

Chapter Three

The question arrived too early.

He felt it before the woman spoke, a tightening that moved ahead of sound, as if time itself had leaned forward to see whether he would follow. He did not look up immediately. He finished aligning the papers on his desk, squared the edges, then raised his eyes.

She stood near the doorway, one hand resting on the frame as if unsure whether she had permission to enter. Her badge hung slightly crooked. He recognized her from the lower floors—processing, intake, somewhere adjacent to waiting. They did not often come down to his level.

“I was told you might know,” she said.

He did not answer. He waited for the rest of the sentence, though he already felt its shape pressing against him, impatient.

“They’ve moved my review again,” she continued. “Just a few days. That’s what they said last time too.” She smiled, quickly, the way people did when they wanted to signal they were not accusing anyone. “I don’t mind waiting. I just need to know whether I should.”

There it was.

He felt the answer arrive fully formed, not as language but as a compression behind his eyes, a narrowing that reduced the room to edges and light. If she waited, her file would drift into a secondary queue. Not intentionally. Not maliciously. Simply as a function of how adjustments propagated once they passed a certain threshold. Her review would not be denied. It would simply never quite arrive in time to matter.

If she moved now—appealed, escalated, insisted—she would incur immediate cost. Friction. Attention. The kind of notice that left marks. But she would remain inside the window where outcomes were still flexible.

He had learned, over time, that these moments were never neutral. Silence did not preserve innocence. It only delayed consequence.

He chose his words carefully.

“They’re still within range,” he said. “Nothing has closed.”

She nodded, relieved. “So waiting won’t hurt.”

He did not correct her.

After she left, the room felt smaller. The light seemed harsher, though nothing had changed. He sat still for several minutes, aware of the pressure lingering longer than usual, refusing to release.

By midafternoon, the Read arrived late.

That, too, was new.

He stared at the screen, waiting for the familiar cascade of distributions to populate. When they did, they came all at once, dense and overlapping, as if compensating for their absence by arriving together. He felt the answers press forward, impatient, crowding one another.

He worked more slowly than usual, deliberately pacing himself, translating what he could without allowing the rest to spill into awareness. It felt like holding back water with his hands, futile but necessary.

When he stood to leave, his legs felt unsteady. He paused at the top of the stairwell, one hand on the rail, letting the sensation pass. Below him, someone coughed. A door opened and closed. The building breathed around him.

On the street, the city moved as it always had. He walked without destination for several blocks, letting the noise and motion dilute the residue of the day. At a corner, he stopped short.

The pedestrian signal flickered, hesitated, then returned to its prior state. People waiting glanced at one another, uncertain whether to move. A man stepped forward, then back again.

The timing corrected itself.

He felt the answer arrive and, for the first time, felt no relief when it did.

At home, the silence pressed harder than usual. He did not turn on the lights immediately. He stood by the window, watching the slow choreography of the street below. Somewhere nearby, a door slammed. Laughter rose and fell.

He thought of the woman in the doorway. Of her careful smile. Of the way waiting felt like restraint when you believed it was chosen.

He slept poorly. When he did sleep, he dreamed of corridors that narrowed the longer he walked them, doors receding just out of reach.

The next morning, the pressure returned before he reached his desk.

It sat with him through the first Read, through the second. He found himself pausing mid-translation, letting seconds stretch longer than they needed to, hoping the answer might soften if given time. It did not.

At midday, he received a message.

The woman's review had been rescheduled again.

He closed the message without responding.

In the afternoon, a supervisor passed through the room. Not his supervisor. Someone adjacent. The man nodded at him without stopping, eyes already elsewhere. The gesture felt neutral, and somehow worse for it.

By the end of the day, his head ached with a dull persistence that did not sharpen or fade. It simply remained, occupying space.

On the stairs, he stopped again, longer this time. He counted his breath. Four in. Four out. The pressure eased slightly, then settled back into place, patient.

At the street, the light held green longer than it should have.

He watched the crowd wait. He felt the answer rise and, for the first time, did not know what to do with it.

The city adjusted.

He went home.