorrow."

"Okay."

A small word.

Not much.

And yet it stayed between us one second too long.

I wanted to say something.

"Do you want to come in?"

Simple sentence.
Five words.
Well, five words and an absolutely disproportionate level of internal panic.
It wasn't a declaration. It wasn't a contract. It wasn't even necessarily ambiguous. You could invite someone inside for coffee without summoning all the great questions of existence.
Except the coffee was wet.
And so was I.
And so was she.
And sometimes, the most ordinary things suddenly became too full.
Alizée seemed to wait.
Or I imagined it.
That was possible too.
I was pretty good at giving silences intentions they hadn't asked for.
"Do you want..."
I stopped.
Bravo.
Very solid opening.
She raised her eyebrows slightly.
"I want?"
"Coffee."
I lifted the bag.
"I mean, if the pack survived. And if the coffee maker still agrees to cooperate with humanity."
She looked at me.
Then she smiled.
Not her big group smile. Not the one she gave easily when she talked fast and the others laughed around her.
Another one.
Calmer.
"I've got twenty minutes," she said.
Twenty minutes.
It was little.
It was huge.
I pushed open the gate.
It creaked, like always.
Alizée walked into the driveway behind me, wiping her shoes on gravel that was already soaked, which served absolutely no purpose.
I let her go ahead of me on the steps.
She turned back toward me before I opened the door.
"By the way."
"Yeah?"
"If your coffee tastes like rain, I'll tell you."
"I expect nothing less from you."
"Good."
I opened the door.
The house smelled of damp wood and summer on pause.
Alizée came in.
Not like an apparition.
Not like a memory returning at the right moment.
Like someone who was cold, who had walked through the rain, who had twenty minutes ahead of her, and who was probably going to criticize my coffee with unfair precision.
I closed the door behind us.
Outside, the rain went on.
Inside, for a reason I didn't feel like analyzing just yet, the day suddenly seemed less ruined.