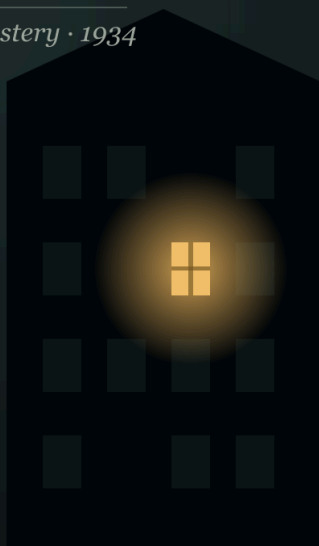


CLARQO PRESS

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A Prague mystery · 1934



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Published by **Shadow Wolf Apps** under the *Clarqo Press* imprint · clarqo.com/books

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1. The Coin-Coloured River

THE RIVER THAT MORNING WAS THE colour of a coin left too long in a pocket. Hron stood at the embankment rail below the dead man's windows and watched a barge nose upstream against the current, its engine coughing, and he thought, as he often did before a body, of nothing in particular — the price of coal, the ache above his knee, a phrase Agnes had not said. The constable beside him was talking. Hron let the words go past like the water. Three storeys up, behind glass the frost had feathered, a man who had owned a thousand old and beautiful things had been found drowned in his own bath with the door bolted from inside, and downstairs the concierge swore on her dead husband that no one had come down the stairs all night. It was not yet eight. The Orloj had not struck. Somewhere a tram bell rang twice, then once, and the city, indifferent and enormous, went about the ordinary business of being awake.

The constable had come down to fetch him at the kerb, as though the building could not be trusted to deliver him to the right floor on its own. He was young and had not slept and wanted to talk about it. Hron listened with the part of his mind that was always listening and looked with

the part that mattered. The building was good. Not new — nothing here was new — but built in the confident years before the war by men who believed the Empire would pay them forever, with a stone face the colour of weak tea and caryatids holding up nothing above the door. A tram crossed the bridge to the north and its bell came thin across the water. Hron put his cigarette out against the rail, kept the stub, and went in.

The lift was a brass cage and out of order, a paper card hung on its grille in a careful old-fashioned hand: *out of order*. So they took the stairs, which were the right kind of stairs for the case to begin on — wide, carpeted in a red worn to the colour of brick along its centre, turning around a stairwell that smelled of floor wax and cold and, faintly, of someone's breakfast two floors down. The young man went ahead two steps at a time and then had to wait, embarrassed, on each landing, like a dog that has run too far up the road.

Bouda met him at the top. Detective Sergeant Karel Bouda had a notebook open already and a pencil behind his ear and the particular stillness he kept around the dead, which Hron valued in him and had never said so.

"Chief Inspector." A small nod. "It's bad and it's strange, both."

"Tell me the strange part later," Hron said. "Tell me the door."

"The door's the strange part."

They went in. The flat opened off the landing through a double door, one leaf standing wide,

and the cold of the stairwell followed them in and was met by the warmth of a flat heated all night and only now beginning to give it up. A long hall ran the depth of the building, parquet underfoot, the rooms opening off it one after another. Hron stood a moment and let the place tell him what kind of money it was. Old money, and a great deal of it, and the taste of a man who bought not to display but to keep. The walls were hung close — etchings, a small dark Dutch thing of a kitchen, a map of Bohemia from before anyone living had drawn breath. A clock somewhere ticked with the heavy, unhurried authority of a clock that has never once been wrong. On a console table a porcelain shepherdess held out a porcelain lamb to no one.

“This way,” Bouda said.

The bathroom was at the end of the hall, past the bedroom, and the door of it stood open now though it had not stood open an hour ago, because they had broken it. The frame was splintered at the height of a man’s hip where the bolt had been, a clean new wound in old wood, and the wood there was pale where the rest was dark with forty years of varnish. Hron looked at the broken frame before he looked at the dead man. He looked at it for some time.

“The bolt was thrown,” he said. It was not a question, but Bouda answered it.

“Barrel bolt. Shot across, into the keep. We had to take the panel to get a hand to it. Wertheimer — the woman who found him — she fetched the

concierge, and the two of them couldn't shift it, and then the constable came, and then us, and we broke it." He turned the notebook so Hron could see the small neat drawing he had made. "Bolted from the inside. There's no other way out. Window's painted shut and it's three storeys to the river anyway."

"And the window's whole."

"Whole and shut and the frost on it unbroken when we came. I checked the frost." Bouda said this last with a flat pride, and Hron, who had taught him to check the frost, said nothing and let him keep it.

Then he looked at Simon Reszke.

The bath was a long old iron thing on lion's feet, enamelled white inside and gone the colour of old teeth at the waterline, and it had been half drained — someone had pulled the plug, the constable most likely, in the first useless hope — so that the water stood now at the level of the dead man's chest and the rest of him rose out of it grey and slack into the cold air. He was a big man who had been a bigger one once; the flesh had begun to go from him the way it goes from the old, leaving the frame too large for what it carried. His head lay back against the curved iron at the tap end, the mouth a little open, the eyes a little open, fixed on the cracked plaster of the ceiling with an expression Hron had learned long ago not to read anything into. The dead do not look surprised, or peaceful, or afraid. They look the way a coat looks on a hook. A white beard, well kept in life, lay

matted to the throat. On the marble shelf above the bath stood a cake of green soap, a razor folded in its bone handle, a tooth-glass, a bottle of something amber gone half down. The towel was on its rail, dry. Hron noted that the towel was dry and did not yet know what it would mean.

He crouched by the bath, his knee protesting the damp, and looked without touching. The materialist in him went round the small room counting the ordinary residue of a death the way another man might count his change. Water still in the bath, cold now, with a scum of soap drawn into curds at the edges. The man's clothes nowhere — so he had come to the bath already undressed, from the bedroom, in the way of a man at the end of his day. A reading-lamp had been left burning in the bedroom; its low light fell out across the hall floor. The amber bottle. The dry towel. He looked at the dead man's hands where they floated, the fingers loosely curled, and at the soft inner skin of the forearms, and saw nothing the police surgeon would not see better. There would be Stross at Albertov with his cold instruments and his colder questions, and Stross would tell him in two days what the water had done and what had been done to the man before the water. For now Hron only looked, and let the room be wrong at him without forcing it to say how.

Because it was wrong. He could not yet have told the magistrate why, and he distrusted the feeling on principle, the way he distrusted confessions and intuitions and all the things that flatter

a policeman into thinking he is clever. But the room was wrong. A man so old and so heavy did not drown in his own bath where the doors were bolted and the frost on the window unbroken, not without the room being wrong somewhere, and Hron's business now was to find the exact corner where the wrongness lived and drag it out into the plain daylight and make it ordinary. Everything could be made ordinary. He believed that the way other men believed in God.

"Who is he," Hron said, rising. "Tell me who he is."

"Simon Reszke." Bouda gave the name its full weight and let it settle. "Sixty-eight. Widower and married again — there's a young wife, Hannah, at her sister's in Vinohrady, telephoned for. He dealt in old things. Books, prints. And he lent money." Bouda's pencil tapped once against the notebook. "In Josefov, on the quiet, for years. The kind of man who knows what everyone's grandmother's silver is worth and what everyone owes."

"A man with a ledger, then."

"More than one."

Hron went out into the hall, and the warmth of the flat pressed on him now and he wanted, the way he always wanted at this hour over a body, to be somewhere cold and outside and walking. He did not move toward the dining room yet. First he wanted the woman on the stairs.

—

Mrs Martha Kühn received him in the hall as if it were her own, which in the sense that mattered

to her it was. She was a square woman of sixty in a dark housecoat buttoned to the throat, her grey hair drawn back so tight it pulled at the corners of her eyes, and she stood with her hands folded over her stomach in the attitude of a woman who has buried a husband and a great deal else and has no intention of being moved by one more dead man, however rich. Hron liked her at once and trusted nothing she said, which were the right two feelings in the right order.

“You keep the keys,” he said.

“I keep the keys. I keep the door. Forty years I keep this house.” She had a low voice, flat, with the embankment in it and a little of the country underneath. “Mr Reszke I knew when he had black in his beard. You ask me what you ask me, Chief Inspector, I have already told the young one twice.”

“Tell me the once that matters. Last night. Who came down.”

“No one came down.” She said it the way she might have said *the river is wet*. Not insisting; merely correcting the question. “There was the dinner last night, the great dinner, and I sat up to let the guests out, all of them, every coat, and they came down late, near one, and I bolted the street door after the last and I went to my bed. After that — nothing. No one came down those stairs.” She lifted her chin a degree at the red-carpeted flight rising into the dark above them. “I sleep at the foot of them. My door is here. A cat does not come down those stairs in the night but I hear it,

and after I bolted the door I heard nothing, and this morning the woman comes running down to me white as the wall and we go up and there he is. No one came down. I will say it to the magistrate, I will say it on my husband's grave. No one came down those stairs."

She said *those stairs* each time, Hron noticed, and put it away unexamined, a small flat fact set face down to be turned over later. *Those stairs*. As against, perhaps, some other stairs. But the flat was on the top floor and the great stair was the only way up that he had seen, and he did not press her, because the thing a concierge tells you first is never the thing she knows, and you draw out the second thing by leaving the first alone.

"You sat up for the dinner last night," he said instead. "How many came?"

"How should I count them? Many. A dozen and more. Coats to the ceiling on my rack." She glanced, despite herself, at the brass coat-stand by the door, empty now and gleaming. "Fine people. Old people. He gave a good table, Mr Reszke, when he gave one, which was not often, not any more."

"And went up."

"And went up, and after, late, near one, came down, and I let them out, and I bolted the door." She unfolded her hands and folded them the other way. "That was the last I heard. After the door was bolted, nothing."

—

The woman who had found him stood in the door of the dining room and did not come into the hall, and Hron understood that she had been standing there some while, holding the jamb, not to be near the dead man and not quite able to be far from him.

Rose Wertheimer was perhaps forty, narrow, in a grey wool dress with a white collar ironed that morning before any of this, and her face had the composure of a person holding very still over a great depth, the way a glass of water stands full to the brim and does not spill if no one breathes on it. She kept Reszke's books, Bouda had said low to him in passing — his catalogues, his accounts, knew where everything was and what everything was worth. She did not weep. Her hands, when Hron looked at them, were perfectly steady and perfectly white at the knuckle.

“You found him, miss.”

“I came at seven, as I come every day.” Her speech was careful, the speech of someone who had German first in the house and learned to be exact in the second tongue out of pride. “The street door was bolted. I have my own key. The flat door — the inner door — was not locked, which was not strange, he never locked it against me. I called out. There was no answer, and the bedroom lamp was burning, and I thought he had fallen asleep over a book, he does that, he did that.” A small correction, made to the dead. “And then the bathroom. And the bolt would not give.”

“You touched nothing.”

“I touched the bolt. I could not move it. Then I went down for Mrs Kühn.” She drew a breath that did not quite reach the bottom of her. “I have not touched anything else. I would not.”

“Good,” Hron said, gently, because there was no use in being otherwise with her, and went past her into the dining room.

—

The dining room stopped him.

It was a long room with two windows on the river, laid for a feast and then cleared, but cleared by people who had given up partway, or been interrupted, or simply left the morning to deal with it. The cloth was still on the table, white damask gone grey-grained with old wine rings and the small archipelago of wax where the candles had guttered and been let gutter. The candles were burned to stubs in tall silver sticks. Chairs sat pushed back at their odd post-dinner angles, each one a body that had risen and gone. The good plates were stacked at the sideboard waiting for a maid who had not come; glasses stood about the cloth still, some with a finger of wine gone to vinegar in the bottom, catching what grey light the river sent up through the frost. The room smelled of cold candle-smoke and old wine and, under it, the dust-and-leather smell of the whole flat, the smell of paper and of years.

Hron stood at the foot of the table. He did not need Bouda to tell him this was last night's, the dinner cleared by no one, the room shut up and forgotten in the grief and confusion of a death —

it had the look of a thing the household had not had the heart to touch. And in the middle of the cloth, pushed a little aside to make room for the serving but left open, lay a book.

It was a ledger. A big flat folio bound in marbled boards gone soft at the corners with handling, its spine cracked white in the creases of a hundred openings, and it lay open near its end, the left-hand page nearly full, the right-hand page blank and waiting. Hron bent over it without touching, his hands behind his back in the old habit. The hand was a fine old commercial hand, upright, German-trained, the same hand running back — he turned no leaves, but he could see the brown tide-line of years in the edges beneath — back forty years and more. A man's whole hospitality, written down. Dates down the left margin in a narrow column. Then names. Then, in smaller letters, the placing: who sat where, *on the right hand*, on the right hand, on the left.

The last entry was dated in his own hand. 28 *February 1934*. The night of the great dinner — last night, the dinner the coats had hung in the hall for.

Hron began to count the names.

He did it the way he counted everything, without moving his lips, his eye going down the column and his mind laying each name flat as he passed it, the way a man lays out cards. The names meant nothing to him yet — strangers, German and Czech and one or two he could not place, a doctor, somebody's widow, a councillor

this and a lady that, the fine old people whose coats had brushed the ceiling. Outside, suddenly and from no great distance, the Orloj on the Old Town Hall began to strike the hour, the deep slow bronze of it carrying over the rooftops and the river-cold air and in through the frosted glass, and Hron, counting, thought without wanting to of Sunday, of the tram up to Vinohrady, of a girl who would be at the window when he came and would not say his name because she had not said any name in five years. The thought went through him like the cold from the stairwell and was gone. He kept counting. The Orloj struck on, indifferent, and the small wooden apostles were turning their slow procession in their little doors above the heads of whoever stood gaping in the square, and Death was pulling his bell-rope as Death did on the hour every hour whether anyone watched or not.

Twelve. Thirteen. Fourteen.

He came to the foot of the column and the column ended and below it the page was blank.

Fourteen names.

He was aware of Rose Wertheimer at his shoulder. She had come in after him without his hearing her, and she stood now a little behind and to the side, looking down at the open page with him, her white hands folded at her waist, and when she spoke her voice was very low and very level, the voice of the full glass not spilling.

“There were fifteen at table,” she said.

Hron did not look up from the page.

“Fourteen names,” he said.

“There were fifteen,” Rose said. “I served the wine. I counted the chairs that morning and I set them and there were fifteen.” She did not raise her voice and she did not soften it. She was not arguing. She was the kind of person, Hron would learn, made physically unwell by an inexactness, who would have corrected the river on the matter of its own colour if she had thought it wrong. “Fourteen places he wrote. Fifteen sat down.”

The Orloj had finished striking. In the silence after it the flat ticked and settled, the heavy clock in the hall counting on, the river going past below the windows the colour of a coin too long in a pocket. Hron looked down at the names in the dead man’s careful, forty-year-old hand and counted them again, slowly, the way you check a sum you are certain of because the certainty itself has begun to bother you.

Twelve. Thirteen. Fourteen.

Fourteen.

2. What the Water Leaves

THE INSTITUTE OF FORENSIC MEDICINE kept its own weather. Outside, on Albertov, the morning had warmed enough to loosen the gutters, and the trams climbing up from the embankment carried a smell of wet wool and coal and the first thin notion of a season that had not arrived; but the stairs down to the dissecting hall went under that and below it, into a cold that did not come from March. It came from tile and zinc and from the long habit of the place. Hron felt it take the ache above his knee the way river water takes a stone — slowly, all at once, and then for good. He did not hurry on the stairs. He never did. A man learns, going down to look at the dead, that the dead are patient, and that nothing he does on the way will change a single thing he is about to be told.

Doctor Emanuel Stross was already gowned and already smoking, which was against his own rule and everyone else's, holding the cigarette between two fingers at arm's length from the table as though that distance made it lawful. He was a small, dry man of sixty, bald to the crown, with the steady unsurprised eyes of someone who had stopped being lied to by faces a long time ago. He and Hron had come up together — not the same

work, but the same years, the same war somewhere behind them, the same two languages worn smooth at the seam. They did not shake hands. In this room one did not.

“You’re late,” said Stross, and then, because the orderly was German and might as well share the joke, he said it again in German — “and he’s early. Always the way.”

“I walked from Charles Square.”

“You walked because your leg hurts and you wanted it to hurt more so you’d have something honest to think about. I know you, Tobias.” Stross set the cigarette on the lip of an enamel dish, where it went on burning by itself, a small grey thread rising straight up in the still air. “Come and look at your antiquarian. He has been more interesting than I expected, and I expected very little. Drowned men are dull. They tell you the one thing and then they sulk.”

The body lay under the high north light, which in that room was the only kindness — a flat, even, shadowless light that asked no questions and granted no drama. Simon Reszke had been a big man once and was now merely a long one, the flesh gone the colour of the river he had lived above, the hair at his temples still combed in the way a valet or a wife had combed it, surviving him by a vanity of hours. Forty years of handling old and beautiful things had left his hands soft. Hron looked at the hands first. He always did. The face told you how a man wished to be seen; the hands told you what he had actually done with his days,

and Reszke's had done nothing harder than turn pages and count coins, and the nails were clean, and there was no torn skin, no defence, nothing under them.

"No fight," said Hron.

"No fight," Stross agreed. "Which a man drowning in his own bath would give you, fall or no fall — he would claw the enamel, he would mark the rim, his nails would carry the grit of the tile. These tell you he never struggled at the end. So. Either he was already gone before the water, which the lungs forbid, or he could not." He moved a lamp on its jointed arm and tilted the dead jaw with two fingers, not gently, not roughly, the way one tilts a thing to read a maker's mark beneath it. "Look here. Under the angle of the jaw. And here, the shoulders."

Hron leaned in. The cold came off the table and met him. Below the jaw, where the skin had the slack translucence of the drowned, two patches darkened the colour of weak tea, oval, the size of thumbs, set a little behind and below the ear on either side. And across the tops of the shoulders, where a man's collar sits, a broader bruising, deeper, pressed down into the meat.

"Thumbs," said Hron. It was not a question.

"Thumbs at the jaw. The heel of the hand and the weight of a body at the shoulders." Stross straightened and retrieved his cigarette and looked at it as if it had done something behind his back. "I will give you the picture and you may keep it or throw it away, it is the same to me. Someone took

him by the lower face — so — to keep the chin up and the head still, and bore down on the shoulders to hold him under. From above. Kneeling, I should think, beside the bath, with the working room a man has when the one beneath him is already soft. There is no bruise of a blow. No struggle in the hands. He was held, and he went under, and the water came into him while he was held.” He drew on the cigarette. “That is not a fall, Tobias. A man who slips and strikes his head and slides under leaves you a wound on the skull and a clean story. There is no wound on this skull. And it is not the other thing your magistrate will want, the easy thing — a man does not drown himself with his own two hands pressing his own two shoulders. The dead cannot hold themselves down. I have looked for the year they could. It has not come.”

Hron stood with his hat in his hands and let the picture settle. He had come to the Institute carrying, against his will, the seductive shape of the case as the embankment had first offered it to him: the open guest-ledger on the dining table, the fourteen names in the dead man’s own hand, the dinner of the night before, the whole grammar of the thing pointing at a death that came out of that table — a guest, a quarrel, a poison in the wine, the body found above the wreck of a last supper. It was a good story. It had the shape stories like to have. And Stross, who cared for no story at all, had just taken the first plank out from under it without once raising his voice.

“The lungs,” Hron said. “You said the lungs forbid.”

“The lungs are emphatic.” Stross said it with something almost like respect, the way another man might speak of a witness who did not vary under pressure. “Water down into the fine passages, the froth, the over-distension — he breathed it in, he was alive and breathing when he went under, no doubt of that, he did not die first and get put in the water after. But the manner is wrong for a fall and wrong for a faint. It is the lung of a man held down who fights for air against a weight and cannot rise. I have seen it three times. Two were canal. One was a wash-basin and a stepmother. It does not lie.” He paused. “And there is the other thing, which is your real present, so put your hat down and attend.”

Hron did not put his hat down. He attended.

“When did he die.” Stross said it flatly, not asking, telling him the question. “Your concierge, your ledger, your fourteen guests — they want him dead at the dinner, or near it. The dinner ended, you told my orderly, at half past eleven.” He went to the slate by the sink and read his own chalk as a man reads a price he does not intend to argue. “Stomach near empty — the dinner long digested and passed on; a small later thing, a tea, a little bread perhaps, taken hours after. Rigor as I find it now, the cold of the room above the river that night, the lividity fixed and where I would put it for a man lying as he was found — I will not give your magistrate a minute, he would only fall

in love with the minute and hang a man on it. But I will give him an hour, and I will sign it. Two o'clock. Near two in the morning. Not eleven. Not midnight. Two."

The thread of smoke from the enamel dish wavered, found its line again, and went on rising. Somewhere above them, through three floors of stone, a tram bell sounded twice on the hill and was gone.

"Two and a half hours after the last guest went down the stairs," Hron said.

"After the last guest you know of went down the stairs," said Stross, and he said it without weight, without any knowledge of what the words would come to mean, simply as a forensic man's reflex to tidy a loose claim. "I count what the body gives me. Who went up and down your stairs is your draught, not mine."

It was an old phrase between them, older than this case — *your draught, not mine* — the line Stross drew at the edge of his table, beyond which he would not be coaxed. The body was his country and he governed it absolutely and would not annex an inch of the corridor outside. Hron had always respected the border. It was, he thought now, why he believed the man. Stross never told you more than the dead had told him, and so the dead, through him, did not lie.

But the words sat in Hron with their own cold. He turned them over, slow, the way he turned a timetable. A dinner that ended at half past eleven. A death at two. And between the two, the thing

the embankment had handed him at eight that morning and he had not yet been able to put down: a door bolted on the inside, a barrel bolt thrown true, and a concierge who would swear on her dead husband that no one came down the main stair in the night. He had let that be an impossibility while the death was a dinner-death — an impossibility wrapped around a body that the dinner could plausibly have killed, the locked room a flourish, theatre, the kind of thing the newspapers would call a *riddle* and the magistrate would call suicide because suicide was the only key that fit a bolted door.

Stross had just moved the death three storeys downstream in time, into the dead middle of the night, into the hour when the house was asleep and the river ran black under the windows and the last tram had clattered north and not come back. A sealed room was no longer a flourish around a poisoning. It was the whole question, standing up in the dark and looking at him. If the man died at two, behind a door bolted from within, then someone had been inside that room at two — or had found a way to reach inside it — in an hour when, by every account Hron had, the only living soul in the flat was the man being held under the water.

“You see it,” said Stross, watching him. It was not unkind. It was the way a doctor watches a patient understand the X-ray. “I do not have to draw it for you.”

“I see a hole where I had a story.”

“Good. The story was bad. Stories are always bad. Bodies are honest.” Stross stripped the gloves at last and crossed to the long sink, and the talk loosened, the way it always did once the table was behind them and a man could be a man again. He ran the water and it went on running, that one warm domestic sound in all the cold, while he soaped to the wrist with the slow thoroughness of a profession that has learned what is on its hands. “You look thin, Tobias. You are not eating. Does your sister feed you on Sundays or does she only feed the girl?”

“She feeds us both. Agnes eats.”

“Agnes.” Stross said the name carefully, setting it down whole, not letting it break. He had buried a son in '18 — not the war, the influenza after it, the same winter wave that ran ahead of the one that took Hron's Klara a decade on, as though the thing had circled the city and come back for the rest of them — and a wife five years after that, and he lived now in two rooms in Vyšehrad with a housekeeper and a great many books and the particular composure of a man who has stopped expecting the door to open. He and Hron had never once spoken of any of it directly. They spoke of it like this, sidelong, across a sink, the way you look at the sun. “Still no words.”

“Still no words. She draws.”

“She draws.” Stross turned off the tap and stood a moment with his hands dripping, looking not at Hron but at the white tiled wall, at nothing, at whatever a man of sixty looks at when a name

has been set down between him and the drain. "My boy drew. Horses. Always horses, and the legs always wrong, four going forward at once like a — like a thing that cannot be. I kept them a while." He reached for the towel. "Then I did not keep them. That was a mistake, I think now. One should keep the wrong legs. They are the part that was true." He dried his hands, finger by finger, the surgeon's habit outlasting the surgery. "Read to her on Sunday. It does more than the doctors think, and we are the doctors, so we would know."

"I read to her," Hron said.

"Then you are not a complete fool." Stross hung the towel and turned, and the dryness came back into him like a tide returning, and he was the police surgeon again, brisk, finished, already half into the next thing the day would bring down those stairs. "I will have the protocol typed by afternoon. Bouda can fetch it. Forced submersion, manner: homicide, time: near two o'clock — and I will note for your magistrate that it is *not* self-inflicted, in those words, so that he cannot pretend I left him the door. Take that as a gift. He will hate it."

"He will hate it," Hron agreed.

He had his hat half to his head and one foot turned to the stairs and the warmer, dirtier, ordinary world above, where the trams ran and the gutters dripped and a man could buy a paper and a plum brandy he did not want, when Stross — already moving toward the slate to chalk the next name, his back half-turned, the thing said almost

to himself, almost as an afterthought a careful man adds only because it would nag him otherwise — said the last thing.

“One curiosity. For your draught.” He did not turn around. “The water in the bath. I had the tub looked at and the trap drawn before they cleaned it. No soap. No oils, no salts, none of the scented muck a man of his sort and his age washes in — and he was a man who washed in something, the soaps in his cabinet alone would dress a chemist’s window. Clean water. And cold.” Now he turned, and the steady unsurprised eyes rested on Hron without any drama in them at all, which was somehow worse. “Drawn cold and never warmed. A man does not run himself a cold bath at two in the morning, Tobias. He runs it hot, or he does not run it, and a man his age, after wine, with the river cold coming through the glass — he does not run it at all. But it was run. Someone ran it for him.”

The thread of smoke from the abandoned cigarette had burned itself down to the dish and gone out, and the still cold air of the place held no smell of it now, only tile, only zinc, only the river that was not in the room and yet somehow always was. Hron put his hat on. He went up the stairs into the loosening morning with two facts in him like two stones in a coat, and he did not hurry, because the dead are patient, and because some part of him had begun to understand that the thing waiting for him at the top of those stairs was not a story about a dinner at all.

3. The Grille in the Door

THE FLAT WAS COLDER THAN THE STREET. Hron noticed it the moment Kühn let him in — the kind of cold that does not come from an open window but from a building that has decided to forget it was ever lived in, the stoves gone out, the river breathing up through the old casements as if the apartment lay below the waterline and not three storeys above it. He kept his coat on. He always kept his coat on the second time. The first time a man walked through a death he was looking; the second time he was checking what he had seen against what he had wanted to see, and for that one wanted to be a little angry at the chill.

Bouda came in behind him stamping his feet, bright as a Sunday, carrying the camera case and the flat board of the evidence book under his arm. He was thirty-one and had not yet learned to be quiet in the presence of the dead, which Hron did not hold against him. The dead did not mind. It was the living who needed the silence.

“They’ve taken him to Apolinářská,” Bouda said. “Stross has him on the table this afternoon. The wife’s at her sister’s in Vinohrady. The son—” he consulted nothing, he was only filling the cold air — “the son they’re still trying to find.”

“Mm,” said Hron, and went into the bathroom.

It was a narrow room, narrower than the wealth of the man would suggest, tiled to shoulder height in a green that had been fashionable when the building went up and was now the green of an old bottle held to a window. The bath stood on iron feet under a high small window of frosted glass, painted shut, the paint unbroken — he checked it again with his thumbnail, and the paint held, a window that had not opened in years. The water was gone now; the porcelain bore the faint tide-mark of where it had stood, a grey ring at the height a man's chest would have made it. Reszke had been a big man. The ring was high.

Hron crouched by the door.

This was the thing. This was the whole of it and he knew it, the way one knows a sore tooth with the tongue, returning to it because it is the only interesting thing in the mouth. The door opened inward, into the bathroom; a good solid door of the old kind, four panels, the lower two of close-grained pine painted over many times, the upper two — and here he set his knee on the cold tile and brought his eyes level — the upper right panel cut out and fitted with a ventilation grille. A brass louvre the size of a man's spread hand, three horizontal slats angled downward, screwed into the frame from the bathroom side, green with the steam of a thousand baths. Through them one could see the dim length of the corridor, the runner carpet, the closed door of the bedroom opposite.

And there, low on the door's edge, the bolt.

A barrel bolt. Nothing more. A child's bolt, the kind on a garden gate, a brass barrel four fingers long screwed to the door, a brass keeper screwed to the jamb, a little knob to slide the bolt home and shut yourself in. It had been thrown when they broke in. He had seen it thrown that first morning, the constables splintering the jamb with a fireman's bar, the bolt holding in its keeper until the keeper's screws tore out of the wood, and everyone had stood and looked at the proof of it: a door bolted from inside, a dead man within, no other way in or out. The impossible thing.

"Locked from the inside," said Bouda from the doorway, almost tenderly, the way one says a thing one likes the sound of. "You'd think the old man wanted nobody to see him go."

Hron did not answer. He had taken the bolt apart in his head a dozen times since Wednesday and put it back together wrong each time. Now he took it apart with his eyes.

He slid the bolt. It moved stiffly, then freely, then stiffly again at the end — old brass, never oiled, a small resistance where the barrel was worn. He drew it back. He pushed it home. He laid his thumb on the knob.

There.

On the side of the knob, on the face that pointed away from the bathroom, toward the door's hinge edge — a scratch. Bright. New. A single score in the dull brass, perhaps a centimetre, running not along the barrel but around the knob, a curved nick as if something had been hooked over

it and dragged. He had not seen it on the first morning because on the first morning he had been looking at whether the bolt was thrown, not at the knob, and a man sees the question he brings. He brought a different question now.

He took his magnifier from his breast pocket — a cheap folding lens, brass, a present from Clara the year before the year, he did not think of that — and put it over the scratch. The brass under the bright score was clean metal, days old at most. He breathed on it; it did not fog the way a thumb-grease would; it was bare.

“Bouda. Photograph this. The knob, this face, close as the camera will hold focus. And measure it from the keeper.”

Bouda came and crouched and made his cheerful noises and set up the plate camera on its short legs, and Hron rose, his knee complaining at the damp tile, and looked at the grille.

He looked at it a long time.

A man could not get an arm through it. He tried, two fingers, and the slats took his fingers to the second knuckle and no further, the brass cold and faintly greasy on his skin. A man could get two fingers in, and a thin thing in those two fingers, and the slats angled downward — downward toward the bolt, toward the knob, toward the bright new scratch four hand-spans below on the corridor side of a door that had been bolted, the constables all agreed, from within.

He withdrew his fingers. On the middle slat, caught where the brass had a burr at the screw-

hole, hung a single fibre.

He did not touch it. He called for the tweezers and the little glassine envelopes from the board, and Bouda brought them, and Hron drew the fibre off the burr with the points of the tweezers as gently as lifting an eyelash. A centimetre and a half, pale, stiffer than thread, with a faint sheen along its length under the corridor light, a sheen like the sheen on a candle's run of wax. He turned it in the grip. Not wool. Not cotton in the way a coat is cotton. Some line, some cord, drawn through wax. He had seen the like in a hundred ordinary places and could not, standing there, name one.

"What is it?" said Bouda.

"I don't know yet." He sealed it in the glassine and wrote on the envelope in pencil, in his small upright hand, the date and the place and *grille, mid slat, fibre, waxed (?)*, the question mark a habit, an honesty he kept with himself. "Number it. And the scratch is C-three, the fibre C-four, keep them apart in the book." He did not say why. He did not know why himself, except that two strange things in one small room wanted to be held at arm's length from each other until each had told him what it was, separately, before he let them speak together and lie.

Bouda wrote it down. He was good at writing things down. It was the chief of his virtues and Hron valued it more than he ever said.

They went across the corridor to the bedroom.

Here the cold was a different cold, the cold of cloth and dust, of a curtained room. The bed was a wide old marriage-bed of dark wood, though the wife slept now, and had slept for some time, Kühn had let it be known with a sniff, in the room at the end. Reszke had slept here alone, and the bed had been slept in. Hron stood over it and read it slowly, letting it offer what it would. The eiderdown was thrown back on the near side, the side a heavy man would rise from. The pillow held the long dent of a head. The under-sheet, where Hron laid the flat of his hand, was cold and held nothing, but it was creased and pulled in the way of a bed a man has lain in and risen from and not fallen back into — not the smooth bed of a man who never lay down, not the wrecked bed of a struggle. A man had got into this bed. A man had got out of it. Between those two ordinary acts a dinner had ended and an old man had walked across a cold corridor to a cold bath and died in it, and the bed said only that he had meant to sleep and had, for a while, slept.

On the nightstand stood a glass with a finger of water gone flat and dusty, a pair of spectacles folded, a book — Hron tilted his head: *Meyrink*, the cheap edition, a page turned down — and a small brown bottle.

He knew the shape of the bottle before he read the label, the way one knows a face down a long platform. He picked it up in his handkerchief. The cork was in. He held it to the grey window light and the label said what such labels say — a

chemist's name in Vinohrady, the looping word *Veronal*, a dosage in a careful pen — and the bottle was perhaps a third gone. He set it down exactly where it had stood, in the small clean ring its base had left in the dust, and looked at it as if it might, on being looked at long enough, account for itself.

“Sleeping draught,” said Bouda. “Old men and their nerves.”

“Old men and their nerves,” Hron agreed, and meant nothing by it, and meant a great deal, and let the meaning sit in him unspoken the way a stone sits in a coat pocket, a weight you carry and do not examine on the tram. *Veronal. The tea things washed. The maid away.* He had three of those stones now and would not turn them over until he had more, until the weight of them told him their shape. A man who turned his stones over too early made pictures out of clouds. He had seen Pelc do it and call it instinct.

“Have the bottle taken to Stross,” he said. “Tell him I want to know if there was veronal in the old man before there was water in him. He'll know how to ask it.” Stross would know, and Stross would not promise more than 1934 could give him, which was why Hron trusted Stross and not the magistrate's hope.

They went back to the dining room, which was the heart of the flat and the cold of it the deepest cold of all, and here Hron had Kühn bring the lamp, and here he had the ledger brought to the table.

It had lain, on the first morning, open where it had been left, on the long table — the table-leaf still out to its full length, the chairs not all put back. Now it lay in its evidence wrapping, and Hron unwrapped it with the care of a man handling a thing he half believed could feel the handling. Forty years of dinners. He had not read it properly on the first morning; on the first morning there had been a body, and a body eats the room. He read it now, under Kühn's good brass lamp, with the river going dark green in the windows and the lamps coming up one by one along the far embankment under the Castle.

It was a beautiful object, he would give it that. A merchant's ledger, half-leather, the spine cracked and re-cracked, the paper the heavy cream paper of before the war, and in it, year upon year, the small upright hand of a man recording who had broken bread at his table. Names. Dates. A diagram of the seating, a long oval with a chair-mark at each place and a name beside each chair in script so small Hron bent close to read it. *Wertheimer. Brod. Schück.* Names he was coming to know. The dinners thinned in the later years — fewer guests, longer gaps — the way a man's table thins as the men who sat at it die or quarrel or simply stop coming, until the oval had chairs drawn and left blank, places kept for the absent in the old courtesy.

The last entry was dated 28 February 1934.

Fourteen names. He counted them with the back of his pencil, touching each, not letting his

eye do the counting because the eye lies to a tired man. Fourteen, in Reszke's small upright hand, the same hand that had written 1931 and 1925 and 1908, an old man's hand grown a little looser but recognisably the hand, the same brown-black ink, the same little flourish on the capital that began a family name. Fourteen places around the oval, fourteen chairs, fourteen names.

And beneath the fourteenth name, set a little apart, at the head of the oval — at the place opposite Reszke's own, the host's place at the far end — a fifteenth line.

Hron went very still.

It was in a different ink. Not different in colour — that was the strange part, the part he could not let go: the colour was the same brown-black, aged to the same depth, dried into the paper with the same faint feathering at the stroke-ends that the fourteen names had, not the wet shine of fresh ink nor the grey of pencil. The same age of ink. But the *flow* of it was wrong, the pressure wrong, the very lean of the letters wrong — Reszke's hand stood upright and a little crabbed; this hand lay back, raked, the letters joined in long ligatures of a kind Hron had seen in old documents under glass in the university library, the long *s* and the swept *t*, a copperplate gone strange, foreign, an old hand, older than the man, older than the century. And it read — he turned the lamp to be sure of it, and made Bouda read it aloud, and Bouda's cheerfulness thinned as he read —

The One Who Counts.

The One Who Counts.

“Well,” said Bouda after a moment, recovering, reaching for the bright noise that was his shield. “There’s your joke. One of the guests had a few glasses and signed himself in for a lark. Or the wife — no. Somebody. It’s a forgery, plain enough, look at it, nothing like the old man’s own. We’ll find whose hand it is and there’s an end of your fifteenth chair.” He laughed, a short laugh, glad of the explanation. “A guest’s joke, Chief Inspector. Old men’s dinners. They get up to things.”

Hron did not answer.

He was looking at the ink. He was looking at the same brown-black, aged the same, feathered the same, dried into the same three-day-old dryness as the fourteen honest names above it — and at a hand that lay back from the upright like a man leaning away from a question.

He drew his own pencil-line, lightly, in the margin beside the fifteenth name, and wrote nothing yet. He would not write *joke* and he would not write the other word, the word that was not a word, and he would not let Bouda’s relief become the file’s relief, because relief in a file was a kind of lie and lies in files killed the wrong men. There was a Leica, Kühn had said on the first morning, in her grieving aside — one of the guests a keen amateur, click click all evening at the candles and the silver, the old gentleman laughing at him for it. Photographs. Of the table.

“Bouda,” said Hron, still looking at the line that no living hand he yet knew had written,

“there were photographs. A guest with a Leica. Find him, find the plates — films, on a Leica, films — and get me every frame of that table. I want to count the chairs.”

“You think we’ll see your fifteenth man,” said Bouda, half a joke.

“I think we’ll see fourteen,” said Hron, and did not explain, because the thing he was beginning to feel had no place yet in a man’s report, and a man kept such things out of the report until the report forced them in.

He called Kühn.

She came from the kitchen where she had been making herself useful with a cloth, a square dark woman of sixty with a concierge’s ring of keys at her waist and a concierge’s face that had let nineteen years of the building’s comings and goings pass across it and kept the most of them. She had wept on the first morning and was past weeping now.

“Mrs. Kühn.” Hron turned the ledger to her and put the lamp where it fell full on the last page, and laid his finger — not touching the ink, a little above it — under the fifteenth line. “This last name. This hand. Whose is it?”

She bent to it. She had to fetch her own spectacles from her apron and she took her time, and Hron let her take it, because the hurried witness is the lying witness and this one he did not want to hurry. She read it. He watched her lips move on the words, *the one who counts*, and watched something move behind her face that was not grief and

was not, quite, fear, but the discomfort of a practical woman handed a thing that would not fit on her shelf.

“That’s not his,” she said at last.

“You’re sure.”

“I’ve cleaned this flat nineteen years, Chief Inspector.” She did not look up from the page. “I’ve emptied his pen-tray every week of it and I know every pen the old gentleman owned, the steel one and the gold one his wife gave him and the broad one he kept special for the ledger, in the drawer, this very book.” She touched the cover, lightly, a thing she had a right to touch. “I know how it sits when he’s pressed hard and when he’s tired and writes light. This is none of them. This is no pen of his.”

“A guest, then. Someone at the table.”

“It’s no hand I know.” And then she straightened, and took off her spectacles, and looked at Hron with the flat certainty of a woman who has decided to say the true thing and let the gentlemen make of it what they will. “And I’ll tell you another, since you ask, and you can write it down or not. The old gentleman wrote Czech badly.” She said it almost fondly, almost an apology to the dead for telling. “Forty years in Prague and his Czech was a tradesman’s Czech, crooked, you could see him fighting it. But his German—” she nodded at the long raked letters lying back across the cream paper, “—his German was beautiful, the German of a gentleman, of the old schools. I heard it every day. And this—”

She stopped. She put her spectacles back in her apron pocket, slowly, as if the page might be different when her hands were free of them.

“This is German too. You can feel it under the words, in how the letters are made. But it’s no German I ever heard out of him. It’s no German I ever heard.” She looked at the river going black in the windows. “It’s older than that. It’s older than any German I ever heard out of a living mouth.”

The lamp hissed. Down on the embankment a tram bell rang, the seventeen, going up toward the National Theatre, and then the river took the sound and there was only the cold, coming up through the floor as it had all afternoon, a draught from somewhere with no window open to give it.

Hron looked at the page a while longer. Then he closed the ledger, gently, on the fourteen names and the fifteenth, and wrapped it again in its cloth, and did not say what he thought, because he did not yet think anything he was willing to own.

4. Two Staircases

A BUILDING TELLS THE TRUTH TO WHOEVER is patient enough to climb it slowly, and Hron climbed the embankment house slowly that Saturday morning, his hand on the cold brass of the banister, the ache above his knee announcing each landing before he reached it. The light came in through tall windows scabbed with old putty and threw the shadow of the railing across the steps in long slanting bars, and the stairwell smelled of beeswax and stone and, under that, of the river, which in this house was never wholly out of the air. He had told Bouda he wanted to walk the staircase. Bouda had looked at him the way the young look at the deliberate, and gone off to find the caterers. Hron preferred it so. He did his best thinking in the company of objects, which did not interrupt.

The main stair was a generous thing, built when the century was young and confident, a wide stone helix turning about a deep well, the banister mahogany worn pale at the curves where forty years of hands had rounded it, a strip of carpet down the centre held by tarnished brass rods, every rod in its place. He went down it first, from the top floor where the dead man's door still wore the police seal, all the way to the entrance hall

with its chequer of black and white marble and its glassed inner door, and he counted as he went — not the steps, though he counted those too out of an old habit of the body, but the things that could not lie. The carpet. The dust on the carpet, which was the dust of a well-kept house, thin and even, undisturbed at the edges where a careless foot does not tread. The way each landing gave onto two flats, their doors facing across the well, brass plates and bell-pulls and the small domestic litter of milk-cans set out and boots and a folded newspaper. A respectable stair. A watched stair. A man coming down it in the small hours would pass four doors of light sleepers and the lodge at the bottom, and the marble of the hall would carry his heels like a drum.

At the foot of it, in the angle by the inner glass door, was the lodge of the concierge.

It was a narrow room, half kitchen and half sentry-box, and Martha Kühn filled the better part of it the way a stove fills a small room, solid and radiating a settled warmth that was not entirely kindness. She had her chair set so that the window of the lodge looked out and slightly up into the entrance hall, and Hron, before he knocked, stood a moment in the hall to learn what that window saw. It saw the glass inner door. It saw the foot of the main stair, the first half-turn, the brass-rodged carpet rising into shadow. A person on those steps, going up or coming down, would cross her line of sight as surely as a fish crossing the lit mouth of a weir. He understood then a part

of what she had sworn, and how she could swear it on her dead husband and be telling, within the walls of her own seeing, the entire truth.

“You’ll wear the marble out, Chief Inspector, standing on it like that,” she said, without turning, and he saw she watched him in the dark of the glass.

“I’m learning your view,” he said.

“It’s a poor one. The hall, the post, who comes for the Wertheimer girl and who doesn’t pay the gas.” She let him in. The lodge was hot and close and smelled of chicory coffee and singed flat-iron. On a shelf above the little table a clock ticked with the heavy, unhurried beat of a clock that has outlived the people who wound it, and beside it stood a photograph of a soldier in the old Austrian grey, a young man with Kühn’s stubborn jaw, who would be the dead husband she swore by. She caught Hron looking and did not soften.

“You see the stair,” he said.

“I see the stair. Nineteen years I’ve seen the stair. I’d hear a strange foot on it the way you’d hear a stranger’s cough in your own church.” She poured him coffee he had not asked for and set it down hard. “Nobody came down those steps that night, Chief Inspector. I told the constable and I’ll tell the magistrate and I’ll tell the Lord God if He asks me. The party broke up at half eleven. I let them out myself, every one, into their cabs and their galoshes. After that — nothing. I sat up to past one with my feet bad and the radio, and then I went to my bed, which is there—” she nodded at

a curtained alcove not three steps from her chair
“—and a strange foot on that stair would have me
up with the poker, old as I am.”

He believed her. That was the difficulty, and he
turned it in his mind the way he turned a coin he
suspected, by its weight rather than its face. He
believed her entirely, and a man was dead three
storeys up with the bath water in his lungs, and
her belief and the death could both be true only if
the death had not used her stair.

On the wall beside the door, where her hand
could reach it from the chair, hung the key-board.

It was an honest old thing, a square of dark
cork in a beaded frame, and into it were driven
two neat rows of brass cup-hooks, each with its
little tab of card beneath in faded copperplate —
the cellar, the loft, the gas-meter cupboard, the
flats by number, the post-box. Keys hung from
most of the hooks, some single, some in bunches
looped on string, the brass gone the colour of old
honey. Hron read the board the way he read every-
thing, left to right and top to bottom, without
hurry, his hands behind his back so they would
not be tempted to touch. He did not yet know
what he was looking for and so he looked at all of
it, and what a man notices when he does not
know what he wants is often worth more than
what he finds when he does. Loft. Cellar. Gas. Flat
1, flat 2. He filed the board in his memory the way
he filed a face, whole, to be examined later in the
quiet, and he asked her nothing about it. Some
questions are best not asked until you have

stopped needing the answer; ask too soon and the answer arranges itself to be helpful.

“You keep all the keys,” he said. A statement, to be agreed with or corrected.

“Who else?” she said. “I keep the keys, I keep the post, I keep the gossip and the gas bills. A house is a body, Chief Inspector. The concierge is its liver. Nobody thanks the liver.”

He drank a little of the coffee to be polite to the hot small room, and set it down, and asked the question he had come down three flights to ask.

“Is this the only way out?”

She looked at him then, full on, with the flat patience of a woman who has been asked simple questions by clever men before. “There’s the way the coal comes in,” she said. “Back of the house. The old service stair.”

He had thought there might be. Houses of this age and this pretension were built with two blood-streams, the seen and the unseen — the broad bright stair for the family and their guests and the narrow back one for the coal-man and the cook and the night-soil and everything that the front of a respectable life prefers not to meet on its way up. He asked her to show him, and she would not leave her chair and her bad feet for it, but she told him the way, through the door at the end of the ground-floor corridor, past the lift cage that had not run since the wires went in the bad winter, and he went and found it.

The service stair was another country. It turned the opposite way, against the sun, a tight stone spiral with an iron rail instead of mahogany, the steps worn into shallow troughs at their centres and gritted black at the edges with the ground-in coal-dust of half a century, and no carpet, and no light but what fell grey from a small wired window at each half-landing. It was cold in the particular way of a flue, a cold that moved, and it smelled of cinders and damp and the faint sweetish rot of a drain somewhere below. He climbed it, slowly, his hand on the iron going slick and gritty under his palm, and at each floor he found its mean little door giving onto the back passages of the flats — the kitchen ends, the maids' rooms, the places where the seen life kept its machinery. At the top, the door let him out not six paces from the dead man's kitchen. A man who knew this stair could come up it from the street and stand at Reszke's back door without once crossing the marble, without once passing the lit window of the lodge, without once being a foot upon the watched front steps. He stood at the top a moment, in the moving cold, and let the building's second truth settle into him alongside the first. Then he went down again to find where it ended.

It ended in its own small street door.

That was the thing the architecture quietly said, and Hron stood before it in the dim well of the ground floor and let it finish saying it. The service stair did not feed back into the hall to be watched by the lodge; it ran straight down past

the coal-cellar's barred hatch to a narrow door of its own, set in the side return of the building, giving onto the little blind passage between this house and the next where the dustbins stood and the cats kept their parliament. A door with its own lock. A door the concierge could not see from her chair, could not hear from her bed, a door that belonged to the body of the house but not to its watched face. The whole impossibility of the thing upstairs — the bolted bath, the sworn stair, the descended-by-no-one — began, here in the cinder-smelling dark, to come quietly apart in his hands, the way a knot comes apart when you stop pulling and find the one loop that was never tight. Not solved. He was too old to mistake a beginning for an end. But the wall that the case had seemed to be was, he saw now, a door, and a door has the property that it can be passed if one knows it is there and holds the key.

He went up to the dead man's floor once more, the front way, to find Bouda, who was waiting on the top landing with his notebook and the eager, slightly aggrieved look of a man who has done his errands well and not yet been praised for them.

"The caterers, Chief Inspector." Bouda flipped the cheap pages. "Stein's firm, two men and a girl, hired for the dinner. They came at six, served, washed up the dinner service in the kitchen — that's the porcelain, the glasses, the silver from the meal — and were paid and gone in their van by a quarter past eleven. Kühn let them out the

front with the rest. Their account agrees with hers down to the minute.”

“And the household. The maid.”

“That’s the thing.” Bouda turned a page with a small flourish he could not help. “There’s a daily girl, Betty, sleeps out. Reszke gave her the night off for the dinner — said the caterers would do, and the master wanted the house quiet after, no clattering. So she went home to Nusle before six and didn’t come back till morning, when she found the constable on the door.” He looked up. “Which leaves nobody. The guests out by half eleven, the caterers out by quarter past, the maid in Nusle, the wife—” he checked the page “—the wife says she took a powder and slept, and the old man went to his bath sometime after, and that’s the last of it till the morning. Between half eleven and the morning, this house had four people in it asleep behind four doors and one old man awake, and not a soul going in or out.”

“By the front,” Hron said.

Bouda stopped. He was not slow, only young, and Hron watched the correction arrive behind his eyes the way you watch a tram round a far corner before you hear it. “By the front,” Bouda repeated.

“The dinner ended at half past eleven and everyone we can name was watched out of the house by a woman who cannot be fooled on her own stair,” Hron said. “And Stross will tell you the water went into Simon Reszke near two in the morning. Between those two clocks, Karel, there is a piece of the night with nobody’s name on it.

Two hours and a half in which this house was a sealed box, and was not." He found his Zorky and did not light it, only turned it in his fingers, looking at the dead man's door and the police seal across it. "The maid was sent away. The dishes from the dinner were done by Stein's firm and signed for. But somebody in this flat made a pot of tea at the old man's bedtime, after the guests and after the caterers, and drank a cup of it, and washed the cup and the pot by hand and set them on the rack, because we found them clean on the rack. With the maid in Nusle. I'd like to know whose hands those were." He put the cigarette away unlit. "But not yet. First the door."

They went down together, Bouda asking the right questions now and Hron answering few of them, and at the bottom Hron led him along the ground-floor corridor and through to the side return, to the small mean door at the foot of the service stair, the door that gave onto the dustbin passage and the street beyond it without ever showing itself to the lodge. He wanted Bouda to see it. He wanted, more than that, to put his own hand on it once with the morning's whole reasoning behind the gesture.

The door was locked. He had expected that; a back door in a careful house would be locked. He tried it anyway, the iron handle cold and pitted with rust under his grip, the rust coming off on his palm in a fine red bloom, and the door did not give, and he stooped to the lock and then to the

bolt below it, an old barrel bolt sunk into the stone of the threshold.

The bolt was bright. He saw it before he understood it. In a stair where every iron thing wore the same fur of red corrosion — the rail, the window-grilles, the handle that had just printed itself on his hand — the bolt slid in its keeper smooth and dark and clean, and when he drew it back and forth with one finger it moved without sound, and his fingertip came away from it not red but faintly slick, with the thin grey shine of fresh oil. He crouched there in the cinder smell and the moving cold and looked at the one oiled thing in a building of rust, and the morning's quiet dissolving stopped being quiet.

He straightened, slowly, the knee complaining, and went back along the corridor to the hot little lodge where the clock ticked over the dead soldier's photograph.

"Mrs. Kühn," he said. "The back door. The service stair, onto the side passage. Who oils it?"

She looked up from her flat-iron, and something in her broad settled face that had been certain all morning was, for just a moment, not. "Oils it?"

"The bolt's been greased. Lately. It's the only thing in that whole stair that isn't eaten through with rust."

She set the iron down on its heel. "Nobody oils it," she said. "Nobody's used that door in years, Chief Inspector. The coal comes by the hatch now. That door—" she shook her head slowly, and the

clock ticked into the gap where her certainty had been “—that door’s not been opened in my time and his.” She glanced, without meaning to, at the photograph. “Years.”

Hron thanked her, and went back out into the entrance hall, onto the chequer of black and white marble, and stood there in the watched light of the main stair with the smell of fresh oil still on his fingertip, listening to the river move behind the wall of the house, and to a tram bell, somewhere up the embankment, ring twice and then, after a pause, once.

5. The Deaf Ear

THE CONCIERGE'S LODGE STOOD HALF A flight below the street, so that the window gave Hron a view of ankles passing on the embankment — galoshes, the hems of overcoats, a dog led on a string — and very little else of the upper world. It was the kind of room that the city kept its caretakers in: a room that smelled of boiled cabbage and lamp oil and the particular damp that lives in stone below the waterline. A stove ticked in the corner. On the wall hung a calendar from a Smíchov coal merchant, a photograph of a man in a tram-conductor's tunic, and a small black crucifix worn pale at the feet where a thumb had touched it for thirty years. Martha Kühn sat with her hands folded on the oilcloth and watched Hron the way a woman watches a doctor who has not yet said the word.

It was the third of March, a Saturday, and the light came in low and grey off the river. Bouda had gone up to the dead man's flat to fetch the ledger; Hron heard his boots crossing the floor three storeys above, the building carrying the sound down its bones the way old buildings do. He let the concierge wait a moment. He had learned that the second minute of a silence told you more than the first.

“You will forgive me,” he said at last, gently, “if I ask you the same things twice. It is not that I doubt you, Mrs. Kühn. It is that I am stupid, and must hear a thing several times before it stays.”

She did not believe the part about his being stupid; her mouth tightened. But she unfolded her hands.

“I have told the young one everything,” she said. “Three times to him on the morning. No one came down. I was at my door, or I was here with the door open, the whole of that night, because my legs were bad and I did not sleep. No one came down those stairs.” She lifted her chin toward the stairwell beyond the lodge, where the main staircase rose in its spiral of worn stone, the brass rail catching what light there was. “I would swear it before the priest. I would swear it on my Wenceslas.” Her glance went to the photograph of the man in the tunic, and back.

“I believe you,” Hron said.

“You say that, and then you ask again.”

“I ask again because I believe you,” he said. “If you were lying I would have no more questions. A lie is a wall — you walk up to it and there is nothing behind. The truth is a window. One keeps looking through it.” He took out the packet of Zorky, looked at it, and put it away again; one did not smoke in a room a woman cooked in. “When you say no one came down — you mean no one came down where you could hear them. Where you could see them.”

“I mean no one came down.”

“Sit a moment with me,” he said. “Which ear is your good ear?”

She blinked. For the first time something in her went still, the stillness of a person who has been asked, without warning, about a thing they have spent years arranging the furniture of their life around. Her hand rose halfway to the left side of her head and stopped.

“This one hears,” she said. “The right —” She tapped near it, lightly, as one taps a clock that has stopped. “Since the influenza. The winter the fever went through the house. It took my hearing on this side and it left me the rest.” She said it without complaint, as a fact of weather. “I sit always so that the door is to my left. So I will hear the bell, and the gentlemen coming, and the post.”

Hron looked at where she sat. He looked at the lodge door, which opened onto the foot of the main stair — to her left. Then he turned his head, slowly, the way one turns to find the source of a draught, and looked at the other door: a low, dark, panelled door in the wall opposite, half-hidden behind a coat-stand and a zinc pail. It gave, he knew now from Bouda’s pacing of the building, onto the service passage and the service stair, the back stair that wound up unlit through the building to the kitchens of each flat and came out, three storeys up, at the scullery door of Simon Reszke’s apartment — and down, at the bottom, onto a narrow areaway and its own street door on the side lane.

That door was to her right.

“Mrs. Kühn,” he said, and kept his voice the same, flat and kind. “The back stair. The service door — there.” He nodded at it. “When you sit as you sit, with the good ear to the front door, that door is at your deaf side.”

She followed his look. He watched her arrive at the thing a half-second behind him, and watched her not like it.

“No one uses the back,” she said. “It is for the coal and the laundry and the kitchen girls. The bolt is thrown on it every night. I throw it myself, at ten, when I bank the stove. It was thrown that night. The police looked the next morning — your own man looked — and it was still thrown, inside, you understand, bolted from the inside.” Her voice had risen. “So no one came in by it and no one went out by it, and so it does not matter which ear I have, because that door was shut against the world the whole of the night.”

“It does not matter,” Hron agreed, and meant something different by the words than she did, and let her keep her meaning. “I only wish to understand the shape of the night. Not to catch you. Mrs. Kühn — listen to me.” He waited until she did. “Your honesty is the most useful thing in this building. It is worth more to me than the doctor and his instruments. A liar would have told me she heard nothing because she heard nothing. You have told me you heard nothing because of where you sat and what is left to you to hear with. That is the truth told properly, with its edges on. Do you see? I am not asking you to have been a better

witness. I am asking you to be exactly the one you were.”

Something eased in her face. The crucifix, the photograph of Wenceslas, the whole apparatus of a life spent below the street tending other people's keys — it had made her ready to be blamed. He had taken the blame off the table and she did not quite know what to do with her hands now that it was gone.

“Tell me the evening, then,” he said. “From the first bell. As you saw it. Count them for me, the gentlemen, if it helps. I am fond of counting.” He almost smiled. “I trust a thing I can count more than a thing I can feel.”

She put her two hands flat and began, and as she named them she pressed down a finger at a time, the way a woman counts the wash.

The first to come had been the fat one with the cane, a doctor of something, and his wife in the fur — that was two, on the one bell, a little before eight. Then the painter, alone, who smelled of turpentine even in his good coat — three. Then a married pair she did not know, foreigners, German in their talk but pleasant — five. Then the bookseller's widow in black, alone — six. Then three together who had shared a cab from the Slavia side, laughing, one of them already wine-warm — nine. Then the old gentleman with the bad chest who stopped on the landing to breathe — ten. Then a lady and her brother, who came late and apologised to her, to *her*, the concierge, as if it were her dinner they were late for — twelve. Then

a thin young man with spectacles who said nothing — thirteen. Then —

She stopped. Her thumb was the only finger left, and it stayed up, alone, like a question.

“And one more,” Hron said.

“And one more.” She frowned at her own thumb. “A gentleman. Thin. Late — the latest of them, well after the others were all up and the noise of them was going on overhead. He rang, or I think he rang; I had stepped to the stove. When I came to the door he was already inside, in the hall, at the foot of the stair.” Her frown deepened, not at Hron now but at the night itself, as if she were holding it up to the low window to see it better. “An old coat. You do not see coats cut so any more — long, to here —” she touched her own shin “— and high in the collar, the old way, the way my grandfather’s people wore. Black, or so dark a thing it was the same. He did not speak. I said good evening and he inclined his head, so.” She tipped her chin, a small grave courtesy out of another century. “And he went up. Quiet. I did not hear his step, but then I would not, on that side, with the noise above. He went up to the dinner.”

“And came down when?”

She looked at him.

“That is the thing,” she said slowly. “I have turned it and turned it since the young one asked me about the comings and goings. They went home, the gentlemen, between eleven and the half after midnight — the painter last but one, the laughing three before him, the bookseller’s widow

with the night porter from the rank fetched to walk her, all of them down past me, all of them I saw, I bowed them out, I locked the front door behind the last at near one o'clock." She pressed each finger flat again as she said it, accounting for them, sending each one safely down and out into the cold March street. "Fourteen up. Fourteen down. I am sure of the fourteen. But the thin one in the old coat —" Her thumb was still up. She looked at it as though it belonged to someone else. "I never bowed him out. I have no memory of his foot on the last stair, his hand on this rail, the door for him. I let him in. I did not let him out."

The stove ticked. Above them, faint, Bouda's boots crossed the dining-room floor and stopped.

"He left while you slept a moment," Hron said. "It is no shame. It was past midnight, your legs were bad, the front door stood unlocked still for the last guests — a man slips out in a minute one does not count."

"I did not sleep that night. I have told you."

"Then he went out behind another, in the crowd of the laughing three, and you bowed two men and meant to bow three." He said it patiently, the way one lays the rational coin on the table and lets the other person pick it up. He half believed it himself. A late guest, an unmemorable departure in a knot of louder ones — it was nothing, it was the ordinary fog of a long evening, it was how memory worked when it was tired and honest both. He filed it so, in the materialist's drawer where he kept the things that did not need a

name. *A fifteenth man at the head of the table*, the photographs would say differently soon; but he did not have the photographs yet, and a good detective does not borrow tomorrow's facts to spend today.

And yet.

"Mrs. Kühn," he said. "The back stair. If a man wished to leave this building without passing you — your good ear, your bowing, your locking of the front — he would go down the back, and out the side door into the lane. Yes?"

"He would," she said. "If the bolt were drawn. But the bolt was thrown. I threw it at ten. It was thrown in the morning when your man looked. So." She spread her hands, fingers down now, the count given back to him entire. "The back was shut against the world all night, from the inside. No one out that way. No one in. And the front I held the whole night and bowed every man down it, every man I saw — and one man I never saw down at all."

She looked at the low dark service door across the lodge, behind its coat-stand and its pail, and then back at Hron, and her face had gone the colour of the river.

"He went up," she said, "and the back door was bolted from the inside all night, I swear it on my Wenceslas, and so he is up there still, isn't he — somewhere — because I never let him out."

She crossed herself, the worn place at the feet of the little black crucifix touched once more by her thumb.

Hron did not.

He sat with the silence the way he had learned to, letting it lengthen, and through the low window he watched the ankles of the city go by — a child's boots running, a porter's, the slow shuffle of an old man with a stick — the ordinary feet of the third of March going about the ordinary business of the afternoon. Behind him he heard Bouda on the main stair, coming down at last, his young footsteps loud and living on the stone, and Hron thought, without wanting to, that here at least was a man the concierge could hear and see and would, when the time came, bow out the front door and lock behind.

The service-stair bolt, when Bouda had shown it him that morning, had been a plain steel barrel bolt, old, the kind a man throws without thinking — and someone, Hron had noticed and said nothing of, had oiled it. Recently. The wood around it bore the dark feathering of oil sunk in, and the bolt slid in its keep with no voice at all; he had drawn it himself and it had been as silent as a swallowed word. An old door left to the coal and the laundry, that no one used, and someone had taken the trouble to oil its bolt so that it ran quiet. He had filed that too. He took it out now and set it beside the deaf ear, and the two things would not lie still.

Bouda came in stooping under the lintel, the great ledger held flat in both arms like a server bringing a dish. His face was bright with the cold and with having found the thing he was sent for.

“Open on the dinner, just as we left it, Chief Inspector,” he said. “The eight-and-twentieth of February. He kept it forty years, the porter says — every dinner, every name, where each man sat.” He laid it on the oilcloth, turning it for Hron, and the smell of old paper and iron-gall ink rose into the cabbage and the lamp oil. “Fourteen guests in his own hand, with the places marked. We have the roster, then. Fourteen to find and ask.” He had his notebook out already, his pencil licked. “Where do we start — the fat doctor?”

Hron drew the ledger to him with two fingers and looked at the dead man’s careful copperplate, the names ruled and dated, the little plan of the table beside them with its chairs numbered round, host at the foot and the long board climbing to the head. Fourteen names. He read them down. He could feel the concierge watching him over the oilcloth, her thumb, he thought, still half-raised somewhere in her, the one she had never let out.

“We start with all of them,” he said. “Every one. We put each man where he sat and we ask him what he saw across the table and beside him and at the door, and we write it down, and we do not tell any of them what the others have said.” He closed the ledger on his thumb to keep the place. “And we find which of these fourteen came late and thin in an old black coat — because one of them did, Mrs. Kühn, surely; one of them was your gentleman, dressed for a costume or for the cold or for nothing at all, and we will set his name

against her count and the thing will lie down quiet.”

“Yes, Chief Inspector,” said Bouda, writing.

It was the rational coin. Hron laid it on the table for the boy’s sake and for his own, and watched it sit there, and did not quite believe it would buy what it promised.

For the case had split. He had felt it split the moment the woman touched the right side of her head — the way a sheet of ice splits not with a crack you hear but with a line you suddenly see has been there all along, running clean from edge to edge. On the one side: a death that wore the costume of the impossible, a man drowned behind a bolt thrown from within, in a building whose only stair a sleepless woman swore she had watched all night. And on the other, lying beneath it like the river under its skin of light — a deaf ear toward a back door, a bolt oiled to run silent, a service stair winding dark and unwatched to a scullery door three storeys up, and a way out into a lane that no honest witness could hear a soul go down.

One case was a riddle. The other was a man who had read a building.

Hron knew, the way he knew weather in his knee, which of the two would have killed Simon Reszke. He put the ledger under his arm, thanked the concierge with both her hands held a moment in his, and went up, past the lodge, to look once more at the door that ran silent and the door that

was bolted from inside, and to stand on the deaf woman's right.

6. The Tea Things

THE KITCHEN OF A RICH MAN IS THE MOST honest room in his house. Hron had learned this in thirty years of standing in other people's rooms after the worst had happened, and he stood now in Simon Reszke's kitchen on the Sunday morning and let it tell him the truth it could not help telling. It was a narrow room at the back of the flat, away from the river, its one window onto the grey light-well, and it smelled of cold gas, of last week's onions, of the mineral staleness a room takes on when no one has cooked in it for days. A maid's room more than a master's. Reszke had eaten his great dinners in the front, under the chandelier; here was where the work of those dinners was undone afterward, the scraping and the scalding and the drying. Hron had come to stand here because the front of the flat had told him all it meant to tell, and he had learned not to trust a room that wanted to be looked at.

The tea things were the first thing. They sat in the open dresser left of the sink, on the second shelf, where a household keeps the daily china rather than the good — a pot of brown glazed earthenware, two cups, two saucers, a small jug, the strainer on its little hook. They were clean. They were not merely clean; they were dried and

put away with care, the cups turned mouth-down on the shelf paper, the saucers stacked square, the pot rinsed of its leaves and set to drain and then wiped and lidded. Hron looked at them a long time without touching them. He had seen the photographs from the first morning — Bouda's man had photographed the kitchen with the rest, dutifully, finding nothing in it — and in the photographs the things had stood exactly as they stood now, dried, put away, innocent. He had not understood them then. He thought he was beginning to now.

A man does not wash his own tea things at two in the morning and stack the saucers square. A man drinks his bedtime tea and leaves the cup where it falls, on the night-table, in the sink, for the maid to find at seven. That was the natural order, the slovenly human order, and Hron had counted on finding it and found instead this — order imposed, the kind a careful person makes when a careful person wishes a room to say that nothing happened in it.

He took down one of the cups and turned it in the light. Bone-white, a thin gold line round the rim worn nearly away, a hairline crack you could feel with a thumbnail but not see. He set it back. Two cups. He noted it with the small cold attention he gave to facts that did not yet have a place: two cups washed, where a man living alone — and Reszke had been living alone that week, the wife away, the maid off — would have used one.

The maid. He had her name in his book from Bouda's first sweep: Betty Tichy, nineteen, from Nusle, who came mornings and stayed for the dinners and went home otherwise to her mother. On the night of the great dinner she had stayed to serve and clear the worst of it, and had gone home well before midnight because — Bouda had her words — the master always let her go once the rough work was done, and the fine work, the tea things, the last of the glasses, those she did in the morning. She had come on the morning of the first of March to find the police on the stair and her master three hours drowned, and had not gone into the kitchen at all; a constable had turned her back at the door. So the tea things had not been washed by Betty. They had been washed before she came and after she left — in the dead of the night, by hand, by someone who stayed, or who returned.

He wrote that down. He underlined nothing; he distrusted his own underlinings, which were a kind of wishing.

The medicine cupboard was in the bathroom, which Hron did not like entering and entered anyway, because the bath had been emptied and the body three days gone to Stross's cold table at Albertov and the room was only a room again, white-tiled, the bolt still drawn back where the locksmith had left it, the little ventilation grille in the upper panel of the door catching the light

from the corridor in its dust. He had stood here before, with Bouda, in the first hours; he stood here now alone, which was how he preferred to think.

The cupboard was a small white-painted thing above the basin, and it held what such cupboards hold — a shaving set, a bottle of cologne nearly empty, a tin of liver salts, a roll of court-plaster, and on the lower shelf three pharmacy bottles and one small carton, all bearing the printed labels of the chemist's on Maiselova, the Josefov shop where Reszke had dealt for years, over the river and across the town from Vinohrady. Digestive drops. A tincture for the gums. A bottle for the heart. And the carton, half its little folded papers gone: *Veronal*. 0.5 g. Below the printed dose, in the pharmacist's ink: one powder at night as needed.

Hron held the carton in his palm and did not feel triumph, which he never felt and would not have trusted, but he felt the small settling click of a thing falling into the place shaped for it. He had asked Stross, at the end of the autopsy, whether the old man had been given anything, and Stross had said the crude tests showed nothing he could swear to in a court — a barbiturate in the blood was a thing one might suspect from the slack of the muscles and the depth of a drowning a sleeper would not wake from, but not a thing one could weigh and name in 1934. *He went under and did not fight*, Stross had said, *or fought only at the very last, when it was already in him and too late*. Hron had car-

ried that *did not fight* about with him for two days like a stone in the shoe.

Veronal. Freely sold, freely prescribed, in every chemist's window in the city, the comfort of half the insomniac bourgeoisie of Prague, merciful in its small dose and, in a large one, in an old man already drunk on the burgundy of his own dinner, a soft and quiet door. Reszke had a prescription; the carton said so; a man of his years and his nerves might well have taken a powder at night as needed. There was nothing here a coroner could not explain away as the household of an old man who slept badly. And yet — Hron turned the carton — the box was for ten powders and held, he counted, four. Six gone. He did not know across what span of nights. He would have to ask the chemist how often it had been filled, and for whom; the Josefov shop kept its books like every other, and a man could not have a powder made up without leaving his name in them. That thread ran back over the river, to Maiselova, and he set it down in his mind for Monday with the rest.

He put the carton in an envelope and signed across the flap, the small ritual that turned a thing in a dead man's cupboard into a thing the magistrate could hold. Then he stood a moment in the white room with the grille breathing its thread of corridor air against his neck, cold, continuous, a draught from nowhere that the building had always made, and he thought that a house keeps its own counsel and gives up only what it is asked for in the right words. He did not yet have the right

words. He had a clean cup too many, a half-empty box of powders, and the sure knowledge that someone had stood at that sink in the dark and washed and dried and put away, and had wanted the morning to find a tidy kitchen and a quiet death. That was not nothing. That was the first human fingerprint he had found in a flat full of beautiful inhuman things.

The number 22 took him up to Vinohrady through the late morning, the tram half-empty with Sunday, two old women in black and a boy with a paper cone of roasted chestnuts whose smell filled the car. Hron sat by the window and watched the city tilt up the hill — the Museum, the long curve of the avenue, the shops shuttered for the Lord's day, a queue already forming outside the soup kitchen by the church though it was barely past eleven, men with their collars up and that stillness the out-of-work have, the stillness of waiting for nothing in particular. He thought of the price of coal. He thought of the burst capillaries Stross had shown him under the dead man's jaw, the small dark blooming the forced submersion leaves, the thing the water tries to hide and cannot quite. He thought of his sister's weak coffee, and of the half-hour he would sit with his daughter, and of the four powders gone from a box of ten.

He got down at Peace Square and walked past the great brick bulk of the church and past the chemist's — the Guardian Angel, its gold lettering

on green, the window dressed with a pyramid of cod-liver-oil bottles and a discreet card for a tonic for the nerves — and he did not go in, because it was Sunday and the chemist was shut, and because the part of him that was a policeman could wait until Monday and the part of him that was a father could not. The chemist's door and his sister's door stood on the same short stretch of pavement. He had walked it ten thousand times and never once thought of the green door as anything but a fixture of his sister's street, the way a man never sees the shop he passes daily. He thought of it now only because his mind was full of cartons and powders, and he told himself it was nothing — a chemist's was a chemist's, there were forty of them between here and the river — and went on up the two flights to his daughter, the way everything in this work in the end turned out to live closer to home than you wished.

Marie let him in and took his coat and gave him the weak coffee, and they spoke for a few minutes of small things — the cost of the new shoes Agnes needed, Marie's husband's cough, a christening in the family — and then Hron went through to the small back room where his daughter sat at the table by the window with the light on her hands.

She was fourteen now and getting her mother's chin. She looked up when he came in and something moved in her face that was not a smile and was warmer than a smile, the thing she did instead of the words she did not have, and Hron sat

down across from her and put his hand over her two hands a moment and then took it back, because she did not like to be held long; she liked to be near and untouched, like a cat, like himself. Spread on the table were her pencils in their tin box and a thick pad of cheap drawing paper. Hron had brought, in his coat pocket, the book they were partway through — *The Little Glow-Worms*, the old story she had loved when she was small and that he read to her still because it was a thing from before, from the years when the four walls of the family had stood, and because reading it asked nothing of her but to listen.

He read. His voice in the quiet room and the scratch of the radiator and, far off, the bells of the church across the square ringing the people in to the late Mass. He read of the little glow-worm and his father and the lamps they carried, the small obedient lights going out into the dark of the garden and coming home, and his daughter bent over her paper and drew, her pencil going with the soft persistent sound of a mouse in a wall, and she did not look up and she did not speak, and Hron had long ago stopped waiting in any part of himself for her to speak, or believed he had.

He read, and a thought he kept for these Sundays and no other place came and sat down beside him as it always did. It was this: that there were things not given to a man to know. That his wife had gone into the influenza winter of 1929 and not come out, and that his daughter had gone into it a child who spoke and come out a child

who did not, and that no doctor in Prague or Vienna had been able to say why the lock had turned in her or where the key had gone; and that he, who could reconstruct from a washed cup and a half-empty box of powders the secret hours of a stranger's death, could not reconstruct the smallest part of his own daughter's silence, and had made his peace, or what he called his peace, with not being able to. Some things were simply not given to us to know. He held that belief the way a man holds a coal in winter, close, for the warmth of it, and he never said it aloud at Bartholomew Street, where it would have been heard as softness or worse; and he never, not once, let it cross over into his work. In his work there were no things not given to be known. There were only things not yet asked in the right words. He kept the two beliefs in two pockets and did not let them touch, the way he kept his two languages, and perhaps for the same reason: that a man of the seam learns early to be two things at once or be torn.

He finished the chapter and closed the book. The bells across the square had stopped. Marie called through that the dinner would be an hour yet. Agnes had set her pencil down and was looking at her drawing with the flat absorbed attention she gave to finished things, deciding, in whatever country she lived in now, whether it was done.

He went back down in the early dark. The afternoon had been the usual afternoon — the heavy

dinner, Marie's husband's careful talk, Agnes withdrawing by degrees into her pad — and now the tram carried him down the hill again into a city going blue and then grey, the lamps coming on along the avenue in their slow uneven sequence, one and then three and then a whole street at once. He had told Marie he would not come for supper, that there was a thing at the flat he wanted to see by the last light, and this was true, though the thing he wanted to see he could not have named; he wanted only to stand again in the dead man's rooms with what he now knew and let it settle.

The river when he came to it at the embankment was going to slate. The green it had carried in the morning was gone with the sun; it lay flat and metal between its walls, and across it the castle was a black shape losing its edges against a sky the colour of a wet pavement, and the first of the evening trams, the 17, came along the embankment with its one bright eye and its bell, two and then one, and passed, and the wires sang behind it in the cold. Hron stood at the rail below the dead man's windows as he had stood the first morning, and looked up. The top floor was dark. Behind that dark glass someone had washed two cups in the small hours and dried them and put them away — and it had not been the maid, who was in Nusle, nor the wife, who was away, nor the book-keeper, who had left after dinner with the other guests. So it had been someone who stayed when the others went, or who came back up a stair

when the building thought itself asleep. Hron felt the shape of that someone in the dark above him, faceless yet, but no longer formless. The case had a body in it now that was not the body on Stross's table.

He let himself in and climbed, and the flat received him in its cold museum hush, the chandelier dead, the river-light coming grey through the front windows. He did not light the lamps. He stood in the dining room where the great table was, the table of the last dinner, cleared now and bare, and took from his breast pocket his notebook, and turned to where he had earlier copied out a small thing that had been nagging him without his quite letting it.

It was not from the kitchen. It was the ledger, photographed and bagged days ago and lodged now at Bartholomew Street — the guest-ledger, open to its last page, the dinner of the twenty-eighth in Reszke's own brown careful hand, fourteen names down the left in their order, the seating, *at table* this one and *to the right* that, all of it neat and known and forty years practised. And below the fourteen, set a little apart, in an ink the photographer's flat light had made look exactly as dry and as old as the rest, a fifteenth line in a hand that was not Reszke's. He had it by heart, the way you keep the one thing in a case that will not lie down. He wrote it in his own book again, for no reason he could have defended, as a man worries a sore tooth with his tongue. *The One Who Counts*. He looked at the words in his own hand and they

looked back at him and meant nothing and would not stop meaning it.

He shut the book. That was the other case, the one that ran alongside and that he would not let touch the first, the way he would not let his two pockets touch; the fifteenth name was for later or for never, and the washed cups were for Monday and the chemist's green door. He turned to go, the light all but gone from the windows, and only then, taking his hand from his coat, did he remember the loose sheet he had carried down from Vinohrady without meaning to. Agnes had been giving him her drawings to keep for some weeks now, pressing them on him at the door; he had taken this one folded into his pocket as he always did, without looking, because looking at them in front of her embarrassed them both.

He unfolded it now, by the last grey window, to see it before the dark took it.

She had drawn a table. A long table, seen from above the way she always drew tables, a child's flattened plan of a grown table, and round it she had set her small careful figures, the round heads and the stick arms she gave to people, each one different in some small way — a hat, a fall of hair, a hand raised. Hron looked at them and the policeman in him, who counted everything, who could not pass a flock of geese or a queue for soup without the number assembling itself behind his eyes, counted them.

Fourteen.

And at the head of the table, set a little apart from the others, drawn thinner than the rest, taller, the head not round but long, the arms not stick-spread like the others' but held down close at the sides — a fifteenth.

He stood with the paper in his hand and the river going black behind the glass and said nothing, because there was no one to say it to and nothing in him that could have shaped the words. She had never been told a single thing of it. She did not know the dead man's name. She had drawn it on a Sunday morning in Vinohrady while he read her the story of the glow-worms and their small lamps going home through the dark.

7. Fourteen Faces

MONDAY CAME IN UNDER LOW CLOUD, THE sky the dull pewter of a soup spoon, and Hron began the long Monday work of asking fourteen people the same four questions. He had the list copied in his own square hand from the ledger's last page, and beside each name an address got the night before from Rose Wertheimer, who kept Reszke's affairs the way a sexton keeps a graveyard, every plot numbered and the grass cut. Bouda took the south of the river and the Vinohrady names; Hron kept the old town and Josefov and the two who lived across the water in Malá Strana, because he liked the walking and because the cases that mattered to him he preferred to carry uphill on his own legs. They would meet at the Café Slavia at six and put the day on the table together. That was the plan, and it held until almost the end.

The German banker lived behind glass on Pařížská, the new wide boulevard the city had cut through the old ghetto like a surgeon through a habit, and his name was Adler and he received Hron standing, with his hat already in his hand as if he meant to be leaving his own apartment. He was a man who measured words out by weight. The dinner: yes. Fourteen: he believed so. He had

attended because Reszke held paper of his that it was prudent to be civil about, and he said this plainly, a man who knew the police could read a ledger and preferred to save them the trouble.

“And the fifteenth man,” Hron said, “at the head of the table.”

Adler’s hat turned a half-circle in his hands. “You have been told of him.”

“I am asking you.”

“There was a person at the head of the table whom I did not know and was not introduced to and did not speak with. This is not unusual at Reszke’s. He collected odd acquaintances the way he collected odd snuffboxes.” A pause, weighed. “He spoke once to our host in German. I am a Prague German, Inspector. I was born on the Graben and schooled in Vienna and I do business in four languages. I did not understand a word the man said, and I am not a man who admits that easily, so you may set it down.” His mouth made the shape of a smile and abandoned it. “It was archaic. Court German, perhaps, very old, the sort of thing one finds in a charter. I assumed a scholar, a man of the manuscripts Reszke dealt in. I assume so still.”

“Did you see him leave?”

“I did not see him at all after the soup. One does not stare. When the gentlemen rose he was not among them, and I confess I did not remark it until your colleague’s question made me remark it, and now that I remark it I find I have no memory of his going, which I dislike, because I have an

excellent memory and pay good money to keep it.” He set the hat on his head, having decided the interview was a kind of leaving. “I should be careful, Inspector, of how much weight you hang on the recollections of a dinner party three days drowned in wine and now in something worse. Memory is a debtor that pays in counterfeit. But you asked, and I have told you what is in my books, and my books are honest.” He showed Hron the door himself, courteously, and the door of the new building shut with the soft expensive sound of money closing.

Adler, Hron wrote on the bright new pavement. 14 + 1. Court German, did not understand — and he understands four. Departure unwitnessed. Warns me off memory. And under it, fair-minded: a man who hates to admit not-knowing; might invent a marvel to dress a lapse. He stood with the pencil and considered that the man had given him, without meaning to, the most honest thing he had: not the marvel but the dislike of the marvel, a banker annoyed at a hole in his own accounting. You could not buy that annoyance. Hron walked on.

The canon of Týn received him in a parlour off the cloister where the cold had a churchly quality, kept and curated, and gave him weak coffee and the news that the man at the head had spoken something he had first taken for Latin and now, pressed, was not sure of at all — Latin got up as German, or the other way about, and in any case

he had sat at the far end attending more to the carp than to theology. He had not seen the man leave. He had assumed a scholar of the old church books, given the coat. He crossed himself once, briefly, when Hron used the word *afraid* of Reszke, and would not be drawn on why.

The actress lived three flights up over a milliner near the Powder Tower and had been, the playbills said, a name in 1911. She gave Hron a long performance of remembering, hands describing the table in the air, and what came out of it, the gestures stripped off, was the same shape as the others. A thin man at the head. Old clothes. A voice she could not place and a German she was sure was German, that had made her think, she said, of the prompter's box — a voice coming up out of the floor of a theatre from a man you cannot see. Reszke afraid: yes. The leaving? She tipped her head. "Darling, I looked away to laugh at something the canon did not say, and when I looked back his chair was a chair. An empty chair is the most ordinary thing in the world and the most frightening, if you have been watching the man in it." She knew a good line and used it; and Hron, writing *14 + 1, departure unwitnessed* for the third time before noon, could not decide whether three people who use a good line are lying, or whether the truth, repeated, simply learns to speak well.

By two o'clock he had five of his eight, and Bouda, when they crossed paths by arrangement at the corner of Bartholomew Street to pool the morning, had four of his six, and the columns matched. Hron did not like it that the columns matched. A lie spreads by contact, by people comparing notes over the telephone the rich all had and the poor envied; but these people did not know one another past the table, a banker and a canon and a fading actress do not ring one another up to agree a story, and Rose had given him the addresses fresh that morning so that no two of his calls had been forewarned by the call before. Independent. That was the word that troubled him. He wrote it in the margin and did not underline it, because underlining was a kind of believing.

"They all say the German one," Bouda said. He was young and the marvel sat on him badly; he kept his voice low though they were in the open street. "Chief Inspector, the photographer. The guest with the Leica. I went there first thing, like you said."

"And."

Bouda took an envelope from inside his coat and did not open it in the wind. "He had them developed. Did them himself, he's keen, he showed me the bath and the red lamp and all of it. Eleven exposures from that night. Some are bad, the smoke, the gas-light. But you can count heads." He handed it over. "I counted them four times on the tram and then I gave up counting and just looked."

Hron opened the envelope in the lee of a doorway. Eleven small glossy rectangles, still smelling faintly of the chemist's bath, the lamplight in them gone the colour of strong tea. The table from the sideboard end. The table from the window. A clutch of men with cigars, mouths open on some joke. Reszke at the foot, full-faced in one, half-turned in another, and you could see in the half-turned one that the photographer had caught him looking up the table toward the head, looking at the place of honour with an expression Hron had seen on the faces of men in the war when a shell did not arrive and they were waiting to learn whether it had been meant for them.

Hron looked where Reszke was looking. The head of the table was an empty chair, drawn out a little from the cloth as a chair is when someone sits in it, and before the chair a place laid and used — a soup plate pushed back, a fish plate, a glass with wine still in it catching the lamp, a napkin dropped not folded. A place that had been eaten from. And no one in it. He went through the other ten. In every photograph that showed the head of the table, the head of the table was a used setting and an empty chair. In no photograph was there a thin man in an old dark coat, or a thick man, or any man, or any blur or smear or doubling of the kind a long exposure makes of a person who moves. Fourteen faces, in this combination or that, talking, eating, laughing, afraid. And the fifteenth place set, and served, and emptied, and no fifteenth face anywhere on the glass.

“You see it,” Bouda said. It was not quite a question.

“I see a used plate and an empty chair,” Hron said. “That is what I see, and that is what I will write.” He squared the photographs and put them back in the envelope and the envelope inside his coat against his chest, where his heart was, which he noticed and disliked noticing. “A plate does not eat itself, Bouda. Somebody sat there and ate. The camera is a stupid honest instrument and it has told us a man can be absent from a photograph. It has not told us he was absent from the chair.” He looked at the boy, who wanted very much to be told the world was a place that obeyed its own rules. “Two cases,” Hron said. “Hold them apart. There is a man who drowned in a bath with the door bolted, and someone bolted it, and that someone is alive and leaves shoe prints and pays for trams and will be hanged. That is our case. And there is a chair at a dinner, and what happened in that chair is not, today, our business. Do not let the second one into the first. It will spoil the first. It would like to spoil the first.”

Bouda nodded, not convinced, only obedient, which on a Monday was enough.

He sent Bouda to finish the south-bank names and walked the rest of his own, and the rest gave him nothing new and the same thing, which is a particular kind of nothing, the nothing of a thing repeated until it stops sounding like a thing at all. A

thin man at the head, old in the cloth, a German no one could place, Reszke afraid, no one who saw him go. By half past five the light was going out of the streets the way it goes in March, all at once, a tap turned off, and he came along the embankment with the river on his left gone from pewter to ink and the lamps coming up yellow along the Smetana Embankment, and the dead man's windows were dark up under the cornice where someone had at last drawn the curtains. He did not look up at them long. He turned in at the Café Slavia.

The café was warm and loud with spoons and the trams ringing in through the door each time it opened, and the window tables were full of the river-watchers, the lawyers from the courts and the writers who watched the National Theatre as if it owed them money and the few who came only to sit over one coffee for three hours and watch the water go by, which in this city is a recognised profession. Otilie found him a small table at the back near the service door, where a Chief Inspector could sit without being a Chief Inspector to the whole room, and brought him a coffee and a plum brandy he had not asked for and did not want and would drink.

“You look like a man who has talked all day,” she said, setting them down. Otilie Bár had worked the Slavia eleven years and knew the river-watchers the way the concierge knew the stairs, every regular and his table and his trouble. She had given Hron small true things over those

eleven years, never for money, mostly for the pleasure of being the one who knew. "Fourteen of them, I heard. Old Reszke's table." She did not ask how she had heard. In this room one did not ask.

"You hear a great deal, Otilie."

"I hear what walks past the till." She wiped the marble that did not need wiping, her way of staying. "He sat there, you know. Reszke. Not often, but. Window table when he could get it, the second from the end, with the bookkeeper, the thin one, Wertheimer. Did sums over the coffee. Tipped like a man who has counted the money twice and resents both countings." A small smile. "I'll not speak ill. He's three days dead."

"And the son," Hron said, not because he had meant to, but because eleven years of small true things had taught him where the till stood in this conversation. "Victor. Does he sit?"

Something passed over her face, not caution exactly, the ordinary human reluctance to be the one who says a hard thing about a man in trouble. "The young gentleman. He sits at the Louvre, more than here, I'd think — that's a card crowd over there, this is a coffee crowd. But he's been in. This last month, twice, three times. By himself, the back, where you are now." She glanced at the chair Hron sat in as if Victor might have left a warmth in it. "Sick with worry, that one. You could see it. A man can sit at a café and you can tell from across the room whether the coffee in front of him is a pleasure or a place to put his

hands. His was a place to put his hands." She straightened. "I shouldn't say. He's just buried his father, or will have, the funeral's Thursday they say. Worry's no crime, Chief Inspector, or you'd have us all in the cells."

"No," Hron said. "Worry's no crime." He turned the plum brandy a quarter-turn on the marble and did not drink it. "Thank you, Otilie."

She took it for the dismissal it gently was and went back to the spoons and the steam and the ringing door, and Hron sat in the chair where Victor Reszke had put his hands, in the warm loud room with the river going black outside, and took out his notebook, and turned to a clean page, and ruled it down the middle with the edge of a tram ticket.

On the left he wrote *PROVEN* — and under it the things a man could hang another man with: *Drowning forced — Stross. Death near 2 a.m. Bolt, barrel, simple. Grille in door. Two stairs, one watched. Concierge deaf to service door. Veronal — tea things washed. The son: a key once existed for the service stair. The son: in debt, in fear, near here, this month.* The last line he wrote slowly, and looked at it, and did not yet know how much it weighed, only that it weighed.

On the right he wrote *WHAT REMAINS* — what is left over — and under it, in the same plain hand, no larger, no smaller, no underlining anywhere: *14 guests, 1 place set and used. 14 faces on the glass, 0 fifteenth. German none could place. R. afraid. No*

one saw him leave. Coin and ledger and thumbprint — to come.

He looked at the two columns a long time, the way he looked at the river before a body, thinking of nothing in particular — the price of the plum brandy, the ache above his knee, the funeral Thursday, a clean page he would rule the same way tomorrow. The left column was a road and he could walk it; it went somewhere, to a service stair and a barrel bolt and a man putting his hands round a coffee cup because he could no longer put them round a throat. The right column went nowhere a man could walk. It only stood there, fourteen faces and an empty chair, and waited to be counted.

He closed the notebook on both columns. The door opened and a tram rang twice in the cold and shut, and for a moment, before the warm room sealed over again, he felt it on the back of his neck — the small flat draught off the street, off the river, off the dark up there behind the drawn curtains of a dead man's windows. He did not turn round to find the door it came under. He had decided, sitting in the warm and the noise with two columns ruled in his book, that he would chase only the left one, the human one, the one that ended in a rope; and he was a disciplined man, and he kept to it.

There was one name left, and she lived nearest of all, so he had kept her for last on the way home:

the bookseller's widow, Mrs. Felkel, on Karlova in a house that leaned over the street like a man reading a newspaper, of whom Rose had said, dry as a ledger line, that she remembered everything and forgave nothing. The stair smelled of size and old leather and the particular cold of a building that has not been warm in living memory. She opened before he knocked, a small woman in black wool with a brooch at the throat the size of a thumbnail, and she looked at his coat and his hat and the place where a wedding ring was not, and she did not ask him in.

"You are the police. You have come about Simon." She had her answers ready and gave them on the threshold, plainly, the way one gives an account one has rehearsed against a wakeful night. Fourteen at table, the twenty-eighth, a Wednesday; the carp she did not eat in March but ate; the Mělník Simon was proud of and that she had had better; the talk money got up as books. And the other one. At the head, opposite Simon, in the seat of honour, a thin man none of them knew, old in the cloth, a coat her grandfather might have worn, the black gone past black into a colour with no name; he did not eat that she saw and did not drink that she saw and his glass was used; and she did not know when he left, nor, she said, did anyone she had asked since.

"You may write that I am an old woman who saw what old women see," she said. "I had German from my mother and my husband had German from his trade, and I have sat thirty years

in rooms where German was spoken three ways at once. I know the banker's German and the professor's German and the German of the old families that is almost not German at all." She had begun to close her door, and then she stopped, and she did a thing Hron had seen frightened people do who are not used to being frightened: she looked past his shoulder down the empty stair, though there was no one on it but the cold, and she lowered her voice, though they were alone.

"He spoke to Simon in German," she said, "but not our German, not the banker's German — an old, cold German, the vowels standing up straight like soldiers from another century, and Simon, who feared no living man, went grey. And then I looked away, and when I looked back the chair at the head was empty, and no one had risen."

8. The Missing Key

THE LODGE OF THE CONCIERGE SMELLED of boiled cabbage and floor-wax and the particular cold that lives in a ground-floor room with one window onto a courtyard the sun never finds. Martha Kühn had let him in without surprise — he was the third morning she had let him in, and a concierge counts the times a policeman comes back the way a grocer counts the days bread keeps — and she had set him on the hard chair by the stove and gone on with her ironing, the flat-iron hissing when she touched a drop of spit to its face. Hron did not mind. He had learned long ago that people told the truth more readily to a man who let them keep working, and a room where a woman irons is a room where time passes the right way, slow, and a question can be set down on the table and left there until it is ready to be picked up.

He had come for the key-board. He had seen it on the first morning and on the second and had taken it then for what it was, a thing of no interest: a square of dark cork screwed to the wall beside the door, two columns of brass cup-hooks, and on the hooks the spare keys of the house, each on its loop of waxed string with a paper tab gone the colour of weak tea. He had counted them

once and gone on. This morning he counted them again.

He counted because of the bolt. Two days before, on the service stair, he had drawn back the street-door bolt at the bottom and it had moved under his hand without a sound — moved oiled, sweet, recent, while every other iron thing in that stairwell wept rust — and he had said nothing to Bouda and written nothing in his book, only kept the small wrong fact in the place where he kept such things, the way a man keeps a stone in his shoe a while before he stops to take it out. An oiled bolt is a bolt someone means to use quietly. A bolt someone means to use quietly is a door, and a door is a key.

“Mrs. Kühn,” he said. “May I take the board down a moment.”

“It’s screwed,” she said, not looking up.

“I’ll only lean it.” He lifted it where it stood on its screws, tilting the cork toward the grey window light, and went down the hooks with his thumb, reading the tabs. Garden gate. Coal cellar — two of those. The two for the loft. Front door, the spare. Reszke, flat — the spare to the dead man’s own flat, which he had borrowed and returned and which hung where it should. He read down the second column and at the seventh hook, near the bottom, the brass cup was empty, and below the empty cup a tab hung from nothing, or rather hung still on its loop of string but with no key threaded through it, the loop drawn closed on air. The ink on the tab was older than the rest,

browned almost to the colour of the cork itself, and the hand that had written it was a careful, old-fashioned hand, the loops of the letters tall. He read it twice to be sure of the down-stroke of the d.

The young master.

The young master.

He held the board at its tilt and looked at the closed loop the way one looks at a sentence that has changed its meaning between the first reading and the second. Behind him the iron hissed.

“That one,” he said. “The empty hook. Tell me about that one.”

Kühn set the iron up on its heel. She came over wiping her hands down her apron, and she looked at the board not at the hook he meant but at the whole of it, the way you look at a face you have stopped seeing because you see it every day, and then she found the empty cup and her mouth went a little soft, the way a mouth goes at a thing remembered fonder than the thing deserved.

“That’s the back-stairs key,” she said. “The service stair, the one onto the side passage. There were three. The old gentleman kept one, I have one — had one —” she frowned and went to a drawer and came back and there it was in her own ring, the twin of the empty one, dark iron, long in the shank — “and the third was the young master’s. Mister Victor’s. His father had it cut for him, oh, years, when the boy still came. So he could come up the back when he was out late and not wake the house. Mr. Reszke had it lettered him-

self, see the hand, that's the old gentleman's own hand, *the young master*, like a label on a wine. He was sentimental that way over little things and hard as a nail over big ones."

"And the key is not on the hook."

"No." She said it flatly, and then, because flatness wants filling, she filled it. "It was never given back. When they — when there was the falling-out, the young master didn't bring it down and set it here and say, here, I'm done. People don't, do they. It just stopped being used and then it was gone. We thought lost. The old gentleman never asked for it back, not in my hearing, and you'd think he would, a man who knew the worth of a thing down to the hells. But there are keys a man would rather call lost than ask his son to return." She looked at it a moment more. "I kept the tab. I don't know why. To throw the tab and keep the empty hook felt worse than to keep both."

Hron set the board back on its screws and got it square and sat down again on the hard chair. He took out his notebook but did not yet write. He had found that to write too soon made people watch the pencil instead of their own memory.

"Tell me the family," he said. "From the beginning, the way you'd tell it if I weren't police."

She told it the way concierges tell, which is the truest history there is, because a concierge sees the laundry and the visitors and the hours kept and is lied to by no one because no one thinks her worth the lie. The old gentleman — she always said *the old gentleman*, never the name — had mar-

ried first long before her time here, a first wife who had died, of what Kühn did not know, before the war or just after, and that first wife had given him the one son, Victor. The son had been raised for better than the trade. Sent to the Technical College to be an architect, Kühn said, and her voice put a little distance round the word, an architect, as one says a word for a thing that did not come off. There had been a few years she remembered of the young man going up and down these stairs in good coats with rolls of paper under his arm and a manner, she said, *a manner* — and Hron understood from the way she set the word down that the manner had not been a kind one, that the young master had been a man who did not see the woman who held his door.

And then the architect had not, somehow, become an architect. There was a practice that opened and a partner and then no practice. There were debts, she thought, though she'd only the smell of them, the way you smell damp in a wall before it shows. And there was the second marriage, the old gentleman past sixty taking a wife not yet thirty, Hannah, and after that the son had come less and then not at all, and the two of them, father and son, had quarrelled — over the new wife, over money, over which was the wound and which the salt nobody now could say — and the quarrel had set hard the way mortar sets, all at once and then for good. Two years now, Kühn said. Two years the young master had not crossed the threshold.

“And the wife. Mrs. Reszke. Hannah.”

“A quiet one.” Kühn chose her words. “Young. Handsome enough. She came down to me Christmases with a parcel, which the old gentleman never did and never thought to, so I’ll not hear ill of her. Whether she married the man or the shop, that’s not for me. She’ll have it all now, I suppose. Her and the charities he was always endowing to spite his relations.” She picked the iron back up, tested it, set it down again. “It’s a hard thing, Chief Inspector, to say of the dead, but he was a man who’d give a thousand crowns to a hospital to keep it from a nephew. The giving was the keeping-from. You understand.”

“I understand,” Hron said, and he did, and he wrote nothing, and the not-writing was its own kind of attention that she felt and rewarded.

He had what he had come for and more than he had come for, and the more was the shape of it: an old man who used his money as a wall, a wife who would inherit the wall, a son shut outside it for two years with a key in his pocket that fit a door no one watched. He did not let his face hold any of it. He asked her instead about the coal delivery and the chimney sweep and the times the dustcart came, the unglamorous traffic of the house, because he wanted her left with the feeling that she had told a policeman about coal, and because somewhere in the dustcart’s hours there might one day be a fact he needed and he liked to lay the ground before he had to walk on it.

Bouda was waiting in the entry passage with his hat in his hands and the look of a young man who has done his errand and wants it noticed. They went out under the arch into the embankment morning, the river running its winter green below the parapet and a barge low in the water going down toward Smíchov, and the cold off the water found the old place above Hron's knee at once and settled in to stay. A tram went by behind them on the seventeen's rails with its bell and its long electric sigh.

"I went to the records as you said," Bouda began, too eager, and Hron let him be eager because eagerness was the boy's whole engine and you do not pour water on a thing that is burning the way you want it to burn. "Reszke, Victor. Born 'ninety-six, so he's — thirty-eight. Studied at the Technical College, didn't finish, or finished and never took the state exam, the clerk wasn't sure which. Lives in Vinohrady, on Korunní, a flat above a baker's, over a boarded-up hatter's. No record of his own, nothing charged, but —" Bouda lowered his voice, which on the open embankment was a comedy, but Hron did not smile — "but the man in the records office, an older fellow, he knew the name without my asking. Said the young Reszke was a man who owed. Said it the way you'd say a man drank. Owed, and to the wrong sort. He wouldn't put more than that to it."

"To the wrong sort," Hron repeated. He looked across the water at the bare trees of the Shooters' Island and the spire beyond, and he thought of a

man with no money and a father with too much, and a key in faded ink, and a bolt that someone had been kind enough to oil. He did not say any of it.

“Do we bring him in?” Bouda asked.

“No.” Hron took out the flat tin of Zorky and did not open it; the holding was enough this early. “We bring in nothing yet. A man you bring in tells you the story he has prepared. I would rather know the money first. Whether he gains by it or loses.” He turned and started slowly along the parapet toward the National Avenue corner and Bouda fell in beside him, shortening his young stride to the older man’s, which was a courtesy Hron noted and would remember in the boy’s favour. “Find me the lawyer. Reszke kept a lawyer — there’ll be a will, a man like that has a will the way other men have a winter coat, and changes it as often. I want to know who stood to have it all on the night the old man drowned. The son, or the wife, or the hospitals.”

“And if it’s the son?”

“Then we’ll have a man with a reason and” — he did not say *and a key*, because some thoughts are stronger for being kept on the inside of the teeth — “and we’ll go slowly, and we’ll go sideways. He’ll not see us coming straight.”

They walked. The Orloj would be near striking; you could feel the hour gathering in the streets behind them, the spoons in the Café Slavia across the water, the cabs at the National Theatre rank. Hron stopped at the corner and looked back the

way they had come, up the face of the building, four storeys to the dead man's windows where the frost had been on the glass three mornings ago, and the bolt and the key and the empty hook turned over once more in him and lay still, two halves not yet let to touch.

"One more thing," he said, and he turned and went back, leaving Bouda on the corner, back under the arch and to the lodge door, and Kühn opened it again with the iron still warm in her hand and the small patience of a woman who has decided this policeman is not going to be done with her soon.

"The son," Hron said. "Victor. When did he last come here? The last time you saw him in this house, or near it."

"Two years," she said at once. "I told you. Since the quarrel. He's not set foot —"

And then she stopped.

She stopped the way a person stops on a stair when they have miscounted the steps, the whole body arrested between one certainty and the next, and her eyes went past Hron's shoulder to the grey square of courtyard light, and the line of her mouth, which had been firm through the whole telling, came loose at one corner.

"No," she said slowly. "That's — no, that's not quite the truth of it, and I'll not lie to police. Not in the house. He's not been *in* the house. But." She turned the iron in her hand without knowing she did it. "A fortnight gone. A little more. There was an evening, dusk it was, the lamps just lit on

the embankment and that wet light off the river you get — I went out to bring in the door-mat before it froze, and there was a man across, by the parapet, standing, not walking, the way no one stands in March, looking up. Looking up at the house. At the top of it. And I knew the set of him, Chief Inspector, you know a person by the back the way you know them by the face, the shoulders and the way the head sits, and I thought, that's the young master, that's Mister Victor, what's he doing there. And I called. I called his name across, *Mister Victor*, not loud, you don't shout on the embankment, but he'd have heard it, it carries over the water at dusk, everything carries —”

She stopped again.

“And?” Hron said. He had not moved. The cold from the courtyard came past her in the open door and touched the back of his hands.

“And he was gone,” she said. “When I'd brought the mat in and looked again. Just the parapet and the lamp and the water going by. I thought no more of it. People go. A man's allowed to stand on a public embankment and look at a house he grew up over. I thought no more of it until you stood there and made me think of him.” She looked at the empty hook of the key-board on the wall by her own shoulder, and then at Hron, and the fondness was gone out of her face and something plainer had come into it. “Why would he stand there, Chief Inspector. Looking up. And not come down to say he'd been.”

9. The Rabbi's Warning

IN JOSEFOV THE WINTER HAD A DIFFERENT quality than along the river, as if the old streets, narrow and turned upon themselves, held the cold the way a cellar holds it — not the bright embankment cold that came off the water and went somewhere, but a still cold that had nowhere to go and so stayed, settling into the stone and the iron and the bones of the men who walked there. Hron came up Maiselova past the new bank facades and the cut of Pařížská, which the city had driven through the old ghetto a generation before, straight and broad and indifferent, lined with shops that sold gloves and chocolate to people who did not know what had been knocked down to give them the view. He preferred the streets the wreckers had left. He turned off into them.

It was past two. The afternoon was already going grey at the edges, the way March afternoons did, the light not failing so much as thinning, as if someone were drawing it back into a drawer for the night. He passed the long blank wall of the old cemetery, behind which the gravestones leaned against one another like a crowd that had been standing too long, twelve thousand of them, the dead stacked ten and twelve deep because there had never been room and never would be, and he

thought, without wanting to, that this was a city that knew how to keep its dead close, in the wall, under the foot, at the elbow. He did not go in. A man who had buried a wife learned which gates to walk past.

The Jewish Town Hall stood at the end of it with its two clocks. The upper face was a Christian clock with Roman numbers and it kept the ordinary time of the city, the time of trams and offices. Below it, on the Hebrew face, the hands ran backward — leftward, the way the letters read — and a man standing in the little square could watch the same hour told twice, once forward and once against the grain, and could feel, if he stood long enough, that he did not entirely know which of the two he lived in. Hron stood long enough. Then a tram bell rang somewhere out on the new boulevard, briskly, in the language of timetables, and he went on.

Rabbi Brod's congregation was a small one, a handful of families in a back court off Široká, and his study was up a flight of worn stairs above a room where, on the Sabbath, perhaps thirty men prayed. A boy of about nine let Hron in without surprise, as if policemen came up these stairs every day, and led him along a passage that smelled of paper and of the particular dust that lives only in books, and knocked, and went away.

The study was walled in volumes from the floor to a ceiling Hron could not have touched with a broom. They were not the bound and gilded books of a collector — they were working

books, their spines cracked and re-glued, slips of paper standing up out of them like the feathers of a moulting bird, and on the great table in the middle of the room three of them lay open at once, face down upon each other in a way that would have made a librarian wince and a reader understand. The window gave onto the court and a strip of darkening sky. A small iron stove ticked in the corner. The room was warm, which Hron had not expected, and the warmth, after the still cold of the streets, made his knee ache where the shrapnel had gone in nineteen years ago, the old wound waking the way it always woke when the weather turned its mind.

The Rabbi rose from behind the table. He was a small man, older than Hron by perhaps fifteen years, with a beard gone the colour of ash and eyes that were not the soft eyes Hron had half-expected but quick and dry and very steady, the eyes of a man who has spent his life looking at small marks on a page and deciding what they meant and being held responsible for the deciding.

“Chief Inspector,” he said. “Sit. You have come about Simon Reszke.”

“You knew him.”

“I knew him forty years. We were not friends.” He said it without unkindness, as a point of accuracy. “Sit, please. You are standing on a bad leg.”

Hron sat. He had not said anything about the leg. He filed it, the way he filed things, in the part of him that distrusted men who noticed too much, and noticed, with the other part, that the Rabbi

had already turned back to his books as if Hron's coming were a small interruption in a longer conversation he was having with the dead.

"He came to see you," Hron said. "In February. Not long before he died."

"Twice." Brod did not pretend to consider it. "On the eighth, and again near the end of the month. The twenty-fourth, I think. You may take that as exact; I write down who comes to me, the way he wrote down who came to him." A dry flicker, not quite a smile. "It is a habit of men who lend money and men who keep faith. We both kept ledgers, Simon and I. His were of debts. Mine are of a different kind of debt."

"What troubled him?"

The Rabbi was quiet for a moment. Out in the court a pigeon settled on a sill with a soft clattering of wings, and somewhere below a kettle was being filled, the pipes knocking. Hron waited. He was good at waiting; it was most of what the work was, waiting and then writing down what the waiting brought.

"He had bought a thing," Brod said at last. "He was always buying things; that was his trade and his pleasure and, I think, in the end, his sickness — a man who must own the old and the beautiful, who cannot let a beautiful thing belong to anyone but himself. He had bought a ring. A small seal-ring, gold, with a stone cut intaglio — a signet, the kind a man presses into wax. Rudolfine, he said, and I have no reason to doubt him; he knew his periods as a priest knows his saints. From the

workshops the Emperor Rudolf kept up at the Castle, in the years when this city was full of men who were going to turn lead into gold and read the future in a dish of ink." Brod's mouth moved. "Three hundred years ago. We had our golem then, Chief Inspector, in the stories — you will have heard the stories, every guide on Maiselova tells them now to foreigners for a crown. It was a credulous age dressed up as a learned one. They made a great many objects with a great many claims attached, and most of the claims were lies told to sell brass for gold."

"But this one troubled him."

"This one troubled him." Brod looked at Hron directly. "There was a tradition attached to it. A story, written and rewritten, that the ring had been cut for one of the Emperor's account-keepers — that a man who wore it, or who had it by him at his table, would be granted a witness to his accounts. Do you understand the phrase? Not a witness in your sense, Chief Inspector, not a man in a court. A witness who sees what is owed. Who sits, and counts, and is not deceived, because he keeps a truer book than the one the man keeps himself." The stove ticked. "Simon read me the passage. His Latin was better than his Hebrew, but he had both. He read it to me here, at this table, in February, and then he asked me a question."

"What question?"

Brod did not answer at once. He drew one of the open books a little toward him and turned it,

not to read it, Hron thought, but to have somewhere to put his hands.

“He asked me,” the Rabbi said, “whether one could un-invite what one had invited.”

The kettle below had stopped. The pipes had stopped knocking. In the small silence Hron heard, very faintly, the backward Hebrew clock striking somewhere across the rooftops, or perhaps he only thought he heard it — the sound came and was gone before he could be sure it had been a sound at all.

“And you said?”

“I refused the question. I refuse it now.” Brod said it mildly, the way one refuses a second helping. “I told him that I am a man who reads texts, and that a text is not a door. That whatever foolishness a credulous scribe wrote down in 1610 to flatter a buyer was foolishness, and that an educated man of sixty-eight should put the ring in a drawer and his mind on his health, which was not good.” He paused. “I told him what a sensible man tells a frightened one. He went away. I do not know that it helped him. He was not a man who took advice; he was a man who collected it, the way he collected everything, and then put it on a shelf and looked at it.”

Hron had taken from his case a flat envelope, and from the envelope a photograph, large, sharp, the police photographer’s careful work — the final page of Reszke’s guest-ledger, the dinner of the twenty-eighth, the fourteen names in the dead man’s small upright hand. And below them, set a

little apart, in the place a man would write the guest who sat opposite him, at the head, a fifteenth line in another hand entirely.

“I will ask you to look at something,” Hron said. “And to tell me only what you see. Not what it means. What it is.”

He laid the photograph on the table, over the open book, and turned it so the light from the window fell on it, and the Rabbi bent his ash-grey head and looked.

He looked for a long time. Longer than reading fourteen names and one took. His finger came up and hovered above the last line, not touching the glass of the print, tracing the shape of the letters in the air a few millimetres above them, the way Hron had seen old men trace the words of a prayer they no longer needed to read.

“It is German,” Brod said. “But it is not the German they speak in the cafés on Národní, or print in the Tagblatt. It is old. The hand is old too — not made old, you understand; old. I have spent my life looking at hands, Chief Inspector, at the way a man forms a letter, because half my texts are copies and the copyist is half the meaning. This was not written by a man pretending to write an old hand. The man who wrote this learned to write a long time ago, in a place that no longer exists, and his hand never changed, because a man’s hand does not change after he is thirty.” He withdrew his finger. “That is what I see.”

“And what it says.”

“What it says is plain. *The One Who Counts*. The one who counts. The one who reckons.” Brod straightened. “I will read you the words because you have asked for the words. I will not read you the feeling of them. That you must do without me, or not at all.”

“I am a policeman,” Hron said. He heard the dryness in his own voice and let it stand. “I look for a man with a pen and a reason. Someone wrote this. Someone sat in that room — or came to it after — and wrote a fifteenth line into a dead man’s book in a hand he had practised, for some purpose I have not yet found. A debtor. An heir. A man who wanted the death to look like something it was not. A hoax, Rabbi, dressed in old German to frighten the credulous, the way your sixteenth-century forgers dressed brass as gold. Give me the hoaxer. You knew the man, you know his circle, you read the hand. Tell me who could have written it.”

Brod regarded him with the dry steady eyes, and Hron had the brief uncomfortable sense of being himself read, his own hand traced in the air, the loops and pressures of a man examined and not flattered.

“I cannot,” the Rabbi said. “Not because I protect anyone. There is no one to protect; Simon’s enemies are not my friends. I cannot, because it is not in the material before me. You ask the wrong man for the right reason. I deal in texts, Chief Inspector. Not in tricks. If a man forged this, he forged it better than any forger I have read, and I

have read the great ones, the ones who sold whole gospels to whole churches — and even they leave the mark of the present in the past, the new word that slips into the old mouth. There is no present in this. There is only past. I am too honest to give you a forger I cannot find, and you, I think, are too honest to want one.”

It was said gently, but it closed something. Hron looked at the photograph a moment longer, at the fourteen names and the one, and then he put it back into its envelope and the envelope into his case, and the small act of putting it away was its own kind of answer — the answer of a man who would go on looking for the pen and the reason because that was the work, and the work was the only ground he could stand on. He had buried a wife and kept a daughter who had not spoken a full sentence in five years, and he had learned, in the keeping of her, which doors not to put his shoulder to. He did not say this. He stood, and felt the knee take his weight badly, and steadied himself with a hand on the table among the old books.

“The ring,” he said. “Where is it now.”

“I do not know.”

“It is not in his flat.” Hron had had the rooms searched twice; Rose Wertheimer had been through every drawer and case with her cataloguer’s eye, and the ring — a Rudolfine signet, gold, with an intaglio stone, a thing she would have known at a glance and entered in a list — was nowhere. “He bought a ring that troubled

him, and the ring is gone, and the man is dead. You see why I ask.”

“I see why you ask.” Brod came round the table to walk him to the door, a courtesy, an old man’s slow politeness. “But I cannot help you find it. I never saw it. He described it to me; he did not bring it. I think — this is not knowledge, Chief Inspector, it is only the impression an old man takes of another old man — I think he did not bring it because he did not like to carry it. He held it at a little distance from himself, the way you held the photograph just now, so the light would fall on it but it would not touch your hand.”

They came to the door. The boy was waiting in the passage to take Hron down, and beyond him the stair fell away into the cold breath of the unheated house. Hron put on his hat. He had what he had come for, which was less than he had wanted and more than he could use: a ring that existed and was gone, a man who had been afraid and was dead, a line of old German in a hand that matched no living hand and that an honest scholar would not call a forgery. He had the shape of an absence. It was not evidence. It would never be evidence. He filed it where he filed the things that were true and useless, the part of him that had grown large since the influenza winter.

“Thank you, Rabbi,” he said. “You have been more help than you think.”

“I have been no help at all,” said Brod, without heat, “but you are kind to say so.”

Hron was at the head of the stair, his hand on the cold iron of the rail, the boy a step below him already, when the Rabbi spoke again — mildly, almost idly, the way a man remarks that the wind has gone round to the north and there will be snow before morning.

“You will solve who killed Simon Reszke, Chief Inspector. You are a good policeman; I can see it.” A small pause, no longer than a breath. “But you will not solve who sat at the head of his table. Do not mistake the one for the other, or you will get both wrong.”

And before Hron could turn, before the question that was already forming behind his teeth could be a question, the door closed — not slammed, not hurried, simply and quietly shut, the latch falling with a small definite sound — and Hron stood on the dark stair with the boy waiting below and the cold coming up the well of the house, and there was nothing on the other side of the door but a warm room full of old books and a man who had told him the truth and would tell him no more.

He went down. Out in the court the afternoon had finished thinning and become evening, blue between the high walls, a single lit window above. He walked back through the old streets toward the embankment and the trams and the ordinary forward time of the city, and he did not look back at the Town Hall clock that ran the other way, though he knew, the whole length of Maiselova, exactly where it was.

10. The Vinohrady Pharmacy

THE MORNING THE CASE TURNED TOWARD the son, it turned not in a confession or a cry but in a ledger of a humbler kind than the dead man's — a pharmacist's register, ruled in violet ink, smelling faintly of camphor and the dust that gathers on the spines of books no one is meant to read twice.

Bouda had found it. That was the thing Hron made himself remember, later, when the credit and the blame came to be apportioned: it was Bouda's legwork, not his own. The young man had walked the pharmacies of the second district one by one in the cold — the chemist's shops of Vinohrady, near where Victor Reszke kept his rooms and his debts — asking each in turn whether a man of that name had had anything dispensed in February. Most had nothing. The seventh, on the corner where the street fell away toward the railway cutting, had everything. Bouda had come back to Bartholomew Street with his collar damp and his eyes too bright, the way they got when he believed a thing had been settled that had only, in fact, begun, and he had stood in the doorway of Hron's office and said, We have him, sir, without taking off his hat.

They went out again together on the Wednesday, the seventh of March, on the early 11. The tram climbed up out of the river's cold into the higher, drier cold of the heights, and the windows of the new apartment blocks went past, their plaster the colour of weak tea, and at Míru Square the great brick church stood up against a sky that had not decided whether to snow. Hron looked at it without thinking of God. He thought of his sister's flat, four streets off, and of the fact that it was Wednesday and not Sunday, and that he would not be stopping.

The pharmacy was called At the Guardian Angel, and the angel was painted over the door in gold leaf gone the green-brown of old brass, holding out one hand to a child who was no longer there, the paint having flaked away from the lower third of the panel. Inside it was warm and dim and smelt of liquorice and ether and the particular clean bitterness of a place where pain is measured out in grains. The shelves climbed to the ceiling, their porcelain jars lettered in Latin in a hand a hundred years dead. A radiator ticked. Somewhere behind the dispensing screen a balance clinked, twice, as a small weight was set down and taken up again.

The pharmacist was a narrow man named Hořejší, perhaps sixty, with the stooped courtesy of his trade and spectacles he wore pushed up onto his forehead, so that he seemed always to be looking at you over the top of a thought. He knew them for what they were before Bouda had his

card half out of his coat. He had been expecting them since the young detective sergeant's first visit; one did not forget being asked about a customer by the police, and he had spent two days turning it over, and it had not improved with turning.

"The register," Hron said. "If you would."

Hořejší brought it from beneath the counter and laid it open on the glass, and turned it with two fingers so that it faced them, and stood back, as a man stands back from a thing he does not wish to be thought to be pressing upon you. The pages were ruled in violet. Each line a date, a name, a preparation, a quantity, the signature of the dispensing chemist, and the number of the prescription. It was, Hron thought, not for the first time, that a whole science of a man could be read out of the columns other men kept of him — the laundry he sent, the tram he took, the grain of barbiturate he carried home in a twist of paper against the long terror of his own wakeful nights.

Bouda's finger went to it before Hron's eye did, and Hron let it; the boy had earned the line.

There were two entries. The first stood on the eighth of February. *Reszke, Victor — Veronal, tablets 0.5 g, no. XX — per the prescription of Dr. Wassermann.* Veronal, half-gram tablets, twenty of them, on the prescription of one Doctor Wassermann. The second stood on the twenty-second of the same month, a fortnight later, in the same column, in the same dispensing hand. The same preparation.

The same count. The same doctor's name. A second twenty.

Hron looked at the two lines for a while without speaking. Outside, muffled, a tram bell sounded going down the hill, and the radiator ticked, and the balance behind the screen had gone still.

"Twice," he said at last. It was not a question, but Hořejší answered it.

"Twice, Chief Inspector. Within the one month." He had his spectacles down now, on his nose, and his eyes were enlarged and sorrowful behind them. "It is not — you understand, it is not against the law. The prescription was good. Doctor Wassermann is a real man, he has rooms in Korunní, his hand is known to me, I have filled his scripts these eleven years. There is nothing irregular in the paper of it."

"But."

"But." The pharmacist set both hands flat on the glass on either side of the register, as if to hold the counter down. "Twenty half-grams is a great deal for a man who only cannot sleep. It is — for sleeplessness one takes a quarter-gram, a half at the most, of an evening, and not every evening, for the body learns it and then it is no use to you and worse than no use. Twenty tablets is a month, six weeks, of bad nights. To fill it again at fourteen days—" He stopped. He had, Hron understood, said this very thing to himself across two sleepless nights of his own. "I asked myself whether he had spilled the first. Lost it. Some men are careless. But he did not say so, and one does not ask."

“You served him both times yourself.”

“Both times. I remember the second better than the first.”

“Tell me the man.”

Hořejší took his spectacles off altogether now and held them, and looked at the gold angel over the door as if to consult it, and what he gave back was the kind of portrait a careful man gives when he knows the weight a careless word might carry — slow, hedged, and all the more damning for the hedging.

A young gentleman, he said, well enough dressed, but the coat wanted brushing and the cuffs had been turned. A handsome face that had stopped being handsome somewhere recently and was still surprised about it. Hollow about the eyes — not the hollowness of one night, the pharmacist said, but the kind that sets in, the kind that becomes the face. He had stood by the door the first time, the eighth, and waited his turn quietly enough and paid and gone. The second time, the twenty-second, he had not waited well. He had come to the counter while another customer was still being served, and stood too close, and turned the change over in his fingers, and looked twice at the street through the glass as though he expected someone he did not wish to meet to be passing. His hands, Hořejší said, were not steady. He had thought, watching them, that here was a man taking veronal for the right reason and the wrong reason both — that he could not sleep, certainly, but

that there was a thing he could not sleep *about*, and that the powder was not touching it.

“You see a good deal across that counter,” Hron said.

“One sees the whole street come in sick, Chief Inspector, year on year. After a while the sickness one cannot read on a face is the rare one.”

Bouda had been still through all of it, the stillness of a man holding a thing in both hands and afraid to spill it, and now it came out of him in a low fast voice, half to Hron and half to the angel. “Forty tablets, sir. Twenty grams of veronal. The police surgeon said the old man was drugged — Stross said it himself, the stomach, the way it took him under so quiet. And here’s the son with twenty grams of it in his coat and his father dead inside the fortnight. It’s the means, sir. It’s the means in his own hand and his own name.” He had flushed. “We could have him this afternoon.”

Hron did not answer at once. He looked at the two violet lines a last time, the eighth and the twenty-second, the small twin surpluses of a man’s bad nights, and he felt the thing every detective learns to distrust most in himself, which is the pleasure of a fact that fits. It fitted. That was exactly what was wrong with it.

“Karel,” he said. “What did Reszke keep on his own washstand?”

Bouda’s flush deepened. He knew the answer because Hron had made him write the inventory himself, the long miserable afternoon of the sec-

ond day, item by item under Kühn's watching eye. "Veronal," he said. "A tube of it. Half full."

"Filled where?"

"His chemist in — in Maiselova. The Josefov shop." The boy's voice had gone flat with the knowledge of where this was tending. "He had his own."

"He had his own," Hron said. "A man of sixty-eight who slept badly and drank worse, with his own grains on his own washstand, prescribed by his own doctor. So the barbiturate in him on the night need not have come from Vinohrady at all. It might have come from the tube three steps from his bath." He closed the register gently, with the side of his hand, and Hořejší's eyes followed it down. "Do you see, Karel. A man may buy forty tablets in a month because he is frightened of the dark. It is not a crime to be frightened of the dark. Half the building behind us is frightened of the dark and the pharmacist there does a roaring trade in it. The surplus is real. But a surplus is not a use. We have a powder twice bought. We do not yet have a powder put into a cup."

"But who buys forty—"

"Many people. Sad people. People who mean it for themselves and lose their nerve, which is the commonest mercy God allows them." Hron said it without unkindness, and saw it land on the boy anyway, and was sorry, and let the sorrow be useful. "It wants a use, Karel. A surplus that wants a use is a thing I will keep. It is not a thing I will arrest a man on, because a clever advocate would

have it laughed out of the door in the time it takes to say the word insomnia, and then we should have spent our one good shot on him and missed.”

Bouda was quiet. He took out his notebook because he did not know what else to do with his hands, and wrote nothing in it, and put it away.

Hron turned back to Hořejší, who had been listening to all of this with the grave neutrality of a confessor, and thanked him, and asked for the prescription numbers and the doctor’s address, which the pharmacist gave from memory and then confirmed from the book, his finger steady where the young gentleman’s had not been. There would be a statement to take, formally, in the proper way, before the examining magistrate wanted it; Hron arranged it for the Friday and the old man inclined his head as if to a thing long owed.

They went out under the flaked angel into the cold, and the cold had decided: a thin dry snow had begun, the kind that does not fall so much as hang, sifting sideways between the buildings, and it whitened nothing, only greyed the air. Hron stood a moment on the pavement and got a Zorka lit against the wind with two matches, and the tobacco was bitter and good, and he turned, without quite meaning to, the way the street went down toward his sister’s.

It was four streets. He knew the number the way one knows a wound — without looking, by the ache of it. He could have walked it in the time the cigarette would burn. He told himself he was

orienting, only that, taking the lie of the district as he took the lie of any district where a suspect lived, and he let the lie carry him as far as the corner, and at the corner he stopped.

Her window was on the third floor, third from the left, behind a geranium his sister kept alive through every winter by some stubbornness he did not share. And Agnes was at it. He had not arranged it, had not hoped it, had told himself he would not so much as glance up — and there she was, framed in the grey light, looking down at the falling snow with her chin on her two hands and her elbows on the sill, the particular grave attention she gave to weather and to birds and to the slow things, the watching that had taken the place in her of speech. She did not see him. She was fourteen and she was looking at the snow as though the snow were saying something to her in the only language she had kept, and Hron stood at the corner with the cigarette burning down between his fingers and did not lift his hand.

He could go up. His sister would feed him; Agnes would set her grave eyes on him and lay her thin cold cheek against his coat for the length of three breaths, which was her whole vocabulary of welcome and was almost too much. It was Wednesday. He had it always to board, this tram, and he kept not boarding it, telling himself Sunday, telling himself the case, telling himself a man cannot grieve and work in the same hour. The truth, which he looked at as seldom as he could, was that her silence was a question he had

no answer to, and that he could not bear long in a room where the question outlasted the answer. He read to her on Sundays because reading filled the silence with someone else's words. He did not know what to do with it bare.

He looked up at her until the cigarette burned his fingers, and then he turned the corner the other way, down toward the tram, and the not-stopping went into him and sat where such things sat, below the knee that ached, a cold he had room for.

Bouda caught him up at the stop, having said nothing, having seen nothing or pretended to, which in Bouda was the same kindness. They stood under the iron post with the line number on it while the snow hung and sifted, and the boy, who could not stay quiet long when a thing was burning in him, said: "Then where, sir. If not him this afternoon."

"His money," Hron said.

"His money?"

"A man's medicine tells you what he fears in the night. His money tells you what he will do in the day to make the fear stop." He drew on the last of the Zorka and dropped it and set his heel on it. "Veronal twice bought is a frightened man. I have a great many frightened men in this city and I cannot arrest the lot of them. I want to know why this one was frightened, and what it would have cost him not to be, and who he owed it to. Map the medicine and you have a sad young man. Map the money and you may have a reason." He looked down the hill where the rails ran shining

and wet through the grey. “We go to the Louvre tomorrow. Quietly. We look at his debts before we look at his guilt, because the debts will still be there when the advocate has laughed the veronal away, and they will not laugh so easily.”

The 11 came up the hill out of the snow with its bell going and its windows fogged, and they got on, and the warmth of it was animal and close, the smell of wet wool and a hundred people’s breath. Hron found a place by the glass and wiped a circle with his cuff and watched Míru Square go by, the brick church standing patient in the falling grey, and four streets off, unseen now, a girl at a window watching the same snow come down. He did not think of the case for the length of two stops. Then he made himself think of it.

There was the matter, he had nearly let it go, of the thing the pharmacist had said last — said almost as they were leaving, in the doorway, the way men give you the worst of it on the threshold so they need not watch you receive it. Hron had turned back for the prescription numbers and Hořejší, writing them, had paused with the pen down, and said it looking at the page and not at Hron, in the low even voice of a man laying down something he had carried too long.

The second time, he said. The twenty-second. When the young gentleman had his change in his hand and was turning to go, he had stopped, and turned back, and asked a thing. Lightly, Hořejší said — that was what had stayed with him, the lightness, a young man’s idle lightness, as one

asks the price of a thing one has no real thought of buying. He had asked how much veronal it would take. To make a man sleep through anything. An old man, he had said. How much, for an old man, to sleep through anything at all.

And Hořejší, who heard a hundred dark questions a year across that counter and had a chemist's dry answer ready for all of them, had laughed, and said that it depended on the old man — on his weight, his liver, his habit, his heart; that an old man was a more various thing than a young one, and you could not say.

And the young gentleman, Hořejší said, had not laughed.

11. The Back Room at the Louvre

THE LOUVRE AT EIGHT IN THE EVENING was a room that did not know there was a depression. Hron came in off Národní třída out of a wind that smelled of coal and the river and the first wet of a thaw, and the warmth met him at the door like a hand laid flat on the chest. He stood a moment on the marble inside the vestibule and let the heat work through his coat while the place went on without him: the long mirrored galleries, the brass and the milk-glass globes, the marble-topped tables set close, the small dry music of spoons and the heavier music of ivory on ivory from the billiard room beyond. A waiter went by with a tray held shoulder-high, and on the tray the coffee and the soda-water and the little glasses of something gold caught the light and let it go. Somewhere a man laughed at his own remark and a woman did not.

He gave his coat to the cloakroom girl and kept his hat in his hand and walked in among the tables as if he had a table of his own waiting, which he did not. This was the part of the work Hron did best and liked least — the easy entrance, the face a man wears in a room that is not his. He had worn it on the Italian front going into villages that had changed hands twice in a week, and he wore it

now between the marble tables of the Louvre, and the two were not, he had long ago decided, so very different. You went in soft. You let the room tell you what it was before you told it anything.

At the chess tables along the far wall the old men sat over their boards as they had sat over them for thirty years, hunched, patient, immortal, the clocks ticking at their elbows. A bishop went down a long diagonal with a click. None of them looked up. Hron passed them and the billiard room opened on his right, green baize under low hooded lamps, and beyond the billiards, where the gallery narrowed and the mirrors gave out, there was a door, and the door was the reason he had come.

It was not marked. It did not need to be. It was a panelled door with a brass handle worn bright by the particular sort of hand that opened it, and a man stood near it the way men stand near such doors everywhere — not guarding it, only happening to be there, large in a good suit, with the still eyes of someone who is paid to remember faces. Hron did not go to the door. He went instead to the nearest free table within sight of it, sat down with his hat on the chair beside him, and ordered a coffee and, after a small show of thought, a plum brandy he had no intention of enjoying. He drank such things to have a glass in his hand. A man with a glass in his hand is furniture. A man with empty hands is a question.

He had been there perhaps twenty minutes, and the plum brandy had gone down warm and

bad, when the croupier came off shift.

Hron knew him by the cuffs. Card men in the better rooms kept their cuffs very clean and shot them often, and this one came out through the unmarked door rolling his shoulders the way a man does who has stood a long time without moving, and lit a cigarette before the door had quite shut behind him, and Hron saw past his shoulder, in the half second the door stood open, the green of another baize and the bowed heads and the still hanging smoke of the back room. Then the door shut. The croupier stood in the gallery smoking, looking at nothing, a thin clever face going to tiredness around the eyes, and Hron let him finish half the cigarette before he caught his eye and lifted two fingers off the marble in the small universal gesture that means: a moment, if you have one.

The croupier came over without hurry. He had been spoken to by policemen before; you could see it the way you can see on a horse that it has been ridden. He sat without being asked, which Hron noted and liked. "You're not playing," he said. It was not a question.

"No."

"And you're not drinking that, either." A nod at the plum brandy. "Bartholomew Street?"

"Chief Inspector Hron." He said it quietly, with the surname only, the way you offer a card face down. "I'm not interested in the room, friend. I want to know nothing about who plays in there or how, and I'll forget the door is there the moment I

leave. I want one man, and he hasn't played here in a week, and he won't again."

The croupier drew on the cigarette and looked at him through it. "Names cost," he said, but mildly, more out of professional form than expectation.

"This one won't," Hron said. "Victor Reszke."

Something moved in the clever face and then was put away, the way a man at the table puts a card back into his hand. "Ah," the croupier said. He looked at the end of his cigarette. "You'll have heard about the father, then. God rest him." He crossed himself, two quick economical strokes, the gesture of a man who does it from habit and not from God. "Drowned, they're saying. In his bath. A bad way."

"A bad way," Hron agreed. He turned his glass a quarter-turn on the marble and did not lift it. "Did he play often? The son."

"Often." The croupier said the one word and let it sit, and in the way he let it sit there was a whole account, the way a single dropped coin tells you the weight of the purse. "Often, and badly, and for too much, which is the worst of the three. An architect, he was — is. You'd think a man who built things would know how a thing falls down. They never do. The ones who build are the worst for it. They think the structure holds because they can see it." He shrugged. "He sat at that table" — a small movement of the head toward the unmarked door — "I'd say four nights of seven, this last while. Lately five. A man comes that often, it

isn't pleasure any more. Pleasure you can leave. He couldn't leave."

"How deep?"

The croupier looked at him for a moment, weighing the door behind him against the man in front, the discretion of the house against the patience of the law, and came down, as such men generally did, on the side of the law that was sitting at the table and not the law that might come later with more men. "I don't keep the markers," he said. "That's the house. But I deal the cards and I've eyes in my head. He was down to the men who don't take a marker so much as lend against it, you understand me. The patient ones lend against a name and a salary. These others —" he made a small gesture, palm down, fingers spread, a flattening "— they lend against the man himself. Against what they can do to him if he's slow. You don't see those gentlemen at the table. You see them in the corridor, after."

"Slow," Hron said. "Was he slow?"

"He had a marker due the first of March," the croupier said. He said it plainly, without weight, and the very plainness of it was the thing that landed, the way the brief flat declaratives in a deposition land harder than the adjectives. "The first. I remember because there was talk of it among the men who watch such things, talk that he wouldn't make it, that this time he'd run out of fathers to go to." He stopped. He had heard the shape of his own sentence a beat too late and his clever face did not change but his eyes came up to

Hron's and held there, and the smoke went up between them, and the billiard balls clicked once in the next room, and neither man said anything for a moment that was longer than a moment.

"To go to," Hron repeated, very even.

"It's a manner of speaking," the croupier said.

"I'm sure it is."

The first of March. Hron held the date without showing that he held it, the way you hold a hot plate by the rim. He let the croupier talk on a little — the architect's manner at the table, easy and ruined at once, the way he laughed loudest on the nights he lost worst, the cigarette he forgot and let burn down between his fingers until it marked them — and Hron listened with the front of his mind and with the back of it laid the date down beside the other thing he carried, the thing Stross had given him in the cold room at Apolinářská with the water still running in the steel gutter: near two in the morning. The night of the twenty-eighth of February going into the first of March. He set the two dates side by side in the dark behind his eyes and they fitted together with a small cold click, like the chess bishop going down its long diagonal, like a bolt drawn home.

A marker due the first of March, to men who lend against the man himself.

And a father drowned in the small hours of that same first of March, in a flat to which — Hron did not yet know this, but he felt the place where the knowing would go, an empty socket in the dark — to which the ruined architect son

might, against all the locked doors and the sworn concierge, have had a way in.

He thanked the croupier and asked nothing more of him that night, because to ask more would have been to show the shape of what he was building, and a man who deals cards for a living can read the shape of a hand from the back. The croupier rose, shot his clean cuffs, gave Hron a last look that had in it something that was nearly respect and nearly warning. "He's not a hard man, the architect," he said, unexpectedly, at the edge of going. "That's the trouble with him. The hard ones, you know where you are. The soft ones, they'll do anything, because they can't bear the one true thing in front of them. Tell him —" and then he seemed to recall whom he was speaking to, and to whom about, and he closed his mouth and went back through the unmarked door into the green light, and it shut.

Hron sat on a while with the bad plum brandy and let the room have him. He paid. He went out through the gallery past the chess men, who had not moved, whose clocks ticked still, who would outlast the Republic and the man across the river in Berlin and very likely Hron himself, and he was almost at the cloakroom when he saw, coming in out of the wind with her coat still buttoned to the throat and the cold of the street on her, Otilie Bár.

She had her Slavia apron in a roll under her arm and the particular slack walk of a woman crossing from one long shift toward what she

hoped was the end of the day. The Slavia kept her late and the cleaners' work her sister did kept the family later, and Otilie moved between the cafés of Národní třída like a coin between pockets, and she saw Hron and her face did the thing it always did, the small private opening that she gave no one else in a café and that was the whole reason she was, in the books no one kept, his.

"You're a long way from your window, Otilie," he said.

"I'm fetching my sister's wages off the Louvre girl, she's owed for the table-linen and the manager's a Saturday-payer with a Tuesday memory." She looked at the glass-fronted room behind him, the marble and the chess and the shut panelled door she could not see but somehow knew the direction of, the way women who serve men all day know the direction of trouble. "You're not here for the chess, Chief Inspector."

"No."

"The Reszke boy," she said. Not a question, either. It was an evening for sentences that were not questions. She said it low, with the apron held against her like a thing to keep her hands busy, and her eyes went past him to the room and came back. "I thought it'd be him you'd come to, sooner or later."

"Why's that."

She was quiet a moment. The wind came in around the door each time it opened and went out, a thin cold line of it across the warm floor, and Otilie shifted to put her back to it. "He came

into the Slavia in the autumn,” she said. “Sat at the river window where the writers sit, where he’d no business sitting, a man dressed like that with cuffs like that, and he drank coffee he couldn’t stand and then he had me bring him a cognac, and then another, and when the room emptied out he —” she stopped, chose the next words the way you choose where to put your foot on bad ice “— he asked me for money. Me. A waitress. He was charming about it, you understand, he made it a sort of joke between us, a loan between friends, he’d pay it back when his father came round, the old man was only being difficult. But I’ve poured drinks for fifteen years and I know the joke that isn’t one. He was drowning. You could see it on him the way you see it on a man who’s been in the river — that look, when they pull them out, before they’re certain whether they’re glad of it.” She looked up at Hron then, full on. “I didn’t give him anything. I’d nothing to give. He went off down Národní in the rain without a hat and I thought, that one’ll be in the river himself by spring, one way or another.”

“And his father,” Hron said. “Did he speak of his father.”

“Only that the old man had the money and wouldn’t part with it, and that it wasn’t right, after all the —” She stopped herself. “That it wasn’t right. He said it the way they all say it, the ones who’ve been cut off. As if a thing they hadn’t earned had been stolen from them.” She tightened the apron roll under her arm. “I shouldn’t be

telling you this in a doorway. I shouldn't be telling you at all."

"You're not telling me," Hron said. "I never came in. There's no plum brandy on the table; I drank water." He held the door for her with one hand and she went out under his arm into the wind, and on the step, with the wet of Národní třída shining under the lamps and a tram of the line going up toward the National Theatre with its bell and its long blue spark off the wire, she said, almost to herself, looking at the river-end of the street where the dead man's windows were a kilometre off and three storeys up in the dark:

"He'd have done anything, that one. Not from badness. He hadn't the spine for badness. From not being able to stand it." And she pulled her collar to her throat and went off toward the Slavia and her sister's wages, and Hron stood a moment on the marble step with the warm of the Louvre at his back and the cold of the street on his face, a man of the seam as ever, in neither room.

He had means, now. The key he did not yet have in his hand but knew the shape of the gap where it had hung. The veronal in the chemist's ledger in Vinohrady, filled twice in a single February. And now, tonight, the third leg of the thing — a clock. A marker due the first of March, to men who lend against the body, and a father drowned in the small hours of that same first of March. A man does not always need a reason that would stand in a court. He needs only a date he cannot move and a debt he cannot pay and a door,

somewhere, that he alone knows is open. Hron had three of the four. He went down the step into the thaw and decided, between one wet cobble and the next, that the will would be the next thing — the will and whatever stood behind it — and he resolved before he reached the corner to send to Schück in the morning and have the old will and any later instrument fetched out of the strongbox and laid before him, every codicil, every date, every signature, the whole dry paper architecture of who got what when the old man died.

He almost did not go back in. He had his collar up and the tram had gone and there was nothing more the Louvre could give him that he had not taken. But it is the small loose thread that hangs the case, and Hron had spent thirty years learning not to leave them hanging, and so he turned on the wet step and went back through the warm door, and found the croupier just pulling on his coat to go, and asked him one more thing, lightly, as if it had only that moment occurred to him, which it had not.

“The marker,” Hron said. “Due the first. Did he make it?”

The croupier paused with one arm in his coat. Something passed over his face — the small habitual reckoning of a man deciding how much a thing is worth telling — and then he gave it up, perhaps because the night was over and the door was shut and there was no profit any more in keeping it, perhaps for some reason of his own that Hron would never know.

“Torn up,” he said. “I saw it done. The second of March, in the morning, one of the patient gentlemen’s men came in and the marker was torn across and the pieces went in the stove with the matches, paid in full, every heller, and the architect was bought back into the world clean as a christening.” He shrugged into the second sleeve. “I thought it a wonder myself, where it came from. A man hasn’t a crown one night and the next he’s clear of everything.”

“In a single day,” Hron said. He kept his voice level as the marble. “Where does a ruined architect find that, friend — in a single day?”

The croupier picked up the rack and set the ivory balls into their triangle, one by one, the click of them very loud now in the emptying room, and he did not look up, and his clever tired face gave nothing at all.

“His father died,” he said. “God rest him.” And he lifted the rack away, and the balls held their tight bright shape on the green, waiting for the break.

12. The Codicil

THE CHAMBERS OF DR. WILLIAM SCHÜCK occupied a first floor on Karlova, in the bent throat of the street where it narrows toward the bridge and the tourists in summer rub the saints for luck. There were no tourists now. There was the cold of early March, which is the worst cold Prague keeps, because it has stopped being winter's honest cold and become a damp that gets into the mortar and the chest and stays. Hron climbed the stair behind a clerk who had not wanted to let him up and had not, in the end, found a way to refuse a Chief Inspector of the central criminal police, and on the half-landing he passed a window that gave onto a courtyard where a single tree, leafless, stood in a square of paving like a witness who has been told to wait.

The office smelled of sealing-wax and good cigars and the particular dust that gathers in rooms where paper is kept against the day it will be needed. Schück rose from behind a desk the size of a small boat and offered his hand and a chair, in that order, with the smoothness of a man who has decided in advance how much of himself to give. He was sixty, heavy, careful in his linen. A gold watch-chain crossed a waistcoat that had been let out more than once. On the wall behind him hung

a steel engraving of the old town hall and a framed certificate in Latin, and between them a darker rectangle where some third thing had hung and been taken down.

“Inspector. You’ll forgive Pelikán downstairs. He has instructions to guard my hours. The hours are most of what a notary has to sell.” He said it pleasantly, as a man states a price. “You’re here about Mr. Reszke. A terrible business. He was a client of mine for thirty years, and a friend in the way that men of business permit themselves to be friends — which is to say we never lent each other money.”

“I’m here about his will,” Hron said.

“Of course you are.” Schück folded his hands. “And I shall tell you what the law allows me to tell you, which, the estate not yet being settled and probate not opened, is less than you will wish and more than I should. I am executor. My duty is to the estate. You understand the distinction.”

“You serve the property. Not the dead man.”

“The dead man,” said Schück, “is past serving. The property has heirs who are not.” He smiled to take the edge off it, but the edge stayed. He was a man who protected the estate the way the concierge Kühn protected her keys — out of an honest custodianship that happened, by its nature, to keep certain doors shut.

Hron took out his notebook, not to write in it but to let it lie open on his knee, a small dull threat. Through the window the Orloj struck the half-hour somewhere out of sight, the chime arriv-

ing thin and second-hand across the roofs. He waited for it to finish. He had learned that men talk into silences they have not made themselves.

“There is an old will,” Hron said. “Tell me about the old will.”

Schück considered this. The considering took the length of time a man takes to decide that a fact, once the police hold one end of it, is better surrendered whole than tugged at piecemeal. “There is. Drawn in 1928. After his second marriage. It is — was — a straightforward instrument for a man of his holdings. Bequests to the synagogue council, to two old servants, a sum to Miss Wertheimer for her years of cataloguing. The bulk of the residuary estate — the flat, the collection, the loans outstanding, the moneys — to his son. To Victor.”

“To Victor,” Hron repeated. “Despite the estrangement.”

“The estrangement is recent. The will is old. A man does not redraw his testament every time his son disappoints him, or no notary in Prague would have a free afternoon.” Schück allowed himself the small joke and then put it away. “By the 1928 will, Victor Reszke inherits substantially everything. He is the heir. He has been the heir for six years.”

“Has been,” Hron said.

The notary’s hands lay still on the leather. Outside a cart went by on the cobbles with a sound like distant thunder badly imitated, and a child shouted something, and a tram bell an-

swered far off on Karlova or the embankment beyond.

“You are very quick, Inspector.”

“I am very slow,” Hron said. “It only looks like quickness because I started a week ago.”

Schück inclined his head, conceding the correction as a courtesy. He rose, went to a cabinet of dark oak with a good lock, turned a key he wore on the watch-chain, and took out a portfolio tied with grey tape. He did not open it. He held it the way a man holds a thing he means to give back to its drawer.

“On the twenty-fourth of February,” he said, “Simon Reszke executed a codicil in this room. At that table where you are sitting. Witnessed by my clerk and by Doctor Mahler, who has rooms on the floor above and who happened to be in. Properly attested. Sealed. It is, in every particular, valid.”

“And it says.”

“It revokes the residuary bequest to Victor in its entirety.” Schück said this flatly, the way Stross had read out a body. “Entirely, Inspector. Not reduced — extinguished. A charitable foundation is created, to be administered by the synagogue council, for the relief of refugees coming over the German border — Reszke had grown much exercised by that, this last year, the people arriving from Dresden, from Leipzig, with their bags and their good coats and nowhere. The collection is to be sold to fund it. And a settled portion, a competence, goes to his widow. To Mrs. Hannah.”

Hron looked at the dark rectangle on the wall where the third thing had hung. "How large a portion to the widow?"

"A widow's portion. Decent. Not the estate." Schück's mouth tightened, professional. "I will tell you plainly, since you would learn it from probate in any case and draw worse conclusions from my reticence: the codicil leaves Mrs. Reszke considerably less than the law of intestacy would have given her, and less than gossip supposes a young second wife schemes for. The bulk goes to the refugees. Reszke meant it as — he used the word himself — a *cleaning*. He said he had spent forty years lending money to frightened people at interest, and would spend his death lending it to frightened people at none." A pause. "He was not a sentimental man. It surprised me too."

Hron sat with it. The shape of the thing was turning under his hands like a coin you finger in a pocket to read by the milling alone. Hannah Reszke — the watchful young widow with the cold composed face, the obvious beneficiary, the woman half the central office had already convicted in the corridor over coffee — gained little. Less than the law would have given her unasked. A motive that had looked, three days ago, like a strong-box, was a thimble. He felt the small clean satisfaction of a suspect falling away, and under it the colder thing rising to take her place.

"So as of the twenty-fourth of February," Hron said, "Victor Reszke inherits nothing."

“As of the twenty-fourth of February, Victor Reszke inherits the contents of his father’s ashtray.” Schück set the portfolio down on the desk at last, square to the edge, and did not untie it. “The codicil stands ahead of the will. He is cut out. Root and branch.”

The window had gone the colour of pewter. Somewhere below in the courtyard a woman was beating a rug, the dull rhythmic thud of it coming up through the floor, and Hron thought, irrelevantly, of his sister’s flat in Vinohrady and the carpet over the balcony rail and Agnes watching the dust go up into the cold and not saying that it looked like smoke, which it did, because she said nothing, and he put the thought down where it could not reach him and looked at the notary.

“Mr. Reszke died on the night of the twenty-eighth,” Hron said. “Four days after he signed.”

“Four days. Yes.”

“Who knew the codicil had been signed?”

Now Schück went still in a different way — not the stillness of a man choosing what to surrender, but of a man arriving at the edge of the thing he had hoped not to reach. He picked up a paper-knife, ivory-handled, and turned it over once, and laid it down.

“That,” he said, “is the part that has kept me from sleeping, Inspector. And I will tell it to you because I am an old man and I have decided I would rather you had it from me than wring it out of Pelikán, who would give you the dates wrong and the meaning worse.” He drew a breath.

“Reszke was a man of secrets, as such men are. He did not want it known he had disinherited his son. Partly shame — a man does not advertise that his blood has come to nothing. Partly prudence. He told me to keep the codicil quiet until after his death. And he told the household, and anyone who asked — and Victor asked — that the *signing had been postponed.*”

The rug-beating stopped below. The silence that followed had a weight, as if the room had taken a breath of its own.

“Postponed,” Hron said.

“Postponed. He let it be understood that he was *minded* to change his will, that there had been quarrels enough, that the lawyers were drawing something — but that nothing was *done*. That it would be seen to in the spring. He said it to Hannah. He said it, I have reason to believe, to Miss Wertheimer. And he said it to Victor’s own face.” Schück’s voice had gone quiet and exact. “I know he said it to Victor, because Victor came to me. Here. To this room.”

Hron did not move. “When.”

“The twenty-sixth of February.” The notary met his eye and held it, and there was something in the heavy careful face that was almost relief, the relief of a man setting down a weight he has carried up too many stairs. “Two days after the signing. Two days before his father drowned. He came without an appointment — Pelikán tried to turn him away and could not, the family resemblance opens doors — and he was, Inspector, in a state I

have not often seen in a grown man. White. Sweating, in February. He had the manner of someone who has not slept. He asked me — he tried to make it sound careless, and could not — he asked me whether his father's will *still stood*. Whether anything had been *altered*. Whether the old arrangement was *secure*."

"And you told him."

"I told him nothing," Schück said, and for the first time the smoothness left him entirely; underneath it was a tired man. "I was bound. The client had instructed me to keep it close. I told Victor that I could not discuss his father's affairs, that he must speak to his father, that these were not matters for a notary to canvass with — with a son who was, forgive me, no longer a beneficiary, though I could not say so. I gave him the wall a notary gives. And he took it — I saw him take it — as confirmation. He went out of that door" — Schück nodded at it — "with the colour coming back into his face. Reassured. Because I had not said the thing was changed, and his father had told him it was only postponed, and a man believes what lets him breathe. He left here believing the old will stood. Believing he was still the heir."

Hron looked at the door. An ordinary door, panelled, with a brass handle gone dull at the grip from forty years of hands. A man had stood there with his ruin two days off and been let believe he was saved.

He had the whole shape now. He felt it close around the case the way the river closes over a stone — without a sound, leaving only the rings. The debt at the Louvre, the marker due the first of March, the men without patience. The duplicate key to the service stair labelled *young master* in faded ink. The veronal filled twice in a single February. And now the engine that turned all of it: a son drowning in debt, with days to live as a free man, who believed — who had been *made* to believe, by his own father's last unkindness — that one death stood between him and an inheritance large enough to bury every marker in Prague. *Why now*. Because the first of March was the clock on the debt, and because as far as Victor knew the estate was still his to come into, and a desperate man does not wait for spring when the men he owes will not wait for Tuesday.

It was all there. It was complete. And it was, Hron knew, sitting in the pewter light with the notebook open and unwritten on his knee, *almost nothing he could use*. The motive was perfect and proved nothing. A man may be ruined, and key-holding, and a buyer of veronal, and an heir who believed himself an heir, and still have been, on the night his father died, asleep in his own bed as he claimed. Hron had the shape of the crime entire and not one thread that put Victor Reszke on the embankment in the dead hour between the last guest's departure and two in the morning. The whole human edifice stood on a single miss-

ing plank — the dead hour — and the dead hour was still dark.

“You’ve been very candid,” Hron said.

“I have been candid about a dead man’s secrets to save a living man from a noose he may not deserve, or to fit him to one he does,” Schück said. “I no longer know which. That is your trade, Inspector, not mine. Mine is the property.” He began, with the slow particular care of an old man, to gather his papers — the portfolio, the ivory knife, a docket he squared against the desk’s edge — and Hron understood the interview was being closed, gently, the way Schück did everything, and rose.

He had his hat in his hand when the notary spoke again, not looking up, fussing the grey tape of the portfolio into a knot.

“The saddest part,” Schück said, “is the irony. You will have seen it. You see everything, I think, a beat after you let the rest of us believe you’ve missed it.” He tied the knot and pulled it and set the portfolio aside and looked at last at Hron, and his heavy face was without any of its smoothness at all. “If Victor did this thing — if he murdered his father, and God forgive me for saying the word in this room where the man signed — then he did it to inherit an estate the codicil had already taken from him three days before he raised his hand. He killed his father for nothing, Inspector. For a thing he no longer owned. He’d lost it on the twenty-fourth and never knew.”

The word sat in the air between them — *murdered* — and Hron watched the old notary hear it, two seconds late, hear what he had said aloud in his own correct chambers about a man not charged, not arrested, not yet anything but a son with a key. The colour came up Schück's heavy neck and into his face, a slow dark flush, and he reached for the ivory paper-knife again and had nothing to do with it and put it down.

“That is — I spoke loosely,” he said. “Strike it. A figure of speech. I have no knowledge whatever that —”

“I'll see myself down,” Hron said, and left him to the silence and the property and the leafless tree in the courtyard, and went out past Pelikán, who watched him go the whole length of the corridor, and down the worn stair into Karlova, where the damp had thickened toward rain and a tram bell rang twice on the embankment and the river, when he reached it, was the colour of a coin left too long in a pocket, exactly as it had been a week ago, and would be tomorrow, indifferent to all of them.

13. The Conductor's Thaler

THE DEPOT OF THE SEVENTEENTH LINE stood at the river's lower edge, past the last of the embankment's good addresses, where the buildings forgot to be handsome and turned their backs to the water. It was a long brick shed roofed in glass gone grey with smoke, and inside it the trams waited out the afternoon in rows like cattle in a winter byre, their poles down, their interiors dark, smelling of axle grease and the dry metallic dust that electric machinery makes and that settled on the tongue. Hron crossed the cobbles of the yard with his hat held against a wind off the Vltava that carried the cold of the snowmelt in it, and he thought, because he could not help thinking such things in such places, of his father, who had punched tickets on the Smíchov line for thirty-one years and died of a thing in his lungs the doctors gave a Latin name to charge more for. The yard had not changed. The men were younger. That was all that ever changed.

A foreman in a leather apron pointed him down the rows with a thumb. Procházka, he said, was on the early-and-late this week and would be in the canteen between runs, and he would not thank Hron for it, but then Procházka thanked no one for anything; it was a thing about him.

The canteen was a glassed-off corner of the shed with a coal stove and four tables and a samovar of coffee that had been boiling since the previous reign. Albin Procházka sat alone with his cap pushed back and a cigarette burned almost to the cardboard, a man of perhaps sixty with the wide stillness of those who have spent their lives standing upright in moving boxes and have learned to hold the floor of the world steady under them by an act of the inner ear. He did not rise. He looked at Hron's coat, then at Hron's face, and read the rank in both before a word was spoken.

"Police," he said. It was not a question and it was not a complaint. It was a man naming the weather.

"The central criminal police." Hron sat without being asked, which was its own small courtesy in such company — sitting, not looming. "Hron. I'll not keep you from your run."

"My run keeps itself." Procházka tipped ash into a tin lid. "It's the night of the antiquarian. Up on the embankment. The drowned man."

"How do you know that?"

"Because nobody from Bartholomew Street walks into this depot in March about anything else." He said it without satisfaction. "We've a tongue down here too. The man in the locked bathroom. The whole line's been telling it." He drew on the dead cigarette, found it dead, set it down. "I had that stretch of the embankment that night. You'll want the log."

It was the answer of a man who had been waiting to give it, and Hron understood then that Procházka had turned it in the long sleepless hours of a night-driver and arrived at the same closed door Hron carried in his own coat and had not been able to open either. That was the second time in this case Hron had met that look. The concierge Kühn had worn it, standing in her doorway with her good ear toward him, telling the truth and watching him fail to believe a thing she could not herself believe.

The log was a soft black book the size of a missal, kept in the dispatcher's cubby; the dispatcher brought it without being charming about it and stood over Hron while he read, which Hron permitted, for a man is entitled to guard his own ledger. The night-runs were entered in a clerk's copperplate from the conductors' paper slips: time of departure, time at each terminus, the running total of tickets by series and number. It was the most ordinary document in the world, and the kind Hron loved — the residue of an ordinary hour, the unglamorous proof of where the city's bodies had been moved and at what price — and he had built more cases on such books than on any confession.

He found the night of the twenty-eighth of February into the first of March. Procházka's hand on the paper slips, transcribed: the late run down the embankment, the one that ran past the dead man's windows and on toward the National Theatre and the bridge.

“There.” Procházka set a thick finger on a line without looking — he knew where it was, he had found it himself in the dark of his own remembering. “Boarded at the Smetana stop. By the museum. Eleven fifty-one, near enough. I’d just come off the bridge turn.”

Hron read the ticket number, and the series, and the fare. Two crowns. He looked up. “Who?”

And here Procházka took his time, because the thing he had to say was a thing he did not like the shape of in his own mouth, and he was an honest man, and honest men go slowly through the parts of their evidence that make them sound like liars.

“A gentleman,” he said at last. “Alone. Got on by the museum and rode three stops and got off before the bridge, by the Mánes, and walked toward the water. Quiet. Older than me, by the way he carried himself, though I couldn’t put a face to him now to save my pension.” He frowned, dissatisfied. “Dark coat. Old. Not poor-old — kept-old, you understand me, the way a thing’s old when it’s been brushed for forty years. The cut of it was —” he made a small helpless motion with two fingers at his own lapel — “I’ve seen coats in the old prints. In the museum windows up there. That cut. A long dark coat to the calf, a collar up like this, and under it nothing modern that I marked. He moved like a churchman. Hands folded.”

“You see a hundred men a night,” Hron said, not to challenge but to let the man push against him, because a witness tests his own memory hardest when something resists it.

“I see a hundred men a night and I forget every blessed one by the next morning, and good ride-dance.” Procházka met his eye. “I have not forgotten this one. I’ve tried.”

Hron let that sit. Through the glass partition a tram came in off the line, brakes singing on the steel, and the floor of the shed took the small shudder of it and gave it back, and somewhere a pole was hauled down on its spring with a sound like a cough.

“Chief Inspector,” said the dispatcher, who had been listening, “tell him about the coin.”

Procházka’s jaw set. He did not like to be prompted to the part of his story that he liked least of all. But he had decided already to tell it, days ago, in the dark, and so he told it.

“He paid in coin. They all do, the night ones. I made his change and dropped his piece in the leather, and I’ll tell you, I felt the wrong of it through the glove. A conductor’s hand knows the till the way a baker’s knows flour — weight, and the edge, and the cold of it. And this was wrong in the hand. Heavier than a five. Thicker. The milling on the rim not like our milling. I thought, foreign — a mark, somebody come over the border with his pockets full of the wrong money, and we get those now, more of them every month, the frightened ones.” He paused, and something passed over his face that was the year passing over it, the unease none of them yet had a clean word for. “But it weren’t a mark. I set it by, the way we do the odd ones, and at the depot I dropped it in the

tin, and Vacek there” — a nod at the dispatcher —
“Vacek thinks he knows coins.”

“My uncle was at the Mint,” said the dispatcher, Vacek, as if this settled it, and perhaps among tram men it did.

“Show the Chief Inspector the tin.”

The tin was a flat tobacco box, Zlatá Praha brand, the lid worn to bright tin where forty thumbs a year had pried it. Vacek brought it down off a shelf above the dispatcher’s window and shook it once so the coins slid and chimed — the deadhouse of a tram line’s commerce: buttons passed as hellers in the dark, a Swiss centime, two Austrian schillings from before the borders moved, a holed Chinese cash-coin some sailor’s tip had brought up the Elbe and the Vltava to die in a tin in a Prague depot. And among them, when Vacek tipped the box into Hron’s open palm and stirred the litter with one finger, a broad silver disc the size of the top of a teacup, dull as old pewter where the rest were dim, dark in the deep of its relief and bright only on the high places where handling across long time had burnished it.

Hron held it to the window light.

It was a thaler. He knew it for that before he could read it, by the heft and the dish of it and the way the silver took the grey light and gave back not shine but a kind of held depth. On the face, a man’s bust in profile, ruffed, crowned with the small high crown of the old Empire, the beard cut to a point and the eye, in the worn metal, somehow still looking sideways at something out of the

frame. The legend ran round the rim in a Latin abbreviated to the bone, and Hron, who had a little Latin from the chaplains on the Italian front and a little more from a boyhood of churches, picked the words out one by one, turning the coin under his thumb as Procházka had turned the night under his.

RVDOLPHVS. II. D : G. ROM : IMP : SEMP :
AVG :

Rudolf the Second, by the grace of God Emperor of the Romans, ever august. On the reverse, the double eagle with the breast-shield of Bohemia, and below it, small, a date he had to tilt twice to the light to be sure of, because the engraving was the engraving of three hundred years ago and his eyes were the eyes of forty-nine years of bad print.

He read it. He did not say it aloud. He put the thaler down on the open ledger so that it lay across the line where Procházka's eleven-fifty-one was written — the coin on the line of the man who had paid it — and the two of them sat there on the soft black paper saying the same impossible thing in two scripts, and Hron looked at them and let the long discipline of his trade come down over the cold place in his chest like a man drawing a shutter.

“That is not money,” he said at last, and his voice came out level, which pleased him, for it was a thing he had practised — to be level in front of the unaccountable, to keep his certainties small so they could not be taken from him. “Not money

you could spend. It went out of the coinage three centuries since." He looked at Vacek. "Your uncle at the Mint would tell you the same."

"My uncle's dead," said Vacek, not unkindly. "But aye. It's a Rudolfine thaler, Chief Inspector. Genuine, I'd stake the depot on it. I've handled three in my life, all under glass at a dealer's. You don't forge the wear. The wear's the thing you can't put on." He scratched under his cap. "How a thing like that comes through a conductor's glove for a two-crown fare on the night run —" He stopped, and did not finish it. None of them finished it. The sentence had no end a sober man would say out loud in a depot canteen in the daylight.

Hron knew what the convenient thought was, and because it was convenient he distrusted it, and because he distrusted it he made himself examine it fully, the way a man makes himself eat the fat as well as the meat. The dead man dealt in old and beautiful things; Simon Reszke had owned a thousand such coins. A man like that, in liquor, after a good dinner, full of his own grandeur, might press a Rudolfine thaler into some servant's hand as a king scatters largesse, for the pleasure of the gesture, and the man who took it, not knowing what he held, might pass it for a fare in the dark.

It was a good thought. It had everything but the truth's weight. Because Reszke had not left the flat. The whole sad architecture of the case stood on that — the bolted door, the watched

stair, the concierge's oath, the body in the cold water at two in the morning. Reszke had not gone down to the embankment at eleven-fifty-one to put a thin man in an old coat on the seventeenth tram. He had been three storeys up, drinking the last of his life, with the dinner-things washed and the maid gone home, and within two hours he would be dead in the water with his jaw bruised under the chin. And the thin man in the old-fashioned coat had come up that night — Kühn had half-seen him come up — and no one, in any account anyone could give him, had seen him come down. Except Procházka. Procházka had seen him come down, and ride three stops, and get off by the Mánes, and walk toward the water and into nothing, with a coin in his glove that had not been legal tender since before the Battle of the White Mountain.

Hron took out his notebook and wrote none of the thoughts. He wrote the facts. The stop. The time. The series and number of the ticket. The fare. The coin, described: thaler, silver, Rudolf II, reverse double eagle, worn, genuine per depot witness Vacek. He drew a small box around it the way he had been taught to box a thing he could not yet place, and he heard, against his will, Rabbi Brod's question to him in the cold little study off Maiselova, the one he had carried out into the street and not been able to set down: *Can one un-invite what one has invited?* He had told the rabbi he did not deal in such questions. He boxed the coin and moved his pencil down the page, because

there was a second thing in the log, and it was the more important thing, and it was the human thing, and he would not let the first eat it.

“There is another boarding,” he said. “Later. The same stop.”

Procházka leaned, looked, and his finger came down further along the column. “Aye. There. Coming on to two o’clock. One fifty-five, give or take — I’d marked the bridge turn at one-fifty and this was after.” His finger held the line. The hand on the slip was the same hand, but the entry was an entry like any other, with none of the dead weight the first one had. “Younger man. Boarded at the embankment, same stop by the museum, rode up the line, the far way, toward Florenc. In a hurry. Hatless, or carrying it. Coat open. Paid two crowns in two crowns” — he smiled thinly at his own joke, glad of an ordinary man to talk about — “good silver, our own, change of a five. Nothing to him. A young gent who’d had a long night and wanted his bed and wasn’t going to walk to it. We carry a thousand of those.” He looked up, and the canniness of an old witness was in his face now, the readiness to be misunderstood and the wish not to be. “He was nothing like the other. You understand me, Chief Inspector. I see you writing them on the one page. Don’t put them in the one man. They were two men, an hour and more apart, and the only thing they had between them was the stop and the river.”

It was exactly the thing Hron had been saying to himself, and to hear his own discipline come

back to him out of the mouth of a tram conductor steadied him more than any superior's order could have done, because it came from a man with nothing to gain. He had felt the pull all the way across the yard — the pull of the convenient figure, the single uncanny stranger who came up at midnight and went down at two and was the whole of the riddle in one shape. It would have been a relief to believe it. It would have closed the case into a ghost story and let him go home. And it was false. There were two men. The midnight man was the thing he could not classify, the cold residue, the draught; and the two-o'clock man — the young man, hatless, coat open, in a hurry, with good Czechoslovak silver and nothing strange about him at all — was the case. Hron felt the second entry settle into the timeline he had been building all week the way a keystone settles, with a small dry finality, and he kept his face shut over it.

“Describe him again,” he said of the young one. “The later man.”

“Tall enough. Slim. Dark coat — but a *coat-coat*, you follow me, a man's town coat off a peg in this year of grace, nothing out of a print.” Procházka's certainty about what the second man was *not* was its own kind of evidence. “Pale. Worried. The way they look when the cards have gone against them, and I've carried plenty of those off the embankment of a night — there's tables down here a respectable man doesn't name. He didn't speak. Dropped his coins, took his ticket, sat on the river side with his collar up and his face

to the glass, and got off three stops on and went up toward the town, fast. That's the whole of him."

The cards have gone against them. Hron wrote the small flat words without comment and did not tell the conductor what they were worth — the back room at the Louvre, the marker due on the first, the young master's key to a stair the deaf woman could not hear. He let it lie in the notebook, unlit, the way he let all his keystones lie until he was ready to take their weight. *Don't put them in the one man.* He would not. He had two men and he would carry them two, the human one toward Bartholomew Street and the other toward — he did not yet have the word for where he was carrying the other. He boxed it and left the box unaddressed.

He closed the log and thanked Vacek, who took his book back as a sexton takes back a borrowed key. Then Hron did a thing he weighed a moment and did anyway: he took the thaler up off the table, asked Vacek what it was worth in crowns, and when Vacek named a sum thirty times the fare it had paid, counted that sum out of his own pocket onto the dispatcher's window-sill in good republican silver, because the coin was evidence and he would not have a depot's odd-coin tin out of pocket for the central criminal police. Vacek looked at the money and at the Chief Inspector and decided, with the tact of his trade, to find it reasonable. Hron folded the thaler into his handkerchief and put it in the inner pocket over his

heart, where it lay against him cold and heavy through the linen — the only coin he had ever carried that he could not have spent in any shop in the Republic — and he could not have said, had a superior asked him, what it was evidence of.

He had one more thing. He had saved it the way he saved the question that mattered for the door, because a man tells you most in the moment he thinks the talk is over.

“Mr. Procházka. The midnight man. The old-coat man.” Hron had his hat in his hand already, half-turned to the cold of the yard. “Did he say anything to you?”

The conductor had risen, stiff in the knees, reaching for his cap and his cigarettes and the long habit of his run. He stopped with the cap halfway to his head, and for a moment the practical face of him opened on something he had been holding shut, and Hron saw that this, too, the old man had turned over in the dark and not been able to set down.

“Only thank you,” Procházka said. “In German. The polite old way — *thank you, my good sir.*” He said the foreign words carefully, the way a man handles a thing not his. “But to me, not from me, you understand. As if he were the conductor and I the passenger. As if it were *his* car, and his line, and his city, and he was letting me off at my stop and wishing me well of the night.” He shook his head once, slowly, and put his cap on, and the practical face came down over the other one. “Cold he was. The whole car went cold when he

got on — the windows took the frost on the inside, in March, with the heater going — and warm again the minute he stepped down by the Mánes.” He rubbed his upper arm through the worn cloth of his uniform, an old man’s unthinking gesture against an old man’s chill, except that it was not the cold of the yard he was rubbing out of his arm; it was the memory of a colder one. “I’ve driven that line eleven years, Chief Inspector. Florenc to the bridge and back, every black hour there is. Eleven years.” He looked at Hron, and there was no fear in it and no fancy in it, only the plain offence of a practical man at a thing that had no business being true. “I have never felt a thing like it. Before nor since. And I’d thank you, if it’s all the same, not to write *that* part in your little book — because I know what it sounds like, and I am not a man who hears things.”

Hron put the notebook away. “No,” he said. “You’re not.”

He went out across the cobbles with the wind off the river in his face and the dead emperor’s silver lying cold against his heart, and he did not look back, and he did not yet know what he would say of any of it, and he thought, because the trams were coming in off the line behind him in the failing light with their poles down and their bells silent, of his father, and of the price of coal, and of a girl in Vinohrady who had not said a full sentence in five years and who, on Sunday, would put a drawing into his hand that he would not under-

stand until much later, and could never afterward forget.

14. The Ticket in the Coat

BOUDA WAS WAITING FOR HIM ON THE steps of the central police with his hat already on, which was how Hron knew before a word was said that the boy had something. Bouda standing still was a clerk. Bouda with his hat on at half past eight, shifting from one foot to the other on the cold stone with the cigarette unlit between two fingers, was a hound that had crossed a scent and could not yet say so in front of the building. Hron came up Bartholomew Street out of the smell of the river and the coal, his knee telling him the night had been damp, and he saw the face and said nothing, only lifted his chin a degree, which meant: walk with me and talk where the door is at our backs.

They went up Bartholomew Street the wrong way, against the trickle of typists and constables coming on for the morning, and Bouda talked.

“It’s Otilie’s sister,” he said. “Rose. She works at a cleaner’s in Vinohrady, on Korunní, near the church. Otilie mentioned it Sunday, only in passing — she said her sister was forever bringing home gentlemen’s coats to brush at the kitchen table because the shop was short-handed. I didn’t think anything of it. Then yesterday it sat down in me.”

“What sat down.”

“That a man who has just murdered his father, and who is careful, sends his good coat to be cleaned.” Bouda had the decency to look uncertain even while he was proud. “Or that a man who is not careful, but who is in trouble with the kind of men we found at the Louvre, has a wife or a landlady who sends his coat to be cleaned because a man cannot go to those men looking like a beggar. Either way the coat goes out of the flat. And a coat that goes out of the flat is somewhere we can reach without a magistrate’s paper.”

Hron walked. He did not say that the second reasoning was sound and the first was a boy’s fancy, because the boy had got to the shop either way, and the shop was the thing.

“Rose does the brushing,” he said.

“Rose does the brushing. And Rose, when a coat comes in, turns out the pockets, because gentlemen leave things — handkerchiefs, theatre stubs, a tram ticket, once a five-hundred note that her foreman made her hand back, which she has never forgiven him. She keeps what she finds in a little tin behind the counter until the coat is collected, and gives it back with the coat. It is honest of her and it is also” — Bouda permitted himself the word — “providential.”

“Whose coat.”

“Reszke. Victor Reszke. A dark grey ulster, good cloth, sent in the third of March with a note from a woman’s hand — the landlady, we think, on Korunní where he keeps a room. Rose had it on

the rail still, not collected, because the gentleman had not been in to pay." Bouda stopped on the corner and looked at him. "It came in with something in the breast pocket. She had it in the tin."

"You have it."

"I have it where it is," Bouda said, and Hron heard, under the eagerness, that the boy had learned at least one thing from him this winter. "I didn't take it. I went to look, I saw it, I left it in the tin and I told Rose to touch it as little as she'd already touched it and to tell no one, and I came back for you. Because I thought — I thought you'd want to lift it yourself, in front of her, so it's clean."

"It is clean now," Hron said. "If you lifted it, it would be a ticket Bouda found. If I lift it in front of the woman who found it, with the woman saying where she found it, it is a ticket the case found." He started walking again, toward the tram. "Good. We go to Vinohrady."

The 11 took them up to Peace Square, and from the square they walked the little distance to Korunní, past the doctors' brass plates and the dark windows of a closed bookbinder, into a morning that up here on the heights had a thinner, cleaner cold than the embankment, the cold of a residential street where no river breathed. The cleaner's was a narrow shop with a steamed window and a smell, when the door's bell let them in, of hot cloth and benzine and something

floral laid over the benzine to make it bearable, which only made it worse. Behind the counter a small woman with Otilie's chin and none of Otilie's quickness was pressing a man's trouser leg under a cloth, and the iron sighed, and the whole shop was warm in the way that makes a cold man's eyes water.

"Mrs. Rose," Bouda said, taking off his hat. "This is Chief Inspector Hron."

She set the iron up on its heel without hurry and wiped her hands on her apron and looked at Hron the way the careful poor look at the police: not afraid, exactly, but counting the cost of every door in the room. "Otilie said you'd come," she said. "She didn't say you'd be old." It was not unkind. It was the kind of thing her sister would have said too, and Hron, who had been called many things across a counter, inclined his head as if it were a courtesy.

"The grey ulster," he said.

She brought it from the back on its hanger and laid it across the counter, and it was a good coat, a heavy herringbone with a velvet half-collar gone shiny at the fold, the coat of a man who had been raised with money and now wore his last good thing carefully. There was a faint ring of old salt-stain at the hem where slush had dried. Hron did not touch the coat yet. He looked at it as he would have looked at a body, letting it say what it would.

"The tin," he said.

She set it on the counter between them, a flat tobacco tin with the paint worn through to bright

metal at the corners, and opened it. Inside, on a folded scrap of the brown paper they wrapped the cleaning in, lay a handkerchief not laundered, a brass collar-stud, two hellers, and a tram ticket.

Hron took a pair of tweezers from his breast pocket — he carried them the way other men carried a knife — and lifted the ticket by its edge into the grey light from the window.

It was a city tram ticket, the cheap buff paper, line 17, and the conductor's punch had bitten a clean little crescent through the printed grid of the time. Hron turned it to the light. The punch fell in the column for the small hours and in the row for the third quarter. He read it the way he read a timetable, without drama, because a timetable does not lie and does not care whether you want it to.

Fifty-two minutes past one. The morning of the first of March. The seventeen — the embankment line.

He stood with the steam wetting the back of his neck and the iron sighing behind the counter and he did not feel the small bright lift of triumph that he saw rise in Bouda's face across from him. He felt instead the particular cold patience that came over him when a thing that had been loose in his hands for a week settled, all at once, into a fact. Victor Reszke had told the landlady on Korunní, and would tell Hron when Hron came for him, that on the night his father died he had been at the Café Louvre at cards until two and then home in his bed by half past, asleep, hearing

nothing, knowing nothing until the morning brought the news from the embankment. And here in a tobacco tin, in a cleaner's on Korunní, in the breast pocket of his last good coat, was a buff ticket that put him on a tram on the Smetana Embankment at fifty-two minutes past one, under the dead man's windows, in the hour the dead man died.

"Rose," he said, and his voice did not change at all. "When did this coat come in to you."

"The third. Monday. The note said brush and press and don't put it in the bath" — she meant the benzine vat — "because the cloth marks. A woman's note. Mrs. Tobol, the landlady; she always writes for him." She looked from Hron's face to the ticket and back, and being no fool she lowered her voice though there was no one to hear. "Is it bad for him?"

"It is a ticket," Hron said. "It is bad for no one until it is read out by a magistrate. Did anyone else go into that pocket?"

"Only me. And I take a ticket out only to look it's not money and put it in the tin. I don't read tickets. I can read," she added, with dignity, "but a tram ticket is a tram ticket."

"Yes," Hron said. "Usually it is."

He had Bouda write it all down then, properly, in the boy's square careful hand — the coat, the sender, the date, the tin, the witness — and he had Rose make her mark and put her name under it, and he folded the ticket into a clean envelope from his pocket and sealed it and wrote across the

flap the date and the place and his own name, because a thing that travels from a tobacco tin to a courtroom must be able to say, at every step, whose hands it passed through. Bouda watched him do it with the patience of a man who wants to run and is being taught to walk.

Outside on Korunní the cold took the steam off them in a breath and the street was ordinary and indifferent, a woman beating a runner against a railing, a coal cart, the bell of the church marking the quarter. Bouda lit his cigarette at last, cupping it against the small wind, and could not keep it in any longer.

“That’s him,” he said. “That puts him there. He said home in bed and he was on the seventeen on the embankment at two, near enough. Stross says drowned at two. We have the key, we have the veronal at the Vinohrady chemist’s, we have the debt at the Louvre, we have the codicil cutting him off, and now we have him standing under the windows in the dead hour with a ticket in his own pocket to prove it.” He drew on the cigarette. “I’d take him today. I’d take him before dinner.”

“On what,” Hron said. He said it mildly, the way he asked his hardest questions.

“On that.” Bouda nodded at the breast of Hron’s coat where the envelope was.

“On a ticket.” Hron began to walk, downhill, toward the square and the tram. “A ticket that says a man rode the seventeen at ten to two. A man may ride a tram. Riding a tram is not a crime, Karel, even on the night his father drowns. A man

may ride to the embankment to stand under the dead man's windows for an hour out of grief, or to wait for a woman, or because he is drunk and the tram is warm and he does not want to go home. You put him under the windows. Good. You do not put him in the bathroom. And in the bathroom is a door that was bolted on the inside."

The boy's face cooled. He was quick enough to follow.

"Schück," Hron went on — naming the dead man's lawyer, who would be Victor's too, when it came to it, or worse, some sharper man hired with borrowed money — "or whoever they get, will not even trouble himself with the ticket. He will say: yes, my client was on the embankment, why should he not be, he came to look up at his father's windows, an estranged son in the night, it is sad, it is human, you have caught him in nothing but his sorrow. And then he will say the one thing I cannot yet answer. He will say: my client, this man on your tram, how did he reach his father, who lay drowned behind a door bolted from the inside, in a room that not even the police can say how a living hand could lock and leave? And the magistrate will look at me, and I will have a ticket and a key and a debt and a son standing in the street under the windows — and a bolted door between him and the body that I cannot open. And the door will walk him out."

A tram came down the line toward the square, the seventeen's cousin, its bell two short notes and the wires above it spitting a blue spark at the

join, and Hron watched it pass and did not board it. Grief was a tram he kept not boarding; so, this morning, was triumph.

“You have done very well,” he said to Bouda, and meant it, and the boy heard that he meant it. “You and Ottilie’s sister have put the case where it needs the man to be. But the case is not the man yet. The case is a door. I am going back to the flat.”

“Now?”

“Now. While the cloth is hot.” It was a phrase of his he had never explained and Bouda had given up asking. He meant: while the thing is still moving, before it cools and sets in the wrong shape. “Go to the central police and lock that envelope in my drawer, and say nothing to Pelc, who will want to take Victor today for the sound of it in the corridor. Tell no one we were in Vinohrady. The ticket keeps. Tickets are patient.” He almost smiled. “More patient than you.”

Bouda took the envelope as if it were an egg, and went, and Hron stood a moment longer on the corner of Korunní in the thin clean cold of the heights, away from the river, and let himself feel the weight of what he held — which was nothing, his hands were empty, the ticket was gone up the hill with the boy.

The ticket was real. He turned it over in his mind as he had turned it in the tweezers. The buff paper was real, the line was real, the punch in the third quarter of the hour was real, the embankment under the dead man’s windows was real, and

the man named in no record who had been afraid of nothing was, near enough to that same hour, truly dead in his bath. Victor on the seventeen at ten to two. He had it. He held it. It would not slip.

And standing in the cleaner's doorway with the benzine and the hot cloth at his back and the cold street before him, Hron found that he was not thinking of Victor at all.

He was thinking of the other passenger. The one who had ridden the same line two hours before — not Victor's tram, the earlier car, near midnight, the seventeen along the same dark water — the quiet man, foreign-old in his clothes, who had paid Procházka with a coin that lay now in a tin in a tram depot the way this ticket had lain in a tin in a cleaner's, except that the coin was silver and three hundred years out of currency, struck under an emperor dead before any rail was laid. For Victor there was a ticket, a coat, a cleaner, a landlady's note, a sister's mark, an envelope sealed in his own hand — a clean bright chain of paper running from a tobacco tin straight to a courtroom. For Victor there would always be a record. That was what made him a man, and a guilty one, and findable.

The other had bought no ticket. No coat of his would come to any cleaner's. No landlady wrote his notes. He had paid with a coin and left only the coin, and the coin proved a hand and the hand proved nothing, and there was no tin, no shop, no sister, no envelope, no record on the earth that would ever put him anywhere at all — only on

Reszke's stair going up, and at the head of Reszke's table, and on a midnight tram, leaving, when no one could account for how he came to be there to leave.

The church bell finished its quarter. A tram bell answered it from the square, two notes and one. Hron put his cold hands in his pockets and went down the hill to find a door he could open, leaving behind him, riding the same line into the dark, the one he never would.

15. Interlude: Anežka

THE LIGHT CAME ACROSS THE PARQUET IN the early afternoon the way it always came on a Sunday — slantwise, a little tired, the colour of the inside of a teacup — and Agnes sat in it with her knees drawn up and her notebook open and let it lie across her hands until they were warm. The flat smelled of Sunday. That was a smell with parts to it, and she knew them all: the goose fat her aunt had rendered yesterday and not quite scrubbed out of the kitchen air; the wet-wool smell of the runner by the door where boots had stood; the dry bitter dust the radiators made when they grew hot, which was the smell of winter ending without quite being able to say so. Below the window a tram went up the slope toward Peace Square and rang once at the curve, and the glass took the sound and held it a moment, the way water holds a stone before it lets it down.

She did not have the words for most of this. She had had them once. She knew she had had them, the way you know a room you have stopped going into is still there behind its door, with its chairs and its particular dark. But the words had gone somewhere with her mother in the influenza winter and had not come back, and she had stopped expecting them, and the not-expecting

was its own kind of quiet she had learned to live inside, the way you learn to live inside a coat that is too large because it is the only warm one. The world came to her now without names on it. A name was a handle you put on a thing so you could carry it to someone else. She had no one to carry things to, so the things stayed whole, and heavy, and very bright.

Her father was reading.

He sat in the chair by the window with his bad leg straight out in front of him, the one that ached in this weather — she had watched him not-rub it as he came up the stairs, which was how she knew — and he held the book a little away from his face the way older men did, and he read aloud in his low even voice that went on like a road. It was a book about a boy and a dog and a long walk through Bohemia, and she did not follow the boy or the dog very closely. She followed the voice. The voice was the thing. It had two countries in it, his voice; she had heard him in the street speak the hard square German with the porter and then turn and speak Czech to the tram man, soft and quick, and the seam between them never showed except to her, who lived at seams now and noticed them. When he read he kept to the Czech, slow, and she let it pour over her hands with the light, and she drew.

She always drew on Sundays. It was the one thing she did that he watched without it becoming a question. The doctors had made everything into a question — the kind aunt-faced doctor on the

Vinohrady avenue with his little wooden stick and his *now then*, and the stern one near the river who had spoken about her in front of her as though she were a window he was deciding whether to repair. They had wanted her to make sounds. They had held up cards with red apples and blue houses and waited, and the waiting had had teeth in it, and she had looked at the apple and thought, *that is not the colour of any apple I have eaten*, and said nothing, and the silence had filled the room until even the doctor was uncomfortable, which had been, she would admit, a small private pleasure. Her father never held up cards. Her father read, and let her draw, and at the end of the afternoon looked at what she had made for a long time and put on his hat and kissed her hair and went away down the stairs, and that was a thing they did together that needed no apples in it at all.

She drew the table again.

She did not decide to. That was the thing about the table; it was simply what the pencil wanted to be doing, the way water on the window wanted to run down and not up. A long table, seen from above the way she liked to see things, a rectangle going away across the page. Around it she set the small figures, the way you set plates. She did them quickly, in the round-headed shorthand that was her whole alphabet now — a circle for the face, two dots, a line for the closed mouth, a body like a little bell. She put them down the two long sides, careful of the spacing, because a table where the spacing was wrong looked like an argument and a

table where it was right looked like a held breath. She counted as she went, not in numbers — she had the numbers, she had not lost the numbers, the numbers had stayed when the words went, which she found neither strange nor not-strange — but in the body, in the small even pressure of the pencil, the way you count stairs in the dark with your feet. Down one side. Down the other.

And then the thin one.

He went at the head, at the short end of the table, opposite the place she always left a little fuller than the rest, the host's place, the place of the one who had asked everyone to come. She did not draw the thin one the way she drew the others. The others were bells. The thin one was a long stroke, an upright, a man made the way a candle is made, narrow and dark and standing very straight, and where the others had the round face with its two dots and its line he had a face she left empty — not blank, she did not leave it blank, she put the circle and then could not bring the dots and the mouth to come, and so it stayed an O, an open thing, a window with nothing behind it but the white of the paper. She did not know why she gave him to the table. She had never sat at such a table. She had sat at small tables and at her mother's table, which was gone now into the room behind the door, and at her aunt's Sunday table with the goose, and none of them had been long, and none of them had had a thin one at the head. He came when the table came. She set the others and then there was a place still wanting at the head

and the place wanted him and she gave him, and the giving was the only part she did without counting.

He was not frightening. She wanted that to be understood, though there was no one to understand it. People thought the things that came without being asked were frightening, the way they thought her silence was a kind of suffering she was being brave about. But she had learned, in the influenza winter and in all the winters since, the true shape of how things were, which was this: that some things arrive without being summoned, and once they have arrived you cannot send them away, and that this is not a horror but simply the rule, the way the rule of the tram is that it comes when it comes and not when you stand wanting it on the cold stones. Her mother had arrived in her, before, alive, a warmth and a voice and a particular way of touching the back of Agnes's neck when she passed behind her chair. Then her mother had left the world and had *not* left Agnes, had stayed, the way a smell stays in wool, the way the warmth of a hand stays a moment on the back of a neck after the hand has gone. You could not summon that and you could not send it away. It was not the dead come back. It was only that some accounts do not close. The thin one at the head of the table belonged to that rule. He was the part of the table that did not close.

Her father turned a page. The dry small sound of it. He had stopped reading, she realised; he had

stopped a sentence or two ago and she had gone on hearing the voice that was no longer speaking, the way you go on seeing the bright window-shape on the dark after you have looked away. She glanced up under her hair without lifting her head.

He was watching her hands.

She knew the smell of him without being near him — coal and tobacco, the coal that was the whole city in March and the particular dark tobacco of the cigarettes he smoked too many of, the blue-grey ones in the soft yellow box, *Zorka*, a word she could read though she could not say it. The smell came to her across the warm air with the goose fat and the dust, and it was the safest smell there was, and she loved him with a love that had nowhere to go. That was the truest thing and the one she could tell no one. The love was whole inside her, large, with no door cut in it. It could not get out as a word — *Papa* — the word was there, she could see it, she could see exactly the shape her mouth would make, and the door to it was bricked and she did not knock at the bricks any more. It could not get out as a sound. It got out, a very little, through the pencil. When she drew the host's place at the table a little fuller than the rest she was, in a way she had no name for, drawing him; and he did not know it, sitting there in his chair with his bad leg out straight, watching her hands move and not knowing that one of the small bells at the table was him, the asker, the one who set the Sundays and came up

the stairs in the wrong weather for his leg and read about a boy and a dog and put on his hat and went away.

He had something in him this Sunday she had not seen before, or not in this shape. She watched seams; it was the only thing she did better than anyone. There was a seam in him today. He had read with a small part of himself held back behind a door of its own, and now and then while he read his eyes had gone to the window and the grey afternoon over the rooftops toward the river he could not see from here, and there had been, in the held-back part, something with water in it. She did not know what. He carried things home from his work that he set down at the door the way he set down his hat, and never spoke of, and she was glad of it, because the things he carried had iron in them and she had enough to hold. But a little of it always came in anyway, under the door, the way the cold did. There had been a man, lately. A man and water. She knew it the way she knew his leg ached — not by being told, by watching what he did not do. He had not spoken of it. He had read about the dog with extra steadiness, the way you carry a full cup.

She looked back at her page and added the wine to the head of the table — a small upright oval at the thin one's place, a glass, because the thin one always had a glass and never a plate she filled, and she could not have said why that was either. The pencil knew. She let it know.

He shifted in the chair. She felt him gather himself to ask. She had felt it before, many Sundays; it came off him like the warmth off the radiator, the wanting to ask, *who are they, Agnes, who is the tall one at the end* — and every time the question came up to the very edge of him and stood there, on the threshold, in the cold draught of her silence, and looked in, and did not come through. He was a man who asked questions for his living, she understood that without the words for it; asking was the iron in him. And with her he had laid the iron down. He would not ask her a thing she could not answer, because the not-answering would lie between them after he had gone, in the empty flat and the empty tram, and he loved her too much to leave that lying there. So he let the question come up and stand and go back down, and the not-asking was, like the reading, like the long looking at her finished pages, a thing they did together, a held breath the right width across.

He said only, in the end, in his low road of a voice, “That is a good long table.”

And she heard, under it, all the questions he had folded up and put away, and she was grateful, and the gratitude also had no door.

If she could have, she would have told him. Not in apples and houses; in the true thing. She would have told him that the thin one at the head of the table is not to be afraid of. That he does not come to take anyone. That he carries nothing and asks nothing and sets no Sundays. He only counts.

He sits at the short end where the host can see him and he counts the table the way she counted it with the small even pressure of the pencil, down one side and down the other, and what he counts is not lost by being counted; it is only, at last, accounted for. Everyone is counted in the end. Mama was counted, and is held now in the wool and on the back of the neck and behind the door that has the chairs in it. And the man with the water, the man her father carried home and set down with his hat and did not speak of — he was counted too, somewhere, at some table, by the thin upright one with the empty O of a face; she did not know him, she would never know him, and that was all right, that was the rule. Some things arrive without being summoned. You do not send them away. You give them their place at the head of the table and you fill the host's place a little fuller and you go on.

She drew the thin figure once more, on a fresh corner, alone this time, with no table under him — just the upright stroke and the empty face and the small oval of the glass beside his hand — and she did not know why, and the not-knowing sat in her lightly, a sparrow on a wire, weighing nothing, troubling nothing. It was only the grown men, she thought, watching her father out of the side of her eye as he reached at last to rub the leg he would not rub while reading, who could not bear a thing that would not close. She closed nothing. She left the face an O. The afternoon light went off the parquet by degrees, and the radiator ticked, and

below the window the tram came up the slope and rang once at the curve and was held a moment in the glass and let down.

16. The Night Log

THE DEPOT OF THE MUNICIPAL TRAMWAYS at the river end of the line smelled of axle grease and hot copper and the cold ammonia tang of the troughs where the night cars were washed down, and Hron, who had come on foot from Bartholomew Street while the bells of Týn were still settling, stood in the doorway of the records office and let his eyes adjust to the lamp-lit gloom while a man in shirtsleeves and a leather apron came down a gantry with the unhurried economy of someone who had nowhere to be that was not already here. Outside it had begun, lightly, to sleet. The cobbles of the yard shone like the backs of fish. Two cars of the 17 stood in their pits with their pantographs down and their windows blind, and a third was being walked out of the shed by a driver who rang his bell once, out of habit, at nothing at all, and the sound went up into the iron rafters and died.

“Chief Inspector Hron,” Hron said to the man in the apron. “The central criminal police. I telephoned the dispatcher yesterday about the night sheets.”

“You did.” The man wiped his hands on a rag that did no good. “Ledvina. I keep the books.” He said it the way a sexton might say he kept the

graves — not boastfully, but as a man who knew where everyone was. “It’s the night of the seven-and-eight you want. The twenty-sixth into the twenty-seventh?”

“The night of the twenty-eighth,” Hron said. “Into the first.”

Ledvina nodded as though the correction were a small kindness he was grateful for and led him back among the shelves, where the conductors’ waybills were filed in long flat drawers like the plates of a printer’s shop, each car’s takings folded into its own sleeve, each sleeve carrying the conductor’s badge number in the corner. He found the drawer. He found the night. He laid the sheets on a sloped reading desk under the single green-shaded lamp and stood back, and Hron took out his spectacles and his notebook and began.

He worked the way he always worked, which was slowly and twice. The first reading was only to see the shape of the thing. Line 17, the river run, the late cars: the eleven-forty out of Národní, the half-past-twelve, the one o’clock, the half-past-one, the two, and then the long gap to the first car of the morning. Procházka’s badge — 1144 — on the sheets from midnight to the depot run. Procházka had told him, four days ago, of two passengers that had stayed with him: the quiet old-clothed man at the embankment near midnight who paid in the coin that was now a curiosity in a tobacco tin, and a younger man, later, who got on at the same stop in a hurry, the collar of a good overcoat turned up. Testimony was one

thing. Hron did not convict on what a tired man remembered. The sheet was another. The sheet did not remember; it recorded.

He took the second reading with his pencil.

A conductor's waybill is a homely document. It is not a passenger manifest — the tram does not ask your name — but it is a clock with takings, and a good conductor's clock is honest because the company's auditors are not. Procházka had ruled his sheet in his own small columns: the time at each terminus, the running tally of fares, the tickets sold by class. And in the margin, where the company's form left a blank box for remarks, Procházka, who was the kind of man who wrote things down, had written things down.

At 23:51, against the embankment stop below the Smetana museum, in the cramped pencil of a man writing on a swaying platform: *foreign guest — silver piece, no good?* And a second, smaller hand, or the same hand grown careful: *handed in to the till*. Hron's thumb rested on the words a moment. He did not let himself read them as anything but what they were, which was a conductor's note that a passenger had paid with a coin he could not make change against and that he had, honestly, surrendered it rather than pocket the difference. The thaler. He wrote in his own book, *midnight passenger — embankment 23:51 — fare anomaly, silver — logged unidentified*, and he underlined *unidentified* once, flatly, and went on. He had learned long ago that the only defence against a thing you could not explain was to write down exactly its size and not

a hair more. The thaler was a fact the size of a thaler. He filed it as such.

Then he came to the run he had walked here in the sleet to find.

01:55. The half-past-one car, running late by its own log, leaving the embankment terminus outbound toward Újezd and the bridge. Against it, in the takings column, a single second-class fare; and in the margin, Procházka's pencil: *young man, in a hurry, collar up*. The fare was a paper ticket, one of the strip the company printed in books of fifty, and the strip's serial ran consecutively, and the company audited the run of serials against the punch the conductor's machine bit into each, and so the ticket Procházka had sold at 01:55 had a number, and the number was on the sheet, and the number — Hron checked it against the slip of paper folded in the back of his own notebook, the one Bouda had carried back from the cleaner's in Vinohrady two days before, the punched line-17 ticket found in the lining of Victor Reszke's grey overcoat — the number was the same.

He held the two together under the lamp, the photographed sheet and the actual paper ticket in its envelope, the way a man holds a key and a lock he has long suspected of each other, and he felt nothing at all, which was how he knew it mattered. The ticket in the dead man's son's coat had been bought from car 1144 of the line 17 at fifty-five minutes after one in the morning of the first of March, at the stop below the windows of the

flat where, within the hour, Simon Reszke would be held under his own bathwater until he stopped.

“You’ve found your man,” Ledvina said. He had not looked at the sheet. He was watching Hron’s face, which was a thing Hron disliked having watched.

“I’ve found a ticket,” Hron said.

He stayed another half hour, because finding the thing you came for is the most dangerous moment of any morning and he distrusted it. He had Ledvina pull the punch-audit ledger and confirm the serial against the company’s own count, so that no defence lawyer could later say the conductor had written a number in afterward to please the police. He had him confirm the badge, 1144, against the duty roster, so that it was Procházka’s car and no one else’s. And he had him read out, twice, the times at the embankment terminus across the whole of that night, while Hron set them down in a clean column, because a single fact is not a case and a case is a sequence, and the sequence was what he did not yet have whole.

He thanked the man, who shrugged as though thanks were a coin he had no change for either, and went out into the sleet, and rode the empty 17 back along the river himself, second class, paying his hellers to a conductor who did not know him, watching the green water go grey under the falling weather, and thinking, in the way that was nearest him to prayer, about times.

At the central office the radiators were knocking and the room smelled of wet wool and cheap tobacco, and Bouda had got the board for him — the wide cork board on its easel that the younger men used for photographs and that Hron used for hours. Hron took off his coat, which steamed, and hung it on the stand, and stood before the empty cork with a box of pins and his notebook, and began to build the night.

He built it in pencil first, on a long strip of paper, and only pinned it up when it held.

Dinner 8 — 11:30. The guests by their own accounts and the Leica's witness: fourteen at the table, the wine going round, the strange head-of-table figure they all spoke of and the camera had not caught — he set that aside, deliberately, in a space at the right margin of the board with a single pin and no line to anything, the way you quarantine a thing you cannot let into the reasoning without poisoning it. *Guests out, main stair, by 11:40.* Kühn's testimony, the one she could swear to honestly: down the front stairs, past her lodge, into Pařížská and the cabs. The main stair watched. The main stair clean.

The dead hour. He wrote it and left a space below it, because the space was the case. Midnight to two. The hours in which a deaf woman's honest ear heard nothing on a stair she could not have heard anyway, and a service door she did not face opened and closed on its own oiled hinges into the alley at the back.

Then the son.

Victor — *service stair* — *circa 01:00*. He pinned the key beside it: the photograph Bouda had taken of the gap in the dead man's key-board, the faded label *young master*, the duplicate to the service door that had never been changed because a father, even a father who had cut a son out of his table, does not change a lock against his own blood until the very week he means to and then dies first. *Veronal in the bedtime tea* — *circa midnight, drunk, things washed*. The Vinohrady prescription filled twice in one February. *Drowning* — *circa 02:00* — and here he pinned Stross's note, the bruise under the jaw, the burst vessels of a forced submersion and not a fall, the police surgeon's flat sentence that the man had been *held*. *Out* — *service stair* — *circa 02:05*.

He stepped back and looked at it and saw at once that it did not work, and was glad, because a reconstruction that works the first time is a story and not a sequence.

The tram was wrong.

If Victor came up the back stair at one and went down at five past two, then the ticket Procházka sold him at 01:55 — *outbound, collar up, in a hurry* — could not be the tram he left on. A man inside the flat at 01:55 cannot be buying a fare on the embankment at 01:55. Hron stood with a pin between his teeth and felt the small clean pleasure of an error caught, which was the only pleasure his work reliably gave him, and he took the strip down and did it again.

There were two ways the ticket and the body could both be true, and only one of them survived an hour's thought.

The first: that the 01:55 man was not Victor at all, but the midnight man come round again — the quiet old-clothed passenger, riding the river line in the dead dark for reasons no one could give. Hron made himself sit with this one, because it was the comfortable one, the one Pelc would seize, the one that would let the strange figure at the head of the table and the strange figure on the night tram and the bolt thrown from inside all fold together into a single uncanny knot a magistrate could rule and shelve. He sat with it. And it would not stand. Procházka's own pencil divided them: the midnight passenger paid in silver, no ticket, *fare anomaly, logged unidentified* — there was no strip serial against him because no strip had been torn; the company's audit showed a gap in the takings there, a coin in the tin, not a ticket on the run. The 01:55 passenger paid in paper, serial number such-and-such, punched, audited, found in the lining of Victor Reszke's coat. The depot books knew nothing of either man's face, but they knew, with the indifferent certainty of double-entry, that one had not paid the fare and one had, and a man does not pay twice in two manners on one night, and a coin is not a ticket. Two passengers. The records would not let them be one.

Hron wrote it on the strip in plain pencil so he would not be tempted later to forget he had reasoned it: *Midnight man (silver, no ticket) ≠ 01:55 man*

(*ticket, serial, Victor's coat*). *Two passengers. Not to be conflated.* He pinned the silver man back in his quarantine at the right margin, alone, with his single pin and no line.

The second way, then, was the true one, and it was a matter of arrows and not of coincidence.

Victor had not left on the 01:55. He had arrived near it.

Hron rebuilt the strip a third time, and this time it held, and as it held he felt the case settle into him the way the river settles into its bed after a barge has passed: *Victor — embankment, line 17, 01:55, outbound* — but outbound was the company's word for the direction of the run, not the man's errand; the car that ran outbound toward Újezd passed the dead man's door and the service alley fifty paces on, and a man in a hurry with his collar up does not ride to the end of the line, he rides one stop and drops at the back of the building he means to enter unseen. The ticket placed Victor on the embankment at five to two — not one o'clock as Hron had first too-neatly guessed, but later, the dead hour narrower and crueller for it. *Arrives 01:55. Up the service stair by two. Down the bath, the bruise, the held man, near two. Out the service stair circa 02:05.*

It was tighter than his first draft and therefore truer, and it had cost him the thing his first draft had given for free, which was comfort. The window in which Victor Reszke drowned his father was no longer a loose hour. It was the quarter past two o'clock, fixed at its near end by a punched pa-

per ticket and at its far end by a police surgeon's estimate of when a heart stops under water, and a quarter-hour, Hron knew, is a long time to hold an old sedated man under, and a short time to explain away.

He pinned up the new strip and stood looking at it, and the radiators knocked, and somewhere down the corridor a typewriter ran and stopped and ran.

"You've been at that since you came in," Bouda said. He had brought two glasses of tea with the spoon already in. "Is it him?"

"It's him on the embankment." Hron took the tea and did not drink it. "At five to two. With his collar up, paying for a ticket he then put in his pocket like an honest commuter and forgot, the way a man forgets the one thing that hangs him." He tapped the punched ticket in its envelope where it hung on its pin. "Procházka's two passengers were never one. I made them one for half an hour this morning and the books took it back off me. Write that in the file, Karel — that I tried the easy joining and the records refused it. A clever defence will try it too, and I want it answered before he does."

Bouda wrote it. He was good that way; he did not need to understand a precaution to record it.

The door went without knocking, which meant Pelc, and it was. He came in on the warmth of the radiators with his hat still on, the way he kept his hat on indoors to suggest he was only passing, and read the board over Hron's shoulder with the

ease of a man who has decided what a thing means before he looks at it.

“You’ve got the son on a tram,” Pelc said. “Good. Very good, Tobias. Now put your son on a tram and let the old man take himself off.” He nodded at the right margin, at the single quarantined pin, at the silver man and the empty space above the dinner where Hron had penned the head-of-table figure none of them could place. “The magistrate’s been reading the guests’ statements. A frightened rich Jew who’d bought himself some cursed Rudolfine trinket, who asks his rabbi can a man un-invite what he’s invited, who bolts his own door from the inside and goes under his own water in the dark — it writes itself, that. Suicide. The suicide of a frightened man. It explains your bolt for you, which” — he smiled without unkindness, which was worse — “your tram does not.”

“My tram doesn’t have to explain the bolt,” Hron said. “Stross does.” He moved one finger to the police surgeon’s note on the board, to the flat sentence about the bruise under the jaw and the held breath. “A man who takes his own life in a bath does not first bruise himself under the chin and burst the vessels of forced submersion. He doesn’t hold his own face down a quarter of an hour. The water didn’t take Reszke, Augustin. A pair of hands did. You can rule it suicide over my report if the magistrate wants the file thin, but you’ll be ruling it over the surgeon’s hand, and his hand is the one that holds at the inquest.”

Pelc looked at the note a moment. He was not a stupid man, which was the trouble with him. “And the bolt,” he said. “Thrown from the inside. Your hands-on-a-throat man — how did he leave a door bolted behind him, if not by being the dead man himself?” He let that sit, and he was right that it sat, because it did. “Until you can tell the magistrate that, Tobias, you have a son on a tram and a corpse behind a bolt no living man could have thrown, and the tidiest line between those two is the one I’ve just drawn you. Think about it.” And he went out, leaving the door open, which Bouda got up and shut.

Hron drank the tea then, cold, because he had earned the small punishment of it.

He had Victor on the river at the dead hour. He had the means in a Vinohrady pharmacy, the motive at the back of the Louvre, the missing key on a board labelled in a dead man’s ink. He had the police surgeon’s two hands. What he did not have — what stood on the board as a clean white space below the word *bolt*, the one gap a man with a good lawyer could pour his whole life through — was how a man in the corridor draws a barrel bolt that every eye that has stood in that bathroom doorway swears was thrown from within. Place a man at the scene and you have suspicion. Show the door cannot have locked itself and you have a man. Hron had the first. He needed the second, and the second was not in any depot ledger.

He took up the pencil and wrote, low on the board where the white space was, in the flat block

hand he used for the thing he meant next to do, the words that were less a conclusion than an instruction to himself for the morning: *The bolt. How.* Then he stepped back to the whole of it once more, the dinner and the dead hour and the two staircases and the two arrows now correctly drawn, the human night of it laid out airtight along the river from eleven to two — and at the right margin, alone, the silver man with his coin out of a dead emperor's mint, riding a tram to nowhere on no ticket, present in the books only as an absence the auditors had noted in honest red, *fare anomaly, unidentified.*

Two men rode the 17 along the river that night, he wrote at the foot of the board, and underlined it twice. One I can hang. And one I cannot find.

He stood and looked at the second line for a long time, until the window went from grey to the blue of early dusk and the sleet turned to a thin rain against the glass, and Bouda, who had learned when to leave a thing alone, reached past him at last and turned out the lamp.

17. The False Solution

THE THAW HAD SET IN PROPER OVERNIGHT and the central criminal police on Bartholomew Street had the smell it always took on when the weather turned — wet stone, hot dust off the radiators, the sweetish reek of the coke they burned in the cellar boiler, and under all of it the cold-coffee, cold-tobacco, cold-ink smell of men who had been in a building too long. Hron came up the stairs at half past eight with the morning paper unread under his arm and the night log from Procházka's depot in his case, the two distinct passengers fixed at last, the embankment timeline closed as tight as 1934 would let him close it, and he meant to spend the day on the bolt and nothing but the bolt. He got as far as the second-floor landing. Bouda was waiting for him there, by the window that looked down into the dark well of the courtyard, and Bouda had the face of a young man who has been sent to deliver bad news and has decided to deliver it standing up.

“Pelc is in with the superintendent,” Bouda said. “Since eight. And the magistrate came across from the courts at quarter past — Lederer, not the young one. They’ve sent for the file.”

“Which file.”

“Ours. The Reszke.” Bouda lowered his voice though there was no one on the stair. “Pelc has been talking about the ring. And the dinner. The German guest.” He paused. “He’s calling it a suicide, Chief Inspector. A suicide.”

Hron stood on the landing a moment with the river light coming grey and level through the window. Below in the courtyard a constable was hosing the cobbles, the water running black to the drain, and the sound of it came up faint and continuous, the one ordinary thing. Then he went in.

The superintendent’s office was the largest in the building and the coldest, because the superintendent believed warmth made men slack, and it held this morning the three men Hron least wanted to find sitting down together. Superintendent Kreutz behind the desk, grey and square and tired, a man near the end of his service who wanted, above all things, files that closed. The examining magistrate Lederer in the good chair by the window, a thin precise man of sixty with rimless glasses and the dry papery manner of the examining magistracy, the men who in this country directed the formal investigation and whom the police, in the end, served. And Inspector Augustin Pelc, standing — Pelc always stood, near a seated superior, so that the superior had to look up at him — Pelc with his coat already on as though to say he was only passing through, only happened to be carrying the solution to a difficult case in his pocket and thought

he would leave it here on his way to something larger.

“Hron,” said Kreutz. “Sit. We were speaking of your antiquarian.”

“My antiquarian is a homicide,” Hron said, and sat, and put his hat on his knee. “Stross signed it a week ago. Forced submersion, manner homicide, in those words, so that no one could pretend he left a door open.” He looked at none of them in particular. “I have it here if the magistrate has not read it.”

“I have read it.” Lederer’s voice was mild, unhurried, the voice of a man who has read a great many protocols and learned that none of them were ever quite the last word. “I have read all of it, Chief Inspector. That is rather the difficulty. I have read a very great deal, and the more I read, the less I find I can put before a court that a defence counsel will not dismantle in an afternoon.” He took off the rimless glasses and held them to the window light and looked through them, not at Hron. “Inspector Pelc has put a question to us this morning that I confess I cannot answer, and I had hoped, before I let your file run on costing the office money it does not have, that you could answer it for me.”

“Ask it.”

It was Pelc who answered. Pelc had been waiting, Hron saw, the whole length of the exchange, the way a man waits at a card table with a card he is sure of, watching the others spend their small ones.

“How did he lock the door, Hron?” Pelc said it almost gently, which from Pelc was the most dangerous register. “You have a son with a debt. Good. A son with a key to the back stair. Better. A son with veronal in his pocket and a tram ticket in his coat. Very good — you have done good work, no one is saying otherwise, you and your sergeant have walked a great many cobbles. And at the end of all of it you have a man drowned behind a barrel bolt thrown true on the inside of a door, in a room with the frost unbroken on the window, and you cannot tell the magistrate how your son got out and left it bolted behind him. Eleven days. You cannot tell him.” He let it sit. “I can.”

“Then tell him,” Hron said.

“He bolted it himself.” Pelc spread his hands, the conjuror showing the empty palms. “Simon Reszke. An old man, sixty-eight, in failing health — Stross’s own words, *his health was not good* — who had spent his last month, by every account you yourself collected, frightened half out of his wits. He had bought some cursed Rudolfine bauble and convinced himself it had brought a *something* to his table. Fourteen he invited and fifteen sat down; you have it in your own statements, Hron, every one of your witnesses swears to a man at the head of the table who is in no photograph, who spoke a German out of a grave, who frightened a man that feared no living soul. Such a man — old, ill, drinking, terrified of a thing he believed had come for his accounts — runs himself a bath in the dead of night, bolts his door against

what he thinks is coming up the stairs, and goes under the water by his own hand. The bolt thrown from inside because he threw it. The locked room because he locked it. And your fifteenth guest” — Pelc’s mouth moved — “is not a riddle for the criminal police at all. He is the reason a sick old man drowned himself. He is the motive. You have chased a murderer round Prague for eleven days and the dead man did it to himself out of fright, and the only mystery is the one even your Rabbi says you’ll never solve, so why” — to Kreutz now, to Lederer, opening it to the room — “why are we paying for him to solve it?”

The radiator ticked. Out in the corridor a typewriter started somewhere and stopped. Lederer put his glasses back on and folded his thin hands on the file, and Kreutz looked at the window, and Hron understood, with the particular cold clarity that came to him sometimes in this work like the cold off Stross’s table, that the thing was already half decided before he came up the stairs. He understood, too — and this was the worse part, the part he would carry down again — why.

Because it was beautiful. He sat very still and let himself feel how beautiful it was. The story Pelc had built was the only one he had heard in eleven days that closed every door at once. It took the locked room — the one fact that had stood up in the dark of Stross’s hall and would not lie down — and dissolved it: the man bolted himself in, of course he did, only an old man’s last frightened act. It took the dead hour and the cold unwarmed

water that no living man runs for himself, and made even those gentle: a frightened man in the small hours runs cold water, sits in it, lets the river-cold of his own death come up to meet him. And it took the thing the Rabbi had warned him not to mistake — the fifteenth line in the unaging ink, the thaler in the conductor's tin, the thumbprint that matched no living hand — and did not leave it as a draught under a door. It put it to work. It made the unknowable the *cause* of the knowable, gave it a place in a file, a sentence the magistrate could write. *The deceased, in a state of nervous derangement following his acquisition of an object he believed to be of supernatural character, did by his own hand—* And the docket would close, and no man would hang, and the draught under the door would be, at last, after eleven days, *explained*.

He wanted it. He sat in the cold office and felt the want move in him like the plum brandy he drank and did not enjoy, going down warm and false. To file the lie and walk down into the thaw and never again put his shoulder to a bolted door. The Rabbi had said *you will not solve who sat at the head of his table*. Here was a way to never have to — a way to take the one thing he could not bear, that some things arrive without being summoned and cannot be sent away, the thing that lived in his sister's flat in Vinohrady and drew with the legs going the wrong way, and fold it into a clause of a coroner's report and be quit of it. He had only to say nothing.

“It accounts for everything,” Lederer said quietly, watching him. It was not malice. It was almost an offer. “You see that it accounts for everything, Chief Inspector. I do not say I love it. I say I can sign it, and a court will accept it, and the family will be spared a trial, and the office will be spared a prosecution it might well lose. You have built a fine case against the son. I have read every page of it. And it founders on a bolted door, and Inspector Pelc has shown me a door that bolts itself. What would you have me do?”

Hron was a long time answering. He looked, not at Lederer, but at the file on the desk between them — the buff cover, the string, the typed protocol he could not see but knew by heart, *manner: homicide, not self-inflicted, in those words*. Stross had written it that way on purpose, eleven days ago, drying his hands finger by finger, *take that as a gift, he will hate it*. Stross had known. Stross, who annexed not one inch of the corridor outside his own table, who told you only what the dead had told him and so through whom the dead did not lie — Stross had seen this morning coming down the stairs at him eleven days early and had nailed the one plank across the door that no story, however beautiful, could pull free.

“Two things forbid it,” Hron said. He said it flatly, the way Stross read chalk. “And they are not mine. They are the body’s, and the body does not care what is convenient.”

“Go on,” said Kreutz, because Kreutz, whatever else he was, was an old policeman, and an old po-

liceman cannot help wanting the true thing even while he votes for the easy one.

“The bruising.” Hron took the protocol from his case after all, and laid it on the desk, and did not open it. “Under the jaw, both sides, the size of thumbs. Across the shoulders, the heel of a hand and the weight of a body. Stross will stand in any court in this Republic and say what they are. They are the marks of a man held down. A man who drowns himself does not bruise his own jaw to keep his own chin up; he does not press his own shoulders under the water with his own weight from above. The dead cannot hold themselves down, magistrate. Stross looked for the year they could. It has not come.” He let that land, one flat stamp. “And the water. Drawn cold and never warmed, no soap, no oils, in a flat full of a rich man’s soaps. A frightened old man in the small hours runs himself a hot bath if he runs one at all, for the comfort of it, against the river-cold coming through the glass. He does not run himself a cold one. *Someone* ran that water — someone who did not care whether it was warm because the man it was for would not feel it. You can hang the whole of Pelc’s story on the dead man’s nerves” — he did not look at Pelc — “but you cannot hang those two thumbs and that cold water on them. A frightened man may bolt a door. A frightened man cannot bruise the underside of his own jaw with the pressure that put him under. The body is emphatic. I did not write it. I would not dare.”

The office was quiet. The hose had stopped in the courtyard; the constable had finished the cobbles and gone in. Lederer took the protocol Hron had laid down and opened it, slowly, to the page Hron knew, and read it again, the page he had already read, and his thin finger moved down the typed lines and stopped where Hron knew it would stop, at the sentence Stross had set there like a man setting a stone across a grave. *Not suicide*. In those words, so that no one could pretend he left the door.

“He wrote it in,” Lederer said, half to himself.

“He wrote it in eleven days ago,” Hron said, “for this morning. He is a better policeman than any of us and he has never carried a service pistol in his life.”

Pelc had not moved, but something had gone out of him, the card he had been so sure of turning over to find it was the lower of the two after all. He recovered quickly; he always did. “Then your son still cannot have got out of a bolted room,” he said. “You have torn down the only door that opened. You are back where you began, Hron, only now with no story at all instead of a bad one. At least mine closed the file.”

“Mine will close it true or not at all,” Hron said. “I would rather hand the magistrate an open file than a clean lie. An open file is honest about what it does not know. A clean lie pretends to know the one thing—” he stopped himself, because he had been about to say *the one thing no man can know*, and that was nearer his own wound than

he meant to come in this room. He let the sentence drop unfinished, the way he let grief drop, the tram he kept not boarding. "A clean lie," he said instead, "is a worse crime than the one we are paid to solve. It convicts a dead man of his own murder so that the living one can walk down the stairs. I will not sign it. I will not let Stross's name go under it. And if the magistrate signs it without me, he signs it over a protocol that says in plain words it cannot be true, and he will live with that, and so, in time, will the son who got away with it because we were too tired to find the door."

It was a longer speech than Hron made in a year, and it cost him, and he sat back from it slightly winded and faintly ashamed, the way a quiet man is ashamed of having raised his voice. The radiator ticked. Lederer closed the file.

"How long," the magistrate said.

"Three days." Hron had the number ready; he had had it ready coming up the stairs, the way he kept all his small certainties ready so they could not be taken from him. "Give me to Friday. I will show you how the door was bolted from the corridor — there is a way, there is always a way, a man's hand and not a ghost's." He was not as close as he said; he had a scratch on a door-edge and a fibre and the shape of a thing in his mind, no more. He said it anyway, because three days was the only thing in the room worth fighting for. "And I will break the son's alibi for the dead hour, which Pelc's suicide would have let stand forever.

Three days, magistrate. If I have nothing on Friday, sign what you like. But you will not put your name to a lie while I have a true thing still coming.”

Lederer looked at him a long moment through the rimless glasses, the dry papery face giving nothing, and then he looked at the protocol still in his hand, *not suicide*, and then at Kreutz, who said nothing, which from Kreutz was assent.

“Friday,” Lederer said. “End of the day. I have a great many files, Chief Inspector, and only the office’s money to run them on, and I do not love this one — it has too much in it that I cannot put before a court, and some of it” — the faintest hesitation, the only sign that even a magistrate of the Czechoslovak Republic had read fourteen statements about a man in no photograph and felt, for half a second, the draught — “some of it I would as soon never put before a court at all. But you are right about the thumbs. A frightened man cannot bruise his own jaw. Bring me the door, and bring me the hour, by Friday.” He gathered the file and stood, and the audience was over the way Schück’s had been over, gently, by a man rising. “Do not bring me the fifteenth guest. Whatever he is, he is not for a court of this Republic, and I will not have him in my file.”

“No,” Hron said. “He is not for any court. I had not meant to bring him.”

He went down the stairs with Lederer ahead of him and Kreutz behind, and on the second-floor landing, by the window where Bouda had stood that morning, Pelc fell into step beside him. The magistrate went on down toward the courts and the superintendent turned off toward his own office, and for a moment it was only the two of them on the landing in the level river light, the inspector and the chief inspector, the rival of fifteen years, and Hron braced for the small cruelty Pelc liked to leave a man with, the corridor needle, the thing said for the pleasure of the sound of it.

It did not come. Pelc stood by the window with his coat still on and looked down into the courtyard where the cobbles were drying in dark patches, and when he spoke it was not in the gentle dangerous register and not in the corridor register, but in some third voice Hron had not heard from him before and would not hear again.

“You want it to be murder because the other thing frightens you, Hron.” Pelc said it quietly, not looking at him, watching the water dry. “That is all it is, underneath. You will dress it in your thumbs and your cold water and your *I will not sign a lie* — and you are right about the thumbs, I grant you the thumbs, you have always been the better technician — but underneath it is only that. A man who jumps because a ghost counted him — that you can’t bear. You sit up there with your statements about a man who isn’t in any photograph and it gets into you, and you can’t have it, so you’d rather it were a son with a key. A son

with a key you can arrest. A son with a key you can put in a cell and a court and a clean ending. The other thing you can't put anywhere, so it can't be true. That's your whole creed, Chief Inspector. Everything can be made ordinary." He turned from the window at last and looked at Hron, and there was no malice in the look, which was the strangest thing of all. "Most things can. Maybe. I hope so, for your sake. You've more reason than most to need it."

And he went down the stairs, unhurried, his footfalls even on the stone, a man who had lost the morning's argument and said, on his way out of it, the only wholly honest thing he would say in the length of the whole affair — and the worst of it, Hron thought, standing alone now on the landing with the dried cobbles below and the thaw running in the gutters and the smell of coke and wet stone coming up the well of the building, the worst of it was that Pelc was half right. He did need it. He needed the world to be a place where things could be made ordinary, needed it the way other men needed God, because the alternative was a flat in Vinohrady where a girl who had not spoken a full sentence in five years drew the legs going the wrong way, and a winter that had circled the city and come back, and a tram he kept not boarding. Pelc had put one finger on exactly that, on the wound under the work, and had been right.

And the rest of it — the part Pelc did not know, the part that made the whole accusation collapse even as it landed true — the rest of it was that the

son *did* have a key. Whatever fear sat under his refusal, Stross's thumbs did not lie and the cold water did not lie, and somewhere in this city a man named Victor Reszke had a duplicate to a service stair labelled *young master* in faded ink, and had filled a veronal prescription twice in a single February, and had ridden a tram along the embankment in the dead hour against an alibi that said he was asleep. Pelc was half right about why Hron wanted it. He was wholly wrong that wanting made it false. The fear was real and the murder was also real, and a lesser man, or a tireder one, would have let the first persuade him to drop the second.

He had three days. He put his hat on. He went down the stairs into the thaw to find the door.

18. The Refugee

THEY HAD BROUGHT HER IN BEFORE HRON reached the central criminal police, and that was Pelc's doing, and Pelc had wanted it known.

He met Hron in the corridor with the news held out like a warrant. "The foreign woman," Pelc said. "The one the greengrocer on Maiselova has been talking about since the first week. Lodges three doors from the side lane. German. Came over in the autumn with no proper papers and a name nobody can spell." He had his thumbs in his waistcoat, the way he stood when he believed the weather had turned his way at last. "She was seen on the embankment. By the cobbler's boy. The night."

"Which night," Hron said.

"What do you mean which night. *The* night."

"There were several. There usually are." Hron put his hat on the peg. He did not take off his coat. "Where is she."

"Number four. I had Slavík sit with her." Pelc's voice dropped to the confidential register he used when he meant to be overheard. "I tell you, Tobias, it has the right smell. A stranger, with reasons to be afraid of police, three doors from the lane the killer used — your own lane, your own back stair, the one you've made such a museum

of. She knows the building. These people, when they come over, they take work where they can, charring, minding — she'll have been in and out of those service doors. And she has the temperament. Slavík says she has not stopped shaking since he sat down."

"A woman shakes," Hron said, "when a policeman she did not send for sits down beside her and will not say why. The shaking tells you nothing except that she has learned what a uniform is for. Where she comes from they have been teaching that lesson hard." He kept his voice level, which with Pelc was the only discipline that served. "I'll see her. Alone."

"It's a joint—"

"Augustin." He said the name quietly. "You woke her, you walked her here through the streets of Josefov where every window knows her face now, and you have given the corridor a story it likes. If she turns out to be nothing — and she will, because the man we want has a key and a coat and a tram ticket and a name his father gave him — then what you have done this morning is point a frightened city at a frightened woman for the colour of her fear. I will not have that on the file under both our names. Let me see her alone."

Pelc's jaw worked. But the magistrate's tidy suicide had collapsed under Hron three days past, in front of witnesses, and Pelc had been seen standing too near it when it fell; he had no surplus to spend on Hron just now. He stepped back from

the door of number four with the air of a man conceding a small thing to take a larger one later.

“Your conscience,” Pelc said. “I’ve a memory for whose it was.”

“So have I,” said Hron, and went in.

She was not what the corridor had made of her. The corridor had made a fury, a foreignness, a woman who knew service doors; what sat in the chair by the cold radiator was a person of perhaps thirty in a good grey coat gone shiny at the cuffs, her gloves folded once and held in both hands in her lap as though they were the last warm thing she owned. On the table before her, squared to the edge with the instinct of someone who has learned that papers must always be ready and always be neat, lay her documents: a German passport with the eagle on it, a Czechoslovak residence permit, a paper from the refugee committee, a paper from a soup kitchen on Dušný with a stamp. She had laid them out herself. No one had asked her to. She had laid them out the way the deaf concierge had laid the blame on the table before anyone reached for it — readiness as a kind of flinch.

Hron sat down across from her and did not look at the papers.

“Miss Brandeis,” he said. “I am Hron. I am sorry you were brought here so early and told so little. That was badly done, and it was not done by me.” He said it in Czech, slowly, and then, be-

cause her eyes had gone to his mouth to read the shapes of words she was not sure of, he said the next in German, plainly, the hard square Prague German his mother's people spoke: "You are not a suspect here. I have only a few questions, and then you may go."

She did not believe the last part. He watched her not believe it. Wherever she had learned her fear, *then you may go* had been said to people who did not go.

"My Czech is not good," she said, in Czech, with the painful exactness of a person who has decided that the state's language is a debt she will pay even when it costs her. "I am learning. I learn it from the children at the committee, they laugh, it is good, the laughing." A small attempt at a smile that did not survive the room. "I have papers. Everything is in order. The residence is until June. I report to the precinct each month, the fourteenth, today is the fourteenth, I was to go this afternoon, I have not failed once—" The words were coming faster, the syntax going, the German pressing up underneath the Czech the way it had under Reszke's beautiful crabbed hand. "Please. If there is a thing wrong with the stamp I will fix it, I will go where you say—"

"There is nothing wrong with your stamp." He said it firmly, to stop the fall. "I have not looked at your stamp. I do not care about your stamp. Miss Brandeis, look at me." She looked. "I am not from the alien office. I do not send people anywhere. I am from the murder police. A man was killed in

this quarter. An old man, a dealer in books, on the embankment — the tall house at the corner of the lane near where you lodge. Simon Reszke. You will have heard the talk.”

Something changed in her face — not guilt; the opposite of guilt; a kind of grief arriving where terror had been. “The old gentleman from the books,” she said. “Yes. I heard. The committee — he gave to the committee. To us. For the people coming over. They said his name at the meeting, after, that he had — that there would be money, for the new ones, from a dead man none of us knew.” Her eyes filled and she did not let them spill; she had clearly learned that too. “I am sorry. He helped people like me and I never knew his face. And now you think—” She stopped. Understanding went through her like cold up a stair. “You think because I am near, and I am from there, and I am afraid of you.” She said it flatly, in German now, too tired to fight the Czech for it. “Because I am German and afraid.”

“Tell me where you were,” Hron said, “on the night of the twenty-eighth of February into the first of March. Not because I think you killed an old bookseller. Because if I write down where you were, then no one — not the man in the corridor, not the next man — can put you in a room with this again. Your fear is a true thing and a useless one to me. Your evening I can use. Give me your evening.”

She understood that. He saw her understand it — that he was offering her the one shelter a police

file could give a person like her, which was to be written down somewhere harmless and dull. She drew a breath and gave him her evening, and it was, as the true ones always were, full of small specific weather.

The twenty-eighth had been a Wednesday. On Wednesdays she helped at the soup kitchen on Dušní, in the cellar under the committee rooms, from five until they had washed the last pot, which on a cold night with a queue out to the corner was past nine. There was a Mrs. Klausner who ran it and would tell him; there was a boy, Pavel, who carried the bread; forty, fifty people fed, some of whom came every Wednesday and would know her. After nine she had not gone home, because Wednesday was also the night the committee sat — the small committee, six of them, that placed the new arrivals and argued over the money — and they had sat that night in the room above the kitchen until very late because a family had come over from Dresden that week, a man and his wife and three children and the wife's mother, and there had been nowhere to put them, and the committee had stayed past midnight finding a room and a cot for the grandmother. She named the six. She named the Dresden family. She had walked home, she said, near one in the morning, with Mrs. Perlmutter, who lodged in the same house and was sixty and would not walk alone, and they had parted on the stair, and she had gone up to her room under the roof and slept badly be-

cause she had got cold and could not get warm again.

“And after one,” Hron said. “When you were in your room. Did you go out again.”

“Go out?” The idea seemed to bewilder her. “Where would I go out? It was March, it was the middle of the night, I am a woman alone in a city that is not mine. I do not go out. I lie awake and I listen to the house and I wait for the morning. That is what I do at night here. I have done it every night since October.” She said it without self-pity, as a description of a climate. “I listen to the house.”

Hron set his pencil down.

There it was. He had not gone looking for it; he had stopped, three days ago, going looking for it, because the case was made and what remained was the locked room and the breaking of one alibi, and a man who went looking too hard found what he wished. But he had learned, over thirty years, to keep one ear open at the deaf side of his own attention, and the phrase had come in through it. *I listen to the house*. A woman who lay awake every night and listened to a building because the night was the only enemy she could still hear coming.

“Miss Brandeis,” he said, and he was careful now, very careful, to lean on nothing, to put no shape in front of her for her gratitude to fill. “What does the house say. At night. You have lain awake in it since October. You know its sounds.”

She did not understand why he wanted this, and that was exactly what he wanted, her not un-

derstanding. She turned her head a little, the way a person does to listen to a room that is not there.

“It breathes,” she said. “Old houses breathe. The water in the pipes when someone above runs a bath. The Perlmutter’s clock. A cat that lives in the lane and cries when it is in love.” A small dry flicker, the first thing in her that was not fear. “The trams stop near one. After that it is the house and the river and the cat. And the back door.”

Hron kept his hands still on the table.

“There is a back door to my house,” she said, “to the yard, and the yard goes through to the lane — the side lane, the one your old gentleman’s house also gives onto, I think, the houses share the lane at the back. The doors onto the lane have a way of banging. The wind takes them, or someone is careless, or the latch is old. In the day you do not hear it. At night, when the trams have stopped, you hear everything, and a door onto the lane is a loud thing.” She frowned, gathering it. “That night — the night the trams had stopped and I was cold and could not sleep, the committee night — I heard it bang. The lane door. Late. After the Perlmutter’s clock had struck two; I remember, because I had counted the strokes, two, and thought, *only two, the night is so long*, and then a little after, the bang.” She looked at him, and a doubt crossed her, the doubt of a person who has spent six months learning that her impressions are not to be trusted by anyone, least of all the authorities. “But that is nothing. Doors bang. I do

not even know whose door. It might have been my own house's, the wind—”

“How many times,” Hron said. “The bang. Once? More?”

“Once.” She was certain of the once. “One bang, and then nothing. I waited for it to come again, the way one does, to know if it was the wind — the wind bangs a door many times, you know, it worries at it. This banged once. As if a hand had let it go.” She heard what she had said and looked frightened of it. “I do not accuse anyone. A door—”

“You accuse no one,” Hron said. “You have told me a door banged once, a little after two, on the lane your house shares with the dead man's house, on a night you were awake to hear it because you are always awake. That is all you have told me, and it is exactly true, and you will sign it, and it will do you no harm and another man a great deal.” He almost did not say the last part; he said it because he wanted her to carry something out of this room besides the memory of having been afraid in it. “You have been a good witness, Miss Brandeis. Better than the people who belong here. They sleep at night. You listen.”

She did not know what to do with that, any more than the concierge had known. She had been braced, since Slavík sat down beside her in the dark, to be the thing the corridor wanted, and instead she had been useful, and useful was a country she had not been allowed into for a long time.

He cleared her in the corridor, in front of Pelc, in front of Slavík, in a voice pitched for the file and the witnesses both.

“Miss Brandeis was at the soup kitchen on Dušný until past nine on the twenty-eighth, then at the committee until past midnight, then walked home with Mrs. Perlmutter and did not leave her lodging again. Six committee members and the kitchen warden will confirm it; a Dresden family she helped house that night will remember the date for the rest of their lives. She was three streets from the embankment and on the wrong side of midnight by an hour and more. She is cleared. It goes on the file today, signed, and she is not to be questioned again touching this matter.” He turned to Pelc, evenly. “And I will be obliged, Augustin, if the corridor that took up her name this morning is given her clearance with the same goodwill. She should leave here as a witness who helped us, not as a woman we let go.”

Pelc said nothing that could be written down. His face said a good deal. *You will pay for the goodwill, it said, one quiet vote at a time, in this corridor, for years.* Hron knew the currency and knew he had spent some and did not regret it. Decency was not free; he had stopped expecting it to be, somewhere around the influenza winter. It was only that some of the things one bought with it were worth the price, and a frightened woman walking out of a police building uncondemned was one of them.

He walked her down himself, to the street door, against the regulations and against Pelc's stare, because a woman brought in at dawn by a uniform should go out at noon beside a man who would be seen to be looking after her. At the door she stopped and turned her papers over once in her gloved hands, the readiness-flinch again, and then put them away in the inner pocket of the good grey coat, and looked up at him.

"I am sorry," she said, "to be foreign. In a year when everyone is frightened. I make it worse, only by being here. I see it in the faces. I bring the thing they are afraid of, into the street, on my own back. I am sorry for it."

Hron stood with her in the cold breath of the open door, the smell of the river and the coal smoke and the wet stone of Bartholomew Street coming in past them both. Across the street a tram went up toward the Old Town, its bell ringing twice at the curve, and the ordinary city went by, indifferent and enormous, in galoshes and good coats and the coats that were not good any more.

"You have nothing to be sorry for," he said.

He meant it. He was a man who weighed his words the way he weighed everything, who kept his certainties small so that they could not be taken from him, and he found that this one was whole and would bear his full weight, and he set it down between them entire: she had nothing to be sorry for. The fault, if there was a fault, was in the

faces she saw it in, and in the corridor behind him, and in the year. Not in her.

She did not believe him, quite. But she took it, the way a person takes a coat held out in cold weather even from a stranger, and she went out and down the steps and turned toward Josefov, a woman in a grey coat going to make her report on the fourteenth as she had made it on the fourteenth of every month, careful, exact, paying her debt to a state that watched her sidelong; and Hron stood in the doorway and watched her go until the crowd took her.

The red herring was dead. He felt it die without satisfaction. A door had banged once on the lane a little after two, heard by the one person in the quarter awake enough to hear it, and that single bang lay now where the oiled bolt and the deaf ear and the service stair lay, in the drawer of true and quiet things, and it fit them, and the fit was a cold one — a man going out the back into the lane and letting the door fall behind him with the carelessness of someone who has just done the worst thing he will ever do and wants only to be in the dark and gone.

And it was a native son. That was the thing Hron carried out into the noon with him, down the steps where the refugee had gone, turning the other way, toward the river. The man who had let the lane door bang at two o'clock was not the foreigner the corridor wanted; he was a Prague man with a key his father had given him, a coat the cleaner knew, a tram ticket in the pocket of it, a

name in a guest-ledger he had been struck out of. He belonged here utterly. He had nothing to be afraid of in any face. And he had drowned an old man in a bath and gone home to bed in the city that was his by every right of birth and blood, while three streets away a woman who had killed no one lay awake all night listening to a house that was not hers, in a country that suffered her on a monthly stamp, afraid.

Hron came out onto the embankment. The Vltava ran below the rail, the particular green of it under the grey, a barge working upstream against the current the way they always were. He did not board the tram that came. He was thinking, against his training, of the woman's good grey coat gone shiny at the cuffs, and of the Dresden family come over with their bags and nowhere; and of the faint thing in the corridor this morning, the eagerness, the smell Pelc had liked, the readiness of a whole building of decent men to point at the stranger first.

For the length of the case he had been afraid of one thing only, and it had not been of this world: a thin man in an old coat who came up a stair and did not come down, a thumbprint that fit no living hand, a name in a hand three centuries dead. He had carried that fear the way you carry a draught under a door — a cold you cannot find the source of and learn to step around. It had not frightened him as men are frightened. It had only made him quiet, because it asked nothing of him and

changed nothing and would be there whether he understood it or not.

Now the other fear arrived, the entirely worldly one, the one with a border in it and a year, and he knew at once it was worse — this readiness in the faces, this eagerness for the foreigner, this swastika that was still only a rumour from across a frontier and not yet a verdict. This would ask everything of him, and of the corridor, and of the city, and he did not think, standing at the rail in the green light, that they were going to answer it well.

He let the tram go without him. He stood a while longer at the rail above the river, a man of the seam between two tongues, and listened to the house of the city breathe, and was afraid, for the first time in the case, of something entirely of this world.

19. The Wire and the Line

IT CAME TO HIM ON THE SERVICE STAIR, which was where it had been waiting for him all along.

He had gone up the front that Wednesday afternoon, the fourteenth, out of an old habit of approaching a thing the way the thing presented itself — a man came to Reszke's dinner up the marble, under the lit window of the lodge, and so Hron came that way too, slowly, his hand on the cold mahogany. But the answer was not on the marble. The answer had never been a guest's answer. He stood a while in the dead flat, in the cold that was not the street's cold, and looked at the bathroom door with its four panels and its grille and its mean little bolt, and then he turned and went out by the kitchen and down the back, into the other country, where the iron rail wore its fur of rust and the steps were troughed black with fifty years of coal and the cold moved, and it was there — at the half-landing window, the small wired pane that gave grey light onto the worn stone — that the thing arranged itself in his hands.

He had stopped before the window to rest the knee. The window looked out into the side return, the blind passage between this house and the next

where the dustbins stood, and below the sill, beyond the wired glass, ran the rain-gutter — a half-pipe of old zinc bolted along the brick, sagging at its joins, choked here and there with the black mast of a winter's leaves and the grit the city laid on everything. Hron looked at it without seeing it, the way one looks at a wall while thinking, and then he saw it, and the not-seeing and the seeing happened so close together that he could not afterward have said which had been first.

Because he had been thinking, as he stood there, of the bolt.

He had taken the bolt apart in his head a hundred times since the third of March and put it back together wrong each time. A barrel bolt, thrown into its keeper, on the inside of a door. A dead man within. And on the knob of that bolt — on the face that pointed away from the bathroom, toward the corridor, toward nothing — a bright curved scratch a centimetre long, running not along the barrel but around the knob, as if something had been hooked over the knob and dragged. C-three, in Bouda's careful book. And on the middle slat of the grille, four hand-spans above, a fibre, pale and stiff and waxed, that he had not been able to name. C-four.

He had kept them apart in the book because two strange things in one small room wanted holding at arm's length until each had told him separately what it was. Now, on the cold stair, with the gutter sagging beyond the wired glass, they spoke together, and they did not lie.

A man stands in the corridor. The dead man is already dead — drowned hours since, in the deep of the night, by a hand that held an old drunk sedated head under the water until the holding was done; Stross had read that under the jaw and would swear to it. But the door stands open, the bath stands brimming, the body lies in it, and the room must be made to say what it cannot say: that no one came in, that the old man bolted himself away to die. So. The bolt is on the inside. The man is on the outside. Between them the grille, three brass slats angled downward, a gap a thin thing might pass.

Before the night — days before, with the flat empty in an afternoon, by a key to the back door that the building's rust had forgotten — the man ties to the knob of the bolt a loop of line. Not thread; line. A line drawn through wax, that it might slide stiff and clean and not catch nor swell. He runs the long end of it through the grille, out into the corridor, and draws the bolt back open so the door may be used, and lets the line hang there against the corridor face of the door, a pale slack thing no one looks for because no one knows to look.

Then the night does its work, and the old man is dead in the water, and the door must be shut from a side it cannot be shut from.

The man takes a wire. A stiff wire, of a florist's gauge, the kind that holds a stem upright in a vase or binds a wreath to its frame — Hron had bought such wire himself, once, for Clara's grave, by the

cemetery gate, a coil of it for a few heller, green-lacquered, and he made himself not think of that now, but his fingers knew the gauge of it the way they knew the weight of a cigarette. The man bends a small hook in the wire's end. He puts the wire through the grille — two fingers' worth, the slats taking it, angling it downward toward the knob below — and with the hook he catches the loop of waxed line where it hangs against the door, and he draws.

The line runs through the grille. The bolt slides in its keeper — stiffly, then freely, then stiffly again at the worn end, the small resistance Hron's own thumb had found — and shoots home into the brass keeper on the jamb, and the room is shut. Bolted. From the inside. By a man standing in the corridor with a wire in his hand and his father drowned behind a door he will never open again.

And then the last small cleverness, the one that made it a conjuring and not a clumsiness: the loop is only looped. It is not knotted to the knob, only hung over it. So the man, having drawn the bolt, lets go his end of the line and gives it the gentlest play, and the loop lifts off the knob and the whole length of waxed line comes free, drawn back out through the grille into his hand, leaving the bolt thrown and the knob bare and nothing — nothing — on the bathroom side but a small bright scratch where the loop had ridden the brass as it dragged.

C-three. The scratch the loop made coming off.

C-four. The fibre the line shed against the burr on the slat, going through.

Hron stood at the wired window a long moment with the cold moving past his ankles and did not feel triumph; what he felt was the cold clean settling that came when a thing loose in his hands for a fortnight dropped, all at once, into a fact. He had said to Bouda on Korunní, *the case is a door, I am going back to open it*. He had opened it. It had opened the way doors open for the patient — not with a flash, but with a click, low down, where the bolt seats.

He looked at the gutter.

A man who has just drawn a bolt through a grille with a wire and a waxed line is left, in the corridor, in the small hours, holding two things he must be rid of. The line he can flush — a loop of waxed line goes down a lavatory without complaint, and Hron would lay money none was ever found, was long since in the river that had taken everything else. But the wire. A man does not flush a stiff wire; it fouls the bend. A man going down the back stair in the dark, the work done, the dead man bolted away above him, his nerve stretched thin as the line itself — such a man wants the wire out of his hand, gone, and he wants it gone in the half-second he passes the one window on the stair that opens, beside which a gutter runs close enough to the brick that a thing dropped from a cold hand falls true.

Hron set his palm against the wired glass. The pane was sound, but the hopper light beside it —

for the stair's foul air — stood ajar on a rusted stay, and had stood ajar, by the look of the grime banked in its hinge, for years. A hand could not reach through the wired pane. But a thin thing, a wire, dropped through the hopper's gap, would fall into the side return — and the gutter ran not a metre below, choked and sagging, a half-pipe of zinc that had caught the leaves of every autumn since the war and let nothing out.

“Bouda,” he said, to the empty stair, and then went down to the street and across to the box on the corner of the embankment and telephoned the central criminal police and had them find the boy.

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Bouda came within the hour, hatless, at a near-run up the Smetana Embankment out of the river-cold, and Hron met him in the dustbin passage with a borrowed ladder from the concierge's coal-store and the particular face that made Bouda stop dead and say, “You have it.”

“We will see what the gutter has,” said Hron. “Hold the foot.”

He went up himself, against the knee, because it was his to find and a man finished what he started even when the climb cost him. The ladder swayed; Bouda held it; the brick was wet and stank faintly of the drain. Hron came level with the gutter and looked along the sagging zinc, and there was the black mast of the leaves, packed and rotted to a peat, and the grit, and a dead sparrow gone to a few grey bones, and he worked his fingers into the cold sodden mass below the stair

window with the patience of a man who has emptied worse, and three handsbreadths along, where the gutter held a standing inch of black water, his fingers closed on something that was not leaf and not stone.

He drew it up into the grey light.

A length of wire, bent. Florist's gauge, green-lacquered, the lacquer flaked where the water had got at it, perhaps twenty centimetres of it, and at one end — Hron turned it, and the rust-water ran down his wrist into his cuff and he did not feel it — at one end a small neat hook, bent in by a pair of pliers and not by chance, a hook the size to ride over a barrel-bolt's knob. And bound to the wire's middle, to give it weight, to make it drop true and lie still where it fell, a twist of lead — a strip of plumber's flashing, or a sinker off a fishing line, rolled tight round the wire and crimped, a few grams, enough.

The weighted wire. The hook. He had it in his hand, in the dustbin passage, in the cold.

"Karel," he said, and his voice was very level, which Bouda had learned was the voice that meant the most. "When you have photographed it where it lies — put it back, photograph it, then lift it — bring it to the central criminal police and set it beside the board. Beside C-three. I want the gauge of this wire measured against the scratch on the knob. I think you will find that a wire of this gauge, hooked, dragging a loop off that knob, leaves a score a centimetre long and a curve to it that nothing else in that flat will match." He came

down the ladder. "And there is waxed line. There was. There will be none — he flushed it, or the river has it. But the fibre on the slat is waxed line, C-four, and waxed line is what you tie a loop of to a knob when you want it to slide and not swell and not catch. Get me to a chandler's, or a fishing-tackle man on Na Poříčí, and let us see what such line sheds against a brass burr."

Bouda had taken the wire by its hook-end in his handkerchief and was holding it up to the light as if it were a relic, which in the small church of the case it was, and his face had gone through wonder into the pure delight of the young when a hard thing comes simple, and he laughed — a short laugh, glad of it.

"It's a *trick*," he said. "It's a parlour trick. He stood in the corridor — Chief Inspector, he stood in the corridor and shut the door from inside with a bit of wire a child could bend. And we stood and called it impossible. We stood in that bathroom and called it a locked room and looked at each other." He shook his head, still grinning. "There never was a locked room."

"There never was a locked room," Hron agreed. "There was a man, and a door, and a grille that someone two generations ago cut into the door so the steam could get out, and a bolt a garden gate would be ashamed of, and a fortnight of our looking at it as if it were a thing the priest should be told about." He took out the packet of Zorky and looked at it and put it away; one did not smoke beside a coal-store with the concierge's clean wash

on the line above. "The architecture made the man invisible — two staircases, the deaf ear, the watched front and the unwatched back. And then the door made the dead man's death an impossibility, so that even with the man placed under the windows by a ticket in his own coat, the magistrate would say, *but the door, the bolted door, you cannot put your son through that door*, and the door would walk him out." He looked at the wire in Bouda's handkerchief. "It will not walk him out now. Now there is a wire in the gutter under the only window on his stair that opens, dropped where a man going down in the dark would drop it, of a gauge that fits the scratch and a make that holds the line. The door is open. I have opened the door."

They took the ladder back, and Bouda went off up the embankment toward Bartholomew Street cradling the wire like an egg, his stride quick with the news he was not to tell Pelc, and Hron stood a while alone in the side return with the dustbins and the cats' cold parliament and the river going its colour past the mouth of the passage. He should have felt the clean whole satisfaction of a man who has, after fourteen days, opened a door that was meant never to be opened. He felt it. He let himself feel it for the length of a cigarette he did not light. The human case was closed at its one closed place. Key, veronal, debt, codicil, ticket, and now the bolt — the wire in the gutter married the man under the windows to the body behind

the door, and there was nothing left in it that a lawyer could prise. Victor Reszke had drowned his father and bolted the room from the corridor with a thing one could buy for a few heller, and the whole great impossibility came down, in the end, to a loop of line a florist's boy could have taught him.

But the wire was not the whole of the room.

He made himself say it, standing there, because a man who would not say the true thing to himself in a cold passage would not write it in a report, and a report that left things out killed the wrong men. The wire explained the door. It explained the scratch and the fibre and the bolt and the bath and the sworn stair and the descended-by-no-one. It explained everything in that flat that had a mechanism.

It did not explain the three dirtied plates that were fourteen guests' worth of fifteen. It did not explain the wine glass with the thumbprint that matched no living hand on file and no print in the house. It did not explain the silver thaler in the depot tin, struck under an emperor three hundred years out of currency, paid by a quiet man in old-fashioned dark who came up the embankment near midnight and got off where there was nothing. It did not explain the line in the ledger that Reszke did not write — *The One Who Counts* — in an ink aged exactly as old as his own that night, in a German older than any German Kühn had heard out of a living mouth.

The wire was the answer to the door. There was no wire for the rest of it. He had thought, in the worst week, that perhaps there was one answer and the strange things were only the door's outworks, the dressing the killer had hung on his crime to make it weirder than murder, to send the police chasing a ghost while the son went down the back stair. He had wanted that. It was the tidiest thing — that the fifteenth guest was Victor's stagecraft, the ledger line his forgery, the thaler a coin he had planted, the whole uncanny a screen. But Victor was a debtor and a parricide and not a magician, and Hron had walked, this fortnight, through every door the strange things offered, and each had a tempting handle and each, when he turned it, opened onto a wall — and under each wall, a draught.

The two cases had run side by side since the first morning. He had held them apart in the book by his own discipline, the way he had held the scratch from the fibre, and had let himself believe, because a man must work, that at the end the method would let them down gently into one. It would not. He saw that now, in the cold passage, with the wire gone up the hill to close the human thing for good. They would never close as one. The door was solved and the table was not, and the table would not be solved, not by him, not by the wire, not by anything he had been given to hold. One case ended in a courtroom. The other ended in a draught under a door that would not shut.

He went out of the passage onto the embankment. A tram came down — the seventeen, the embankment line, the one that ran past the dead man's windows and the one the quiet old-clothed passenger had ridden into the dark with a thaler in the conductor's till — and its bell sounded once at the curve and was gone, and Hron stood at the rail above the green water and did not board it.

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It was past five when he got back to the central criminal police, and the lamps were lit along Bartholomew Street, and in the long room the board stood with the wire laid beside it under a reading-glass and the gauge taken and the score on the knob matched, and Bouda would not leave it alone.

He had the recovered tools and a bolt — he had found somewhere an old barrel bolt the twin of Reszke's, screwed it to a board with a square of brass mesh above it for a grille, tied a loop of fishing line waxed with a candle-end round the knob, run it through the mesh, and now he stood at Hron's desk in the lamplight working the thing for the third time, drawing the loop with a hooked wire so the bolt shot home with a small brass click, then lifting the loop free and reeling the line back through the mesh, the bolt thrown, the knob bare.

"You see," he said, delighted, doing it again, the click, the lift, the line coming clean. "You see, Chief Inspector — there is always a string, if you look. There is always a string."

Hron looked at the loop of waxed line lying in his open palm where Bouda had dropped it, the small pale slide of it, smelling faintly of the candle. He thought of three dirtied plates that were fourteen guests' worth of fifteen, and of a coin three hundred years too old lying in a tin in a tram depot, and of a hand that lay back from the upright like a man leaning away from a question.

“Not always, Karel,” he said. “Not always.”

20. The Young Master

VICTOR RESZKE KEPT HIS ROOMS ON Korunni in a tall corner house of the new kind, the plaster the colour of weak tea, one of those that had gone up across the heights in the good years when men still believed the good years would go on. Hron came up to it on foot from Míru Square, the great brick church at his back, his knee speaking to him of the night's damp. There was a baker on the ground floor and a shop that had been a hatter's and was now boarded, and above them four storeys of windows, and the topmost row under the eaves where the rents fell off and the light was better — the floor where the city housed its dreamers and its failures, who are so often, Hron had found, the same men photographed at different hours.

The stair was clean and cold and smelt of floor-wax and other people's cabbage, and on the third half-landing a landlady's door stood ajar an inch — Mrs. Tobol, he supposed, who wrote the notes for the cleaner's. He did not knock at it. He went on up to the top, where a card in a brass frame said V. RESZKE, *arch.*, the *arch.* added in a smaller hand as a man adds a title to a name when the name alone has stopped being enough, and he knocked, two flat knocks, the policeman's knock

that he had spent thirty years learning to make sound like a neighbour's.

There was a silence of the particular length that means a man has heard and is deciding, and then a chair, and then the door.

He had seen Victor Reszke once before, across the cold room at Apolinářská the morning the body was claimed, signing the police surgeon's docket with a hand that had not been quite steady. Now he looked properly. The son was tall, with the father's long Josefov face gone soft at the jaw and softer at the eyes — handsome still, at eight-and-thirty, but handsome the way a good house is handsome after the heating has been turned off in it, the structure all there and the warmth gone out. He wore no collar. His cuffs were clean, very clean, the cuffs of a man who keeps up the one thing he can still keep up, and under the cleanness the wrists were thin. There was a smell behind him of cold coffee and India ink and paper-dust, and under it, faint, the sweetish chemical ghost of something Hron had learned the smell of in a Vinohrady chemist's a week before and did not name to himself now, because to name it would have been to show his hand to his own face.

"Mr. Reszke. Chief Inspector Hron, the central criminal police." He had his card out, face up, the open way, the way you offer it when you wish a man to relax. "I'm sorry to come to you again. There are some questions of routine — the family must always be troubled with them, I'm afraid, it's

the worst part of the work — and I'd be glad of half an hour, if you can spare it."

"Routine." Victor said the word as a man tastes a wine he suspects has turned. Then something in him decided, visibly, to be the gracious one, the bereaved son receiving the law correctly, and he stood back from the door. "Of course. Forgive the — come in, Chief Inspector. I wasn't expecting. I don't get many callers up here."

The studio was one long room under the slope of the roof. There was a great north window, the architect's window, the good true light falling grey and even across a drawing-board the size of a door, and the drawing-board was the centre of the room and the proof of its failure. Pinned to it was a half-finished elevation — a villa, generous, clean horizontals and a flat roof and a long band of glazing, the sort of house a confident young man draws for a client he is sure is coming. The paper had gone faintly brown at the edges. The pins had rusted. The client had not come, and the villa stood on its sheet of cartridge paper unbuilt and would not now be built, a house for no one, in the best light in the flat.

Around it the room told the rest. A daybed not made. A gas-ring with a single pot. On a shelf a row of the things a man of that family kept by instinct — a bronze, a small ikon, a piece of Bohemian glass — and the clean rectangles in the dust where two or three such things had stood until lately and now did not, sold or pawned, the shelf emptying itself the way the man was empty-

ing himself, a little at a time, from the inside out. Hron took it all in without seeming to.

“Yours?”

“A commission.” Victor moved a stack of journals off a chair and set it for him with both hands, an exaggerated care. “Was a commission. The gentleman found his money was needed elsewhere. They all find that, lately. A man wants a house in the spring and by the autumn he wants only to keep what he has.” He laughed, a short pleasant sound with nothing behind it, and went and stood by the cold gas-ring as though he might offer coffee and they both knew he would not. “Sit, please. You’ll think me a poor host. I haven’t — things have been — you understand. My father.”

“Your father,” Hron agreed, and sat, and took out his notebook and laid it open on his knee unwritten, the small dull weight of it, and waited a beat for the room to settle around the fact of the police being in it. “I’ll be plain with you. It would be wrong of me to pretend the manner of your father’s death is settled. It is not. While it is open, I am bound to account for everyone — everyone — who had any part in his life that week. It is no accusation. It is arithmetic. I am sorry it must include the son.”

“You’re very honest.”

“I find it saves time,” Hron said, “and time is most of what a case has to spend.”

Something eased in Victor at that — the honest detective, the bloodless arithmetic, the worst of it perhaps a tedious afternoon — and Hron watched

the ease arrive and was sorry for it and used it. A man who is afraid talks past you. A man who has decided you are harmless tells you the thing he has prepared, in the words he has chosen; and a prepared man's chosen words are the most useful thing a detective is ever given, because once said they are fixed, and a fixed thing can be measured against the world, and the world does not arrange itself to oblige a liar.

"Take me through the night, then," Hron said, gently, as a man asks the way to a street he already knows. "The night of the twenty-eighth. Not the dinner — I know you weren't at the dinner."

The smallest stillness. "No. I wasn't asked." Victor said it lightly, and the lightness cost him something, and he turned a journal on the shelf a quarter-turn to have somewhere to put his hand. "We were — my father and I were not on terms, Chief Inspector. I'll not pretend otherwise to you, you'll have heard it from everyone by now, the whole of Josefov dines out on it. He thought I'd wasted myself. I thought he'd — well. It's an old quarrel and he's dead and I'll not win it now." A breath. "No. I wasn't at the dinner. I learned he was dead the way the milkman learned it, near enough — a telephone call to the landlady the next forenoon, the police already there, the staircase full of strangers."

"So that night," Hron said. "Where were you, the night of the twenty-eighth, going into the first?"

And here it came, the prepared thing, and Hron kept his eyes down on the unwritten page and his pencil still, because a man watched too closely while he lies grows careful, and a man left a little alone with his own story warms to it and gives you more than he meant to.

“At the Café Louvre.” Victor said it easily, almost with relief, the relief of a man arriving at the part of the road he has walked in his head. “I play cards there — you’ll know that too, I expect; there’s no secret left in this city that a Chief Inspector hasn’t been handed twice. I’m not proud of it. It’s a vice and an expensive one and I’ve paid for it, God knows. But that night, that’s where I was. I went in about nine and I played till — late. Two. Near enough two; I remember because the room was thinning and the man who keeps the table was making the noises they make when they want you gone. I’d had a poor night of it, and at two or thereabouts I gave it up and came home. Walked, partly; took a tram the last of it. And I was in my bed by the half hour after two, and I slept like the dead until Tobol was hammering on the door at eleven with her face like a funeral, and that’s when I knew.” He spread his thin clean hands, palms up, an architect’s gesture, a man laying a plan flat on a board for inspection. “There it is. It’s a poor alibi for a son to give — cards, all night, till two. But it’s the true one, and I’d rather give you a shabby true thing than a respectable false one.”

Till two. Then home, in bed by half past, asleep till eleven. Hron let it lie in the room a moment, the way you let wet plaster stand before you touch it. He did not write it down in front of the man — he never did, the writing alarmed them — but he set it in the dry orderly place behind his eyes where the timetables lived, and laid it down beside the buff ticket sealed now in his drawer at Bartholomew Street: line seventeen, the embankment, the punch in the third quarter of the hour, fifty-two minutes past one. A man at the Café Louvre at cards until two cannot be on the seventeen under his dead father's windows at ten to. The two facts could not both stand. One of them was a tram ticket in a tobacco tin, brushed out of the breast of his own good coat by a cleaner's wife who could not read tickets and had no reason to lie. The other was a thing Victor Reszke had just made with his mouth, in the best light in his flat, of his own free choice — and Hron had only to keep it whole and carry it out of the door intact, so that later, in a colder room with a croupier's word laid against it, it would break of its own weight and take the man down with it.

So Hron did not say: *but you were seen*. He did not say: *a tram does not run from the Café Louvre to your bed by way of the Smetana Embankment*. He said nothing of the kind. He nodded, slowly, the way a tired man nods at a tedious truth, and made a small mark in his notebook that was not a word.

"You walked part, took a tram part," he said. "Which line, do you recall? It's the sort of thing

we have to set down.”

“Lord, I couldn’t tell you.” Victor smiled, the rueful smile of a man confessing he is human. “Up to Vinohrady — the eleven, the sixteen, whichever came. I wasn’t noticing trams, Chief Inspector, I was noticing that I was forty crowns poorer than I’d been at nine and wondering how I’d —” He stopped himself, and the stopping was the most truthful thing he had done, and he covered it. “One doesn’t notice trams. One gets on the one that’s there.”

“No,” Hron said. “One doesn’t notice trams.” He turned a page he had not filled. “And you’d not been to your father’s flat — to the embankment — recently? Before that night, I mean. In the ordinary way of things.”

“To the embankment?” The surprise was good; it was very good; if Hron had not stood in the gap on the key-board where a labelled hook hung empty, he might have believed it. “No. Not in — God, not in two years. Not since the worst of it with my father. I wasn’t welcome there, Chief Inspector, that’s the plain ugly truth of it. He’d not have had me past the door. There was a time” — and now a real thing came up under the prepared one, a flush of something old and unhealed — “there was a time I had the run of that house. I was the young master of it. *The young master*, the old concierge used to call me, before this one, when I was a boy and ran up and down those stairs. Both stairs.” He said it and did not hear it, the way a man drops a coin in long grass and

walks on. “But that was a long time ago. I’d not set foot on the embankment in years. Why should I have?”

“No reason,” Hron said. “I only have to ask.” And he wrote nothing, and felt the small cold settling of a second thing into place — *both stairs* — and did not let it reach his face. The man had named the second staircase in the same breath as swearing he went nowhere near the house, the way the guilty cannot keep away from the true thing, must touch it and mention it and push it down, as a tongue goes to the broken tooth.

They talked on a while in the grey north light, and Hron let it be dull, let it be routine — the funeral, the disposal of the collection, whether Victor had been close with his father’s wife (“Hannah and I are civil; we’ve nothing else to be”), whether he could think of anyone who would have wished the old man harm (he could not, and named two debtors anyway, too quickly, which Hron noted and discarded). And all the while the unbuilt villa stood on its board in the good light, browning at the edges, and the man kept his clean cuffs and his soft ruined face and his patient courteous lie, and Hron warmed his hands at the small fire of being underestimated and gave nothing back.

It was near the end, when Hron had closed the notebook and was making the small movements of a man about to take up his hat, that Victor made his one mistake — not in anything Hron had asked, but in the thing he could not stop himself

from reaching for, the thing that had been sitting under the whole hour like water under a floor.

“Chief Inspector.” He had meant it to sound careless. He turned the journal on the shelf again, that quarter-turn, his hand needing the small task. “Forgive me. It’s a low thing to think of, with my father not a fortnight in the ground. But these matters have to be seen to, the lawyers press one — the estate. My father’s will.” He wet his lip. “I take it — it’s all in order? The arrangements stand as they were? There’s been nothing — altered, at the end? One hears things. One hears he’d been — that the lawyers had been at him, this last while. I’d be easier knowing it was all as it should be.”

And there it was, bare in the grey light, the whole engine of the thing showing for a half-second through the grief like iron through worn plaster — *does the will still stand* — the question of an heir, asked by a man who, by his own account, had nothing to inherit and no terms with the dead and no foot on the embankment in two years, and who yet, at the door, could not let the policeman leave without knowing whether the house was still coming to him. Hron stood with his hat in his hand and saw, with the cold clean certainty that came to him perhaps three times in a case and that he trusted more than any confession, that the man across the failed drawing-board believed he was the heir — had believed it on the night of the twenty-eighth, believed it still, had not been told the thing Schück had told Hron in the pewter light

on Karlova, that on the twenty-fourth of February a codicil had taken it from him root and branch — and was asking now, too soon, in the wrong voice, whether the fortune he had killed for was, after all this, his.

“These are matters for Dr. Schück, the executor,” Hron said, evenly, giving the man the same wall the notary had given him, and watching the man take the wall, exactly as he had taken it on the twenty-sixth, as reassurance — for what is not denied is, to a drowning man, confirmed. “I don’t deal in wills. Only in the hour a thing happened, which is dull work and mine. I’ll trouble you no further.”

He moved to the door. Victor came with him, almost eager now, the relief of a guest seeing a difficult visitor safely out, and at the door he put out his hand.

Hron took it. The palm was dry. The grip was firm and unhurried and warm, the easy practised handshake of a man raised to it, a young master’s handshake, and it did not tremble and it did not damp, and it held Hron’s a courteous second and let it go. And Hron thought, with the door open and the cold stairwell breathing up at them: there is the hand. There is the hand that held an old man’s head under cold bathwater in the small hours until the old man stopped, and reached a wire through a grille in the dark, and drew a bolt across as calmly as it has just drawn this door wide; dry now, and steady now, on the latch of its own clean room. And going down the stair past

the landlady's wary inch of light he thought of the table by the river the night the old man died — of the fourteen named in the dead man's hand and the fifteenth named in a hand that was no one's, the thin gentleman seated at its head who had come up and not gone down, and had spoken to Reszke in a German no one could place until Reszke, who feared nothing, was afraid. And he wondered, without letting the wonder show even to himself, who had sat watching while the table was cleared, and whether that one was watching still, and counting; and whether the young master with the dry warm hand and the unbuilt house in the best light knew — coming up the back stair at one in the morning to a thing he could not have planned to find at the head of the table — that he had been counted, and the account opened against him, long before any policeman ever climbed his stair.

Bouda was waiting at the corner of Korunní by the boarded hatter's, stamping his feet, and fell in beside him without a word until they were past the church and out of sight of the house, and then it came out of him.

“Well? You had him an hour. Did he —”

“He was at the Café Louvre at cards until two,” Hron said, “and then home in his bed and asleep until the landlady woke him. He has no key to the embankment, and he has not set foot there in two years. He is grieved, and he is civil, and he asks, before his father's a fortnight gone, whether the will still stands.” He turned up his collar against

the thin clean cold of the heights. "He lies very well, Karel. As well as any man I've sat with. There's no sweat in him and no shake in his hand and he gives you the shabby thing freely so you'll not look for the shameful one. He's a better liar than his father was a man, and his father was good."

"Then we had him." Bouda had stopped on the pavement, the colour up in his face. "We had him in the room. The ticket puts him on the seventeen at ten to two and he's just sworn to you he was at cards till two and home — that's it, that breaks him, why in God's name didn't we —"

"Because a lie is only useful once it's locked," Hron said. He did not break stride, and after a moment the boy came after him. "Today it's words in a warm room, his against a ticket, and a good advocate unties words. Let him say it to the magistrate. Let him swear it. Let it go down on the record in his own mouth, *at the Café Louvre until two* — and then we go quietly to the man who deals the cards at that table, and we ask the one thing, and the man tells us the hour Victor Reszke left the green baize, which I would lay my pension was not two o'clock." A tram came down toward the square, and Hron watched it pass and did not board it. "Then the lie has the man inside it, and the door we've spent a fortnight at swings shut on him from the wrong side. You don't spring a trap to show it works, Karel. You leave it set, and let him walk all the way in, and only then you let him feel the spring."

21. The Wife's Account

THE FLAT HANNAH RESZKE HAD TAKEN since her husband's death was on Mánesova, near the top of the hill where Vinohrady begins to forget it was ever a vineyard, three rooms on the second floor of a building the colour of weak coffee, and a maid let Hron in without his having to give his name twice. It was the fifteenth of March, a Thursday, and the afternoon light came thin and clean through the tall windows the way March light does for an hour before it gives up. The room had been furnished by someone with money and taste and no particular hurry to use either; the chairs good and recent, the carpet good and recent, and against the wall a single dark old chest like a guest from the previous century who had been allowed to stay, and on it a clock ticking the even tick of a thing wound that morning. There was nothing of Josefov in the room. There was nothing of the dead man in it at all, unless it was the chest, and Hron looked at the chest while he waited and thought it might be the only thing she had taken from the embankment flat, and could not say why he thought so.

She kept him waiting four minutes. He counted them by the clock. When she came in she came in composed, in grey, a young woman with a wide

pale handsome face and dark hair drawn back without ornament, and she gave him her hand and a chair, in that order, the way Schück had, the way the well-off did, and sat across the low table from him with her ankles together and her hands folded in her lap and looked at him with the flat attentive watchfulness that half the central criminal police had already read, over coffee in the Bartholomew Street corridor, as the look of a woman with something to hide.

It was a good look to convict a person on. Hron had learned to distrust it. He had seen it on a war-widow in Smíchov whose only crime had been to keep her face from coming apart in front of strangers, and he had seen it, once, on a man who had cut his brother's throat and felt nothing about it at all, and the look had been the same on both, and that was the trouble with looks. He took out his notebook and let it lie open on his knee and did not write in it.

"You'll forgive me coming on you again, Mrs. Reszke," he said. "I ask the same things twice. It is a fault of the work."

"You may ask them three times, Chief Inspector," she said. Her English was good, a little German under it at the vowels, the speech of a girl from a German-speaking family who had married into a wider room than she was born to. "I have nothing to do this afternoon but answer you. I find I have a great deal of afternoon now."

That was honest, and the honesty of it sat oddly against the watchfulness, and Hron filed the

two of them side by side the way he had learned to file things that would not lie still next to one another.

“The night of the twenty-eighth,” he said. “I have it from the household that you were not at home. That you were away that evening, and the maid with you.”

“I was at the Lucerna,” she said. “A benefit concert — for the children’s clinics in Žižkov and Karlín, it is a thing the wives do, one buys a ticket and wears one’s good coat and is seen to be charitable. Simon did not care for concerts. He said music was the only thing a man could not own afterward, and so resented paying for it. He gave me the price of the ticket and stayed home for his dinner. I went with my maid, Terezie. We took the tram.”

“Which tram.”

“The eleven, to the bottom of Wenceslas Square, and walked up.” A small dry movement at the corner of her mouth that was not a smile. “We were in our seats before eight. There was a great deal of Dvořák, because there is always a great deal of Dvořák, and a soprano from the National who was not in her best voice, and an interval at which I drank a glass of lemonade I did not want and spoke to women I did not like. The concert ended near midnight. There were speeches; there are always speeches. We came out at — half past twelve — and the trams had stopped, so we walked, Terezie and I, up the Vinohradská in the cold, and were home before one.” She turned one

hand over in her lap, palm up, and turned it back. "I went to bed. Terezie will tell you she put out the lamps and locked the door behind us and heard me cough half the night, because I had taken cold in the walk and was no use to anyone until noon the next day, when the telephone came to say my husband was dead."

She had given it to him whole, unprompted, in order, the way a person gives a thing they have already had to give several times and have stopped flinching at. Hron let the clock tick a moment into the room.

"You kept the ticket?" he said. It was the sort of question that insulted a guilty person and reassured an innocent one, and he watched which it did.

She rose without haste, went to the dark old chest, opened a small drawer in it, and came back and laid on the low table between them a stub of grey pasteboard, torn at the perforation, *CHARITY CONCERT* printed across it in the heavy republican capitals and a row and a seat number and the date inked in by a hand at the box office. He looked at it without touching it. The date was right. The row was good — she had not stinted on the ticket she did not want.

"I keep things," she said, sitting again. "It is a habit from being a poor girl who married a rich old man. One learns that the proof of where one was is a kind of money. I have the programme too, and the cloakroom token, and the woman who runs the benefit could tell you to the minute when

the speeches ran long, because she gave them." A pause. "You may speak to Terezie. You may speak to the two women I disliked in the interval, whose names I will write down for you. You will find I was where I say I was until one o'clock, and asleep and coughing after, which I am told is the very hour your doctor cares about." Her eyes did not leave his face. "I have read the newspapers, Chief Inspector. They are careful, but one reads between the careful. I was in my bed at two in the morning with a fever coming on, four streets from the river, and a maid in the next room who heard me the whole night, and I cannot drown a man in his bath from there, however much it would tidy your file to have me do it."

It was said without heat, the bald flat truth of it laid down like a stamp, and Hron believed it, and had half believed it before he came, since the morning at Schück's chambers — but a man does not strike a name from the column on belief; he strikes it on the ticket and the maid and the doctor's clock, and he had, now, all three. He let himself feel the small clean satisfaction of a suspect falling away properly, by evidence and not by liking, and under it nothing rose to take her place, because the place was already filled — had been filled since the missing key, since the veronal, since the dead hour with one man's name coming up in it like a body coming up in slow water.

"You gain by his death," he said. He said it gently and he said it because not to say it would

have been a discourtesy, a pretending, and she was not a woman to be pretended to.

“I gain a widow’s portion,” she said. “You will have it from Schück; you have it from Schück already, I can see by your face that you are not telling me anything I do not know that you know.” The dry thing moved at her mouth again. “Simon left the most of it to the refugees coming over the border, and a good deal to the synagogue, and to me a sum that is — decent. That is the word the lawyers use. Decent. It is more than I came with and less than I would have had by the plain law if he had died without troubling to write anything down, which is a strange thing for a man to do to a wife he had no quarrel with, but Simon did strange things at the end.” She looked, for the first time, away from Hron, toward the tall window and the thin going light. “I will tell you what I gain that the newspapers cannot reckon, Chief Inspector. I gain back the rest of my afternoons. I am twenty-eight. I have spent four years being the young wife of an old man, which is a position, you understand, not a marriage — one is hired into it almost, bought a wardrobe and given a chair at his table and the use of his name, and in return one is decorative and grateful and does not ask where the money in the strong-box comes from or who climbs the back stairs to borrow it.” She turned back. “I did not love him. I did not hate him. I should like you to write that down, because everyone wishes me to feel one or the other, and I felt neither, and the not-feeling is the thing that costs.

He was not unkind. He was simply — elsewhere. Always elsewhere, in his books and his ledgers and his old beautiful things, and I sat at the foot of his table four years and learned to be elsewhere too, and that is the whole of the account between us, and there is no murder in it, however much its shape might please your colleagues.”

Hron had written nothing. He looked at her across the careful room, the good recent chairs, the one old chest she had taken and could not say why, and he understood the watchfulness now, that the corridor had read for guilt: it was the watchfulness of a person who has spent four years learning to be looked at and never seen, and has stopped expecting the looking to turn into the seeing, and watches for it anyway out of an old reflex she would be ashamed to name. It was not guilt. It was a kind of grief, in a register he knew — grief that went about disguised as a flat composed face, a tram one kept not boarding, a notebook one kept open and did not write in. He recognised hers the way one recognises a countryman’s accent in a foreign street: not by the words, by the music under them.

“I’ll write down that you felt neither,” he said. He did not write it. They both let that stand.

“There is a thing,” she said then, abruptly, as a person says a thing they have been carrying to the door of their mouth the whole conversation and decided, at the last, to let out. “You have not asked it and I do not know that it is anything, and I have not said it to your young one or to the men

from the newspaper because they would make it into the wrong size. But you ask the same things twice, and you have not asked this once, so.”

“Say it however you like,” Hron said, and did not move, the way he had learned not to move when a witness arrives, of their own weight, at the edge of the thing.

“In February he changed.” She weighed each word as if it cost. “I do not mean he was ill, though he aged in that month the way some men age in a year, all at once, the flesh going from the face. I mean he had taken to — talking. At night. To no one.” She held Hron’s eye to see whether he would let the sentence be the size she had made it, and he did, and she went on. “We did not share a room; it was not that kind of marriage; but the wall is thin between, and I heard him. Most nights that last month. Not the rambling of an old man asleep — I knew that sound, he snored, he muttered at his dreams like anyone. This was — he was awake. Sitting up, I think, in his chair by the bed, the lamp on, I would see the line of it under the door, and he was speaking. Low. Steady. The way one speaks to a guest one is being very correct with. There would be a silence, a long one, as if he were being answered, and then he would speak again.” The clock ticked. “Once I got up and stood at his door, because I thought — I do not know what I thought, that there was a person in the flat. And there was no one. The maid was gone, the front was locked, the back was bolted, I had heard no bell. There was no one in that flat

but the two of us, and he was speaking to someone at the head of his bed in a voice I had never heard him use to a living soul — gentle, Chief Inspector, almost humble, my husband who was humble to no one — and I went back to my room and did not open his door, and I have been ashamed of that since.” She looked at her folded hands. “I told myself it was the work, that he had debtors on his mind, that men of his trade talk their accounts over in the dark. I have stopped telling myself that. I do not know what I would put in its place. I only know I should have opened the door, and I did not, and now there is no door to open.”

Hron sat with it. Through the tall window the light had gone from thin to grey, the going of it almost a sound, and somewhere below in Mánesoava a tram bell rang and the wires would be singing in the cold after it. He thought of the bookseller’s widow and the head of the table and the German nobody could place; of the rabbi’s table in Josefov and a man asking whether one could un-invite what one had invited; of the deaf concierge’s thumb that she had never let out. He did not let any of it into the reasoning. He set it instead in the place at the right margin where he kept the thing he could not yet let in without poisoning the rest, the quarantine with its single pin and no line drawn to anything, and kept his face the same, flat and kind, the face of a man being told about an old man’s nerves.

“It is no shame not to have opened it,” he said. “We none of us open the doors we should, at the time. We open them after, in our heads, for years.” It was truer than he meant to be in a stranger’s drawing-room, and he heard it land in her, the small recognition, the music answering the music, and he stood, because he had what he had come for and more, and a man does not stay past the having of it.

She rose with him. She gathered his hat from the side table herself, where the maid had set it, and gave it to him, and at the door, with her hand on the brass of the handle, she stopped, the way Schück had stopped at the tying of the grey tape, the way witnesses stopped when the last and heaviest thing had not been said.

“I will tell you one more,” she said, “and then you will go and I will have my afternoon. It is the thing the others were all too polite to tell you, the women who came to sit with me, who saw it themselves at our suppers and looked away from it the way one looks away from a stain on a host’s cloth.” Her hand stayed on the handle; she did not turn it. “In the last weeks — January, into February — Simon began to lay a fifth place at our private supper. There were two of us, Chief Inspector. Myself and my husband, at the small table in the back, when there was no dinner and no guests; two of us, and he would have Terezie lay for five. I thought at first it was a habit of the old dinners come loose in his head, a counting he could not stop. I told her to lay for two. He told

her to lay for five and was angry, which he was almost never, and so we laid for five, and three of the places stayed empty through the meal, and one of them was at the head, opposite him, and he would look at it between the courses the way you look at a chair where a person has just been sitting.” She drew a breath. “I asked him. Once. Who the place was for. And he put down his fork, and looked at me — kindly, which frightened me more than anger would have — and he said, *For the one who is keeping our accounts now.* And he smiled, in a way I had never seen on his face in four years, a smile with no — no *floor* under it, Chief Inspector, I do not know how else to say it, a smile over a great drop. And then he asked me to forgive him. To forgive him things I had not known he had done. Things he did not name. He said he would have it all set right, that there was a witness now to see it set right, and that I should forgive him in advance for the size of the wrong, because I would learn the size of it soon enough.” She turned the handle then, and the cold of the stairwell came in around the door, the brass-cold draught of the unheated stone, moving across the threshold and into the warm room and over them both. “I have not learned the size of it. Perhaps you will, Chief Inspector, before I do. You count things. Good afternoon.”

He went down the worn stone of the stair into Mánesova, where the afternoon had finished giving up and the lamps were not yet lit, and turned toward Peace Square and his sister’s flat that he

would not, this once, go up to, and walked instead the long way to the tram, past the great church with its dark twin spires going to ink against the last of the sky, and thought, waiting at the stop with his collar up and his knee beginning its small grey complaint at the damp, that he had struck a name from the column today by ticket and maid and the doctor's clock, cleanly, the way a thing should be struck, and that the field had narrowed to one man and the dead hour and a bolt drawn from a corridor, and that the human case was nearly whole.

And that a dying old man who feared no living person had laid, for two people, a table for five, and had asked his young wife to forgive him in advance for a wrong he would not name, and had called the empty chair at the head of his board *the one who is keeping our accounts now*, and had smiled a smile with no floor under it.

The 11 came along with its one bright eye and its bell. Hron got on, and gave the conductor his hellers, and rode down the hill into the lighting city, and did not, all the way to the river, take out the thing at the right margin and turn it over, though he could feel it there in the cold of his coat like a coin he had not put in.

22. The Ledger of Debts

THE SHOP WAS ON MAISELOVA, THREE doors up from the corner where the new bank had put its cold stone face against the old street, and it kept its hours like a man who has decided that the world may come to him or not at all. A narrow front, the glass painted half up with gilt letters gone brown at the edges — *S. RESZKE · ANTIQUES* — and behind it, on a baize that had once been green, a little congregation of objects arranged without any wish to sell: a Meissen shepherdess with a chipped crook, a row of snuffboxes, a folio open to a map of a country that no longer had those borders. Friday morning, the sixteenth of March, and a thin sun was trying the cobbles and not warming them. Hron stood a moment looking at the map before he tried the door, and thought that this was the kind of window a man could pass a thousand times and never once want what was in it, which was perhaps the point — that Reszke had not sold things so much as kept them, and let the keeping be his pleasure, and lent money on the side to people who needed it more than he needed their thanks.

The door was unlocked. A bell on a coiled spring announced him, two notes and then a long shiver of the spring, and from the back of the shop

Rose Wertheimer's voice said, "I am here, Chief Inspector," before he had got fully in out of the cold, as if she had been expecting him at this exact hour, which, he understood a moment later, she had — he had telephoned the central criminal police's request through the operator the evening before, and she was a woman who, told a man would come at ten, would be ready at five to.

She was in the study behind the shop, a low room with a single high window onto a court, lined with shelving to the ceiling and smelling of leather and dust and the cold metal smell of an iron safe that stood in the corner with its door open and empty. She had laid the ledgers out on the table already — not the guest-ledger, the police had that, but the others, the working books, the ones a man keeps not for posterity but for the first of the month. Three of them, fat, half-leather, the spines cracked and re-cracked exactly like the spine of the dinner-book, because they were brothers to it; the same paper, the same hand. She stood behind them with her white hands folded at her waist and her grey wool ironed and her collar ironed, in mourning that was only her ordinary clothes worn with a different face, and she did not offer him coffee, because this was not a visit.

"You will want the loan accounts," she said. "I have marked them. I did not know which you wanted so I have brought all three. This is the trade book — the antiques, the buying and selling, you will not need it but I would not leave it out and have you think I chose. This is the household.

And this" — she laid her hand flat on the third, the way the Rabbi had laid his hand on a book to have somewhere to put it — "is the lending."

"Thank you, miss."

"I have done his books for twenty years," she said, as if he had asked her credentials, which he had not. "I know them as I know my own hand. Better. I do not keep my own as well." A small dry thing, not a joke, the way a precise person tells you a true fact about herself and lets it stand naked. "Ask me what you came to ask. I will not make you read forty years of arithmetic to find it."

Hron took out his notebook and laid it open on his knee and did not write in it. "Tell me about the loans," he said. "Not all of them. The ones that were live. The ones he had not been paid back."

She opened the lending book without looking for the place; her finger went to it. The page was ruled in her own ruling, he saw — the columns drawn with a straightedge, the headings lettered small and upright, almost the dead man's hand but rounder, a hand that had learned its letters from his over twenty years the way a daughter takes a mother's walk. Names down the left margin. Sums. Dates of advance. Dates of interest fallen due. A last column, narrow, headed only with a single small abbreviation he had to lean to read: *note*. In that last column, against perhaps a third of the names, small marks in pencil.

"He lent in Josefov," she said, "and across the river, and in the new quarters where the old families have spent themselves on motor-cars. He lent

to people who could not go to a bank, or would not, because a bank asks questions on paper and Mr Reszke asked them across this table and forgot the answers if you paid. He was not —” she paused, weighing the word against her loyalty and her exactness, and let exactness win, as she always would — “he was not gentle about it. He charged what the danger was worth, and to a man without a bank the danger is worth a great deal. But he carried his debts himself. He did not sell them to men who break legs. When a man could not pay, he wrote in the note column and waited, and most of them paid in the end, because he outlived their excuses.”

“And the marks.” Hron touched the air above the pencil column, not the page. “What do the marks mean.”

For the first time her composure moved — not broke, only moved, the way the surface of the full glass moves when the table is touched two rooms off. “Those are mine,” she said. “Not his. He told me, in February — the second week of February, I can give you the day if you need it — he told me to go through the live loans and mark the ones he meant to call in. To call in, Chief Inspector. Not to wait on. To present, and require, and if not paid, to put to the law.” She drew a slow breath through her nose. “He had never said such a thing to me in twenty years. He was a patient man with money; impatience was for the young and he despised it. And in February he sat where you are sitting and told me to make him a list of the people he was

going to ruin. I made the list. The marks are the list.”

The court window let in the thin sun and a square of it lay on the open page like something spilled. Hron read down the marked names. He did not know most of them, and the ones he knew he knew only as names — a wine-merchant on Dlouhá whose shop had gone dark in the autumn; a widow in Vinohrady with a title from the old empire and nothing under it; a young doctor; a man who had been, the note said in Rose’s small letters, a councillor once, and was now a debtor with a pencil mark against his name. Motives, Hron thought, for half of Old Town. Here in this ruled column was the reason a dozen men might have wished Simon Reszke dead, each of them with a marker about to be called, each of them looking down the same barrel of public ruin. He had been afraid, a week ago, that the case would have too few suspects. The lending book offered him a city of them.

And not one of them had a key to the service stair labelled *the young master* in faded ink. Not one of them had a prescription for veronal filled twice in a single February. Not one of them had been seen by the deaf concierge going up a stair she could not hear, or had a tram ticket punched at ten to two in the dead hour folded into an overcoat. The lending book gave him a dozen men with motive and took none of them past the threshold, because motive was the cheapest thing in the case and Hron had stopped, days ago, believing in it as

anything but weather. A man may want another man dead and never lift his hand. The work was not who wanted it. The work was who could have, and had.

“Miss,” he said. “Is Victor Reszke in this book?”

She had been waiting for it. He saw that she had been waiting for it from the moment he came through the spring-shivering door, that the whole careful laying-out of three ledgers had been an honest woman building a road to the one fact she did not want to be the one to say and would say because not saying it would be inexact. Her finger turned three leaves and stopped.

“He is,” she said.

The entry was older than the others, the ink browner. *V. Reszke*. A sum that made Hron’s eyebrows go up before he could school them — not a wine-merchant’s overdraft, not a widow’s hundred crowns, but a real sum, the kind a father advances a son and calls a loan to keep it from being a gift, to keep the shape of a man between them where the love had failed. The date of advance was four years old. Below it, no repayments. None. Four years and the principal sitting whole, the interest accruing in Rose’s careful column and never once reduced, a debt that had stopped being money and become the last cold rope between a father and the boy he would not see.

And in the note column, against the son’s name, in a hand that was not Rose’s careful round letters but the dead man’s own small upright spik-

ing hand — the only entry on the page he had made himself — two words.

Recall. At once.

To recall. At once.

Hron looked at it for a while. Out in the court a window was opened somewhere above and a woman shook a cloth and shut it again. The iron safe in the corner stood with its empty door open and the cold coming off it.

“When did he write this,” Hron said.

“I do not know the day. He wrote it himself, you see, in his own hand, in my book, which he did perhaps four times in twenty years. He did not tell me he had written it. I found it after — after the night. I was reconciling the loans for Dr Schück, for the estate, and I turned to his son’s page and there it was, in his hand, in ink that was —” she stopped. Her exactness had carried her to the edge of a thing and she stood at the edge of it. “In ink that was not old,” she said. “I know inks, Chief Inspector. I know how his dried. This was fresh. He wrote it in the last weeks. He meant to call in his son’s debt, in full, at once, and the writing of it was among the last things his hand did in this book.”

So it was complete. Hron sat with it and felt the case close the last of its human distance the way a door closes that has been standing ajar in a draught — not slammed, simply and finally shut. A son drowning in debt to men without patience at the back of the Café Louvre, a marker due the first of March. A father who had, on the twenty-

fourth of February, cut him out of the will entire and told him it was only postponed, so that the boy went on believing himself the heir. And now this: that the same father, in the same weeks, had moved to call in the one debt that still bound them, in full, at once — to take from the son not only the inheritance he did not know was lost, but the very ground under his feet, the calling-in that would have laid his ruin open in a courtroom for all of Prague to read. The boy had not merely been about to lose an expectation. He had been about to be dragged into the light and stripped, by his own father, with days to spare before the men at the Louvre came for what was theirs. *Why now.* Here was why now, in the dead man's own spiking hand. *Recall. At once.*

“Did Victor know?” Hron asked. “That his father meant to call the loan.”

Rose was quiet. “I cannot tell you what a man knew. I can tell you that Mr Reszke was not a man who threatened idly, and that when he had decided a thing he let it be felt before he let it be done — it was how he collected his debts, by the weather coming before the storm. If he had decided to call it in, the son would have felt the weather.” She closed the lending book, gently, with both hands, the way one closes a coffin one has the keeping of. “I have given you the books. You will draw from them what a policeman draws. I will only say — and I would say it to the magistrate, and have it written down — that Mr Reszke was a hard man with money and a just one, and that he

did not deserve the river. Whatever the marks against the names. No one in this book deserved to do that to him.”

She had said it level, the full glass not spilling. But Hron had been watching faces for thirty years and he saw, under the levelness, the particular grief of a person who has loved without return and gone on serving the unreturning love until it died and left her nothing in the will but a sum for her years of cataloguing, a clerk’s portion, a thank-you in legal Latin. Twenty years of his books better kept than her own. The window table at the Slavia, the sums done over the coffee, the thin one, Wertheimer. She had loved him, plainly and hopelessly and with her whole exact heart, and he had left her a competence and called it generous, and she would correct the river on the matter of its colour but she would not correct the dead man on the matter of what he had owed her, because some debts are not in any book. It exonerated her, that love, more wholly than any alibi — a woman does not drown the man she has spent her life standing full to the brim beside. But it gave her shape, at last, in Hron’s seeing: not the suspect of the first morning, the steady white hands at the brim, but a person, grieving in the only register she had, which was accuracy.

He did not say any of this. He said, “The synagogue. The refugees. He left the collection to them. Did you know that?”

“He told me. In February. He read me the phrase as though he had made it up that morning,

which he had, and he was pleased with it, and he said it to me the way he priced a snuffbox." She looked at her own white hands. "I am telling you he was not a good man, Chief Inspector, in the way the word is used. I am telling you also that he was about to do a good thing with everything he had, and that he was killed before the good thing was finished, and that there is no justice in the order of those two facts, and I have stopped looking for any."

There was nothing in his notebook he needed to write. He had what he had come for and more than he could prove, which was the condition of the whole case — the motive total, the man fixed, and still the dead hour dark between them. He gathered himself to rise, his knee taking the weight badly in the cold off the safe, and it was then, with the human business done, that the other thing came back into the room, the way it always came back, not announced, a draught under the door.

There had been, that morning, a report on his desk at Bartholomew Street — the graphologist's report, three pages of careful destruction. The police had sent the photograph and then the book itself across to a man named Hejduk who examined hands for the courts, a dry specialist with a loupe and a library of forgers, and Hron had wanted, had badly wanted, a forger. He had wanted Hejduk to write that the fifteenth line was a later insertion in a practised hand, that the ink was fresher than that night's other writing, that some debtor or

some heir had opened the dead man's book and written *The One Who Counts* into it to dress a murder as a haunting. He had wanted the hoax. A hoax he could file. A hoax had a man behind it with a pen and a reason, and a man with a pen and a reason was the only kind of ghost Hron knew how to arrest.

Hejduk had given him none of it. The hand, the report said, matched no exemplar the police held — not Victor's, taken under pretext; not Rose's, freely given; not Hannah's, not Schück's, not any of the fourteen guests', not the caterers', not the dead man's own. It matched no living sample submitted, and resembled, in its formation, only hands that had stopped being written a great while ago — not a finding a court could use, which Hejduk set down only because his honesty required it. And the ink. He had done the one test the year allowed him, the patient comparison of how the ink had oxidised into the heavy old paper, and the ink of the fifteenth line had aged to precisely the degree of the fourteen lines around it. The same dried age. Not fresher. Not laid down later in a different week and left to catch up. It had dried alongside the dead man's own entries from that night, as though the hand that was no living hand had written its single line in the same hour Reszke wrote his fourteen.

No forger. No later ink. No matching hand. Hron's last rational foothold, the tempting solid door of *somebody simply wrote it*, had opened, when he walked through it, onto a wall with cold air

coming under it. He had done the work fully and honestly, and the work had taken his hoax away from him and given him nothing he could put in a file but the absence where the hoax should have been.

He did not tell Rose any of this. She would not have wanted the feeling of it, only the words, and the words were not his to read out. He put his hat on his knee and made to stand, and asked her instead, because it was on the report and because he was a thorough man, the small flat procedural thing he had come second to ask: how many had sat down to dinner. He knew the answer. He had it three times over — from her on the first morning, from the photographs that showed fourteen, from a tram conductor's till. He asked it the way you check a sum you are already sure of, because being already sure is how the work goes wrong.

Rose Wertheimer stood very still behind the closed lending book, her white hands folded, the thin sun off the court lying across the empty safe behind her, and she looked at him for a long moment with the steady grief that was her whole face now, and she said:

“I have worked for that man twenty years, Chief Inspector, and I will tell you a thing I will deny if you ask me again, and I will deny it to the magistrate, and I will deny it with my hand on whatever you put under it. I laid that table myself. With my own hands, from the good service, the morning of the dinner. Fourteen places. I am not a woman who miscounts. I laid fourteen, because

the book said fourteen, and Mr Reszke's book had not been wrong in forty years."

The court was silent. No window opened above.

"And I cleared fifteen," she said. "After they had gone, when the maid was away and the washing fell to me, I cleared fifteen. Fifteen plates used. Fifteen glasses. And the fifteenth glass, Chief Inspector —" her voice did not rise and did not break, the full glass holding, holding — "the fifteenth was the old Bohemian glass. The green-and-white, the diamond-cut, that he kept in the cabinet by the window and never used, never once in all my years, because he said it had come from Rudolf's own table and was not to be drunk from by anyone now alive. He kept that cabinet locked. He wore the key on his own chain. There was no other key in the world, and the cabinet was locked when I cleared the room, and locked it is to this day, and the glass is back in it, washed, where I put it. And I cannot tell you, and I will not try to tell you, who took it out."

23. The Thumbprint

THE FINGERPRINTING ROOM WAS IN THE back of the ground floor at Bartholomew Street, on the courtyard side where the sun never came, and it smelled of three things in a layered order a man learned to read like a label: first the printing ink, sweet and oily, that got into the back of the throat and stayed there through dinner; then the chalk and camphor of the file cabinets, the dry mortuary smell of paper kept against damp; and under both, faint and permanent, the river, which got into every room in the building that faced the wrong way and a good many that faced the right. Hron had been coming to this room for fifteen years and the smell of it had never once been pleasant and never once changed, and there was a small cold comfort in that, in a place that did the same thing the same way and got the same answer or honestly got none.

The man who ran it was Zavodsky, who had been a printer before the war and a fingerprint clerk after it and had brought from the one trade to the other a pressman's patience with ink and a pressman's contempt for haste. He was past sixty, with the stained fingers a lifetime of the work leaves, the loops of his own prints rubbed half away by the very ink he rolled onto other men's,

so that he was, he said, a man slowly erasing himself in the line of duty, and the joke was old and he made it new each time by the dryness with which he let it lie there. He had the cards laid out for Hron already on the long zinc-topped table under the two bare bulbs, the way a sexton has the grave open before the mourners come.

“Chief Inspector,” he said, not looking up from the slab where he was working a fresh tube of ink out into a thin even film with a roller, back and forth, the small wet hiss of it the only sound in the room. “You want them all on one table at once. I have never had a case where a man wanted fifteen sets of fingers in a row and meant to look at every one. Most men want the one. You want the herd.”

“I want to be able to say I looked at the herd,” Hron said. “Not that I looked at the one I wanted.”

“Mm.” Zavodsky rolled the ink. “That is either very good police work or a man who does not trust himself. In my experience the two come to the same table.”

They did it properly, which is to say slowly. The procedure had a shape Hron knew the way he knew the stations of the seventeen, and he submitted to it because the value of the thing was in its dullness — a fingerprint convicted not because it was clever but because it was patient, because it could be done again by another man and come out

the same, because it did not care who you wanted it to be.

The living first. Zavodsky had been taking them all that week, in this room and out of it, in the parlours of the well-bred who would not come to Bartholomew Street and at the kitchen tables of those who could not refuse to. He inked each finger separately, the bulb of it rolled nail-to-nail across the filmed slab and then nail-to-nail across the printed square on the card, so that the whole arch of the ridge stood recorded and not just the flat middle a careless man left — a printer's rolling, even pressure, no smear at the turn. Each card carried a name in Zavodsky's block capitals, the date, the right hand above and the left below in their ten boxes, and at the foot the four plain prints taken all at once, the controls that caught a clerk who had boxed a finger in the wrong square. Then the classification, the Galton-Henry numerator and denominator that turned ten human fingers into a fraction a man could file and find again — whorls counted, ridges traced, the loops told as ulnar or radial, all of it reduced to a primary figure that put the card into one of a thousand pigeon-holes, so that the file, when you came to search it, gave you not a hundred thousand cards but the forty or fifty that shared your man's particular arithmetic.

Hron stood at the table and Zavodsky laid them down for him one at a time and said the names, and it was, Hron thought, a strange roll-call, the dinner of the twenty-eighth of February

summoned up again as ten inked fingers a man at a time, the living come back to the cold zinc to account for the parts of themselves they had pressed, that night, against the dead man's crystal.

The fourteen guests first. Felkel the book-seller's widow, whose card Zavodsky had taken in her own parlour on Karlova and who had held her hand out, he said, like a duchess giving it to be kissed and had asked whether the ink came off, because she had a funeral to attend. Adler the banker, whose primary Hron did not need to be told had come back the way a banker's everything came back, in order, complete, nothing missing and nothing offered. The eleven others, the book-sellers and the one professor and the cousin from Brno and the man who dealt in old coins and the rest of the small grey world that had eaten Reszke's carp — fourteen cards, fourteen sets of ten, and against each, in the end, the same result, which was the result that matters and is never reported because it convicts no one: each of them had touched something at that table, and what each had touched could be told from what each had not.

For they had the glasses. That was the patient heart of it. The caterers' men had cleared and stacked but not washed — the death had stopped the ordinary motions of the household, the maid away, the things left — and the crystal had stood three days on the sideboard untouched while a flat became a scene and a scene a case, so that the wine-glasses of the twenty-eighth had been lifted

by Bouda in his careful gloved hands, every one, brought here in their cotton wool, and dusted with the grey powder and the camel-hair brush. What came up under the powder was the whole sad human record of an evening — the overlapping smears of a hand that turns a glass, the clean oval of a lip-print in the women's, the place where a thumb and two fingers had pinched the stem. Fifteen glasses. Fourteen of them gave up their owners. One by one the glasses were married to the hands, this whorl to Adler, this tented arch to the coin-dealer, this loop with the broken ridge that Felkel carried from some old kitchen burn — fourteen glasses, fourteen guests, each glass spoken for by the living fingers that had drunk from it.

Then the rest of the house. The caterer and his three men, printed to a man, because the serving and the clearing had passed through their hands and a serving-man's print on a guest's glass meant nothing and had to be known so that it could mean nothing. The maid, Betty, brought back weeping from her mother's in Nusle, certain she was accused, printed and consoled and excluded. Rose Wertheimer, the bookkeeper, who had not been at the dinner but had been in and out of the flat for years and whose prints were on half the objects in it as a matter of course, given freely, her hand steady on the slab. Kühn the concierge, whose square dark thumb Hron watched Zavodsky roll with particular care, because her hand had been on every door in the building for

nineteen years and would be found, if you looked, on everything. Hannah Reszke, the widow, who had given her fingers in her sister's parlour in Vinohrady without a word and with that cold composure Hron had stopped mistaking for indifference — a woman accounting for her hands.

And Victor.

Zavodsky laid that card down a little apart, or seemed to, though it was the same card as the others and Hron knew the apartness was his own eye and not the clerk's hand. Victor Reszke had been printed two days before, under the routine fiction Hron had built for him, the elimination of all who had access, a thing a man could not well refuse without making a flag of himself. He had given his fingers, Bouda said, with a steadiness that was itself worth noting in a man Hron believed had drowned his father — given them and made some light remark about feeling like a pickpocket and asked, like Felkel, whether the ink came off. It came off. It always came off, Zavodsky said; that was the trouble with the work, everything came off but the cases.

"He is not on a glass," Hron said. It was not a question. He had known it would not be; Victor had not been a guest; Victor had come up the back stair at one in the morning when the glasses were three hours used and the guests two hours gone.

"He is not on a glass," Zavodsky agreed. "He is in the flat — a man's prints are in his father's flat, that is no marvel, on the door of the study, on a book, on the rail of the service stair where God

knows he'd no business but a man may have stood on a stair. He is not on the table and he is not on a glass." He looked up. "If you wanted him on a glass, Chief Inspector, you have not got him there. I tell you what is, not what would be convenient."

"I know what you tell me," Hron said. "That is why I come to you and not to Pelc's man."

Which left the fifteenth glass.

It had stood, Hron knew from the photographs and from Rose's account and from Kühn's, at the head of the table, at the place opposite Reszke's own, the seat of honour the old man had given to a guest none of them could name — and it had been used. That was the whole stubborn fact that had sat in the case since the second day and that the fingerprints were to resolve, one way or the other, into something a man could write in a file. Fourteen guests. Fifteen dirtied plates. Fifteen glasses. The extra place set and eaten from and drunk from, and on the extra glass, when Bouda's brush had passed the grey powder over its bowl, a print.

Zavodsky had it under glass now, the lift mounted and the photograph beside it enlarged to the size of a dinner plate so that the ridges stood up black and clean as the contour lines of a map of some country no one had walked. He set it before Hron and said nothing, which from Zavodsky was a kind of warning.

It was a thumbprint. A right thumb, by the set of it, by the way the ridges swept; whole, complete, not the half-smear of a careless touch but a full clear rolled-quality print as though the man had pressed his thumb to the glass on purpose, the way a man presses his thumb to the slab when a clerk tells him to hold still — a print of a clarity Zavodsky himself, taking prints all week from the careful and the trembling, had not got cleaner from a living hand held in his own. The pattern was a whorl. A plain whorl, the ridges turning in upon a centre in two full circuits, the type-lines clean, the delta sharp on either side, a thing as legible as print, as a thing made to be read.

“That is a good thumb,” Zavodsky said. “That is the best thumb on this table, and I took all the others off living fingers in good light and that one came off a wine-glass that had stood three days in a cold flat. I do not understand it and I do not say I understand it. It is a very good thumb.”

“Whose.”

“Ah.” Zavodsky sat down on his stool, which he did rarely, a man who worked standing. “There you ask the question.”

He had run it. He told Hron how, and Hron made him tell it fully, because the value of a wall is in knowing it is a wall and not a door a man failed to try. The whorl gave a primary figure; the primary figure narrowed the whole file, such of it as Prague held, to the pigeonholes where whorl-thumbed men lived, and within those, the secondary and the sub, until the search was not a

hundred thousand cards but a workable few hundred — every one of which Zavodsky and his assistant had taken out and read against the lift with the loupe, ridge by ridge, the bifurcations and the ridge-endings and the little islands and lakes that no two men in the world share, the points of comparison the courts liked twelve of and Zavodsky liked sixteen and on this print could have offered forty, the thing was so clean. And against every whorl of its own kind in the Prague file, the thumb on the fifteenth glass matched not one.

“Not in the criminal file,” Hron said.

“Not in the criminal file.” Zavodsky counted it off on his erased fingers. “Not in the anthropometric. Not among the licensed trades we print — the cabbies, the night-porters, the men who carry guns for the banks. I sent the formula to Vienna by the old courtesy, where they keep the imperial cards still, the army men, the prisoners of the monarchy, because I thought — an old man, an old coat, perhaps a soldier printed under the Emperor and never since. Vienna wired back two days and a question mark: no such formula in their hands either, and would I confirm I had read my own ink right.” He said it without offence. “I read my ink right. Forty years I have read my ink. The thumb belongs to no man we have ever printed, here or in Vienna, living or dead in any drawer I can reach.”

Hron stood over the enlargement. The whorl turned in on itself, patient, complete, indifferent, a man’s thumb made into a small black galaxy on a

white plate, and it had been laid against a glass at the head of a dead man's table on the last night of his life, and it belonged to no one.

He did not let it sit. That was the work, and he did it. He went at the print the way he went at a too-tidy alibi, looking for the ordinary door.

"A stranger," he said. "Not a guest, not the household. Someone who handled the glass before the dinner. The shop that sold it. The man who packed the crate at the glassworks. A glass is made and washed and shelved and sold and carried up four flights — a dozen hands touch a glass before a guest does."

"A glass is also washed," Zavodsky said. "By the maid, before a dinner — you have her print on the others, on the stems where she set them out, fresh, that evening. The glassworks man's thumb went under her cloth with the dust. The only prints that survive a setting-out are the prints of the evening. And this is on the bowl, where a man drinks, not on the foot, where a man carries. It is a drinker's print, not a porter's."

"A delivery, then. The night of. The wine came up, the ice came up, a boy from the wine-merchant carried something into that room—"

"And dipped his thumb in a clean wine-glass on the table?" Zavodsky let it lie, dry. "Print the boy. I will run him gladly. But you will tell me, Chief Inspector, that you have printed the merchant's boy and the ice-man and every soul who crossed that threshold the night of the twenty-eighth, because your Detective Sergeant is a thorough young

man and you do not let a door go unshut, and I will tell you that none of them is this thumb either, because I have run them, every name you sent me." He nodded at the file, the week's work of it. "I have shut your doors for you. There are no more doors. There is the glass, and the thumb, and the whorl that is in no drawer in this building and none in Vienna."

"An old print," Hron said. He was not arguing now; he was walking the wall, putting his hand to it the length of it to be sure there was no give. "Already on the glass from another evening. The crystal was old, Reszke kept it for the great dinners. A guest of some other year — a dead man, a man emigrated, a man we have never had cause to print — drank from this same glass in nineteen-twenty-eight, his thumb dried into it, the maid's cloth missed it, three days of cold cellared it, and it is the ghost of an old dinner and not this one at all."

Zavodsky was quiet a moment, giving it its due, which Hron honoured him for. Then he shook his head, slowly, a printer who would not set a line he did not believe.

"A print does not keep through a washing," he said. "Not a wine-glass washing, with the cloth and the warm water. It might keep a week on a thing untouched. It does not keep six years through every dinner's washing-up. And were it the ghost of an old dinner —" he leaned and touched the glass of the case — "the ghost would be old. The grease ages, Chief Inspector. A print

laid down weeks ago lifts grey and broken, the ridges starved, the fats gone into the glass. This is fresh. This is the freshest print off any glass on that table — fresher to the powder than Felkel's, than the banker's, than the widow's. Whatever pressed this thumb to this glass pressed it that night, late, with a hand that had oil in its skin like a living man's, and then —" he sat back — "and then walked out of every file in Europe."

The two bulbs hummed. Down the corridor a door closed and a typewriter started somewhere and stopped. The river-smell came up under the ink. Hron looked at the whorl a while longer, then took out his notebook and wrote, in the small upright hand, *Glass XV — R. thumb, plain whorl, full & fresh — no match Prague crim/anthro/trades — no match Vienna imperial — excluded: 14 guests, 4 caterers, maid, bookkeeper, concierge, widow, son, wine-boy, ice-man.* He read it back. It was a complete sentence. It said everything and closed nothing.

Bouda had come in somewhere in the last of it, hat in hand, and stood by the door with the deflated quiet of a man watching a horse he had backed come in last by a length. He had wanted, Hron knew, the print to be Victor's. Of course he had. It would have been so clean — the son at the table he was barred from, the thumb on the glass, the whole locked-room theatre dissolved into one man's nerve. He had wanted it the way the young want a thing to be over.

“It’s nobody,” Bouda said at last. He said it to the room. “We’ve printed the whole city that touched that flat and it’s nobody.”

“It is not nobody,” Hron said. “It is somebody. It is a thumb. A thumb is a man. There is no thumb without a man.” He heard the stubbornness in his own voice and let it stand. “It is a man we have not printed. That is all this print says, and it is honest, and it is not nothing.”

“A man we haven’t found.” Bouda turned the words over, looking for the floor under them. “That’s all it is, then. Some man — a stranger, somebody who came and went and we never got his name and never will, but a man, a real man, who we just — haven’t found.” He looked up, and there was almost hope in it, the boy’s wish for a world that stayed the size he could carry. “That’s it. Isn’t it. Just a man we haven’t found yet.”

And there it was — the door Hron could not shut. Because it was true. It was perfectly, irreducibly true, and there was no instrument in the building and none in Vienna that could turn it false. The thumb belonged to a man. The man was not in the file. A man not in the file is a man not yet found. It defeated nothing and proved nothing and a magistrate could write it in a closing and sleep, *an unidentified person, untraced* — and it would be the truth, and it would be a lie of exactly the kind Hron spent his life not telling, a true sentence laid over a thing it did not cover, like a sheet over a shape.

“Yes,” Hron said. “A man we haven’t found.” He did not say the rest, that they had found everyone, that the finding had been complete, that the file of a careful city had given up every hand that touched a dead man’s table on the last night of his life except the one at the head of it. He did not say that you cannot prove a negative is final, only walk it to its end and stand there. He had walked it to its end. He was standing there.

Zavodsky slid the lift and the enlargement into a folder and the folder onto the unmatched shelf, the small shelf at the end where the cards went that the file could not eat — and there were not many of them; that was the point of the shelf, its near-emptiness. He stood with his hand on it a moment, an old printer with the ink rubbed into his own ridges, and looked at Hron with the dry, level look of a man who had filed a hundred thousand cards in his working life and matched all of them but a handful.

“A hundred thousand,” he said, as if Hron had asked, which Hron had not. “More. I have inked more fingers than there are people in some towns. And of all of them I could not name —” he held up his stained hand, fingers spread, and folded them down one at a time — “you could count on this. A few. And every one, Chief Inspector, every single one when we ran it to the ground, was the same two things. A foreigner we had never had cause to print, gone back over a border we could not follow. Or a man long dead and never printed in his life, because he died before the work came

in, before the war, before any of us thought to keep a man's hands." He let the hand fall. "Those are the only two. The stranger from far off, and the dead man from far back. There is no third drawer." He looked at the folder under his palm, then back at Hron, and the joke was on his face, the joke he made of his work, the dry small joke that had got him through forty years of other men's fingers — and he had it ready, Hron could see he had it ready, *so which is yours, the foreigner or the dead man*, the easy thing a man says to put a wall back to the size of a doorway.

"So which is this one," Zavodsky said. "The foreigner, or the —"

He did not finish it.

Hron had looked up from the whorl that belonged to no living hand and to no man in any drawer in the building or in Vienna, the whorl turning in on its patient centre, fresh as the breath of an hour ago and matched to nothing on the earth, and he said, simply, because it was the only true thing left to say and he had spent the week earning the right to say it without dressing it:

"I don't know."

The bulbs hummed. The river came up under the ink. And Zavodsky, who had held the joke a half-second on his tongue — the foreigner or the dead man, one or the other, it was always one or the other — heard something in the two flat words that he had not heard in a great while in that room, and closed his mouth on the joke, and

let his hand come off the shelf, and did not make it.

24. Midnight, Not Two

THE LOUVRE ON A SATURDAY MORNING was a different animal from the Louvre at night. The mirrors gave back a grey light off Národní Avenue instead of the milk-glass globes, the chess men were not yet at their boards, and a charwoman moved among the marble tables on her knees with a pail, working the floor in slow wet half-circles, so that the whole long gallery smelled not of cigars and coffee now but of damp ash and carbolic and the particular flatness of a room that has been emptied of the night before and not yet filled with the day. Hron came in out of a thaw that had turned, overnight, to a hard clean cold, the kind that dries the cobbles and silvers the wires, and he kept his hat in his hand and his coat on, because a man does not sit down comfortably in a place he has come to take something from.

He had telephoned ahead, through the switchboard operator, to a number the croupier did not have but the manager did, and the manager — a careful man who understood, as such men do, that the police could be a customer too if they were handled right — had agreed that Mr. Doležal would be made available, in the small office behind the cloakroom, at nine. It was nine now. Somewhere above, a clock with a soft seconds-

beat marked the morning out. The charwoman did not look up.

Doležal came out through the unmarked door at the far end with his coat over his arm and his cuffs already clean, though the room had been shut for hours, a man who put on the cuffs perhaps before he put on anything, the way another man straps on a watch. By daylight the clever face had less of the croupier in it and more of the clerk. He had shaved badly under the left jaw. He saw Hron and stopped, and something went across him that was not surprise — he had known, the moment the manager said *the police, again, for you* — but the small private settling of a man who has been waiting some days for a knock and is, on balance, relieved to hear it land.

“You came back,” he said.

“I said I might.”

“You said you’d forget the door was there.”

Doležal nodded, once, toward the green room he had come out of, and there was no rancour in it; he was only keeping the account straight, the way he kept the cards. “Will you, this time?”

“The door, yes,” Hron said. “I’ve no interest in the door. I’ve never had any.” He waited while the man hung his coat over the back of a chair and sat, uninvited, which Hron noted again and liked again. “I want the one man. The same one. And I want one number off him, and then I’ll go, and I’ll not come back a third time, which is more than I can say to most.”

“A number.” Doležal took out his cigarettes, looked at the charwoman’s wet floor, and put them away unlit, a small courtesy to the carbolic. “You came in March of the wrong year for numbers, Chief Inspector. There’s not a man at that table can tell you the right ones any more. That’s the whole of why they’re at it.”

“I want the hour he left,” Hron said. “Victor Reszke. The night his father died — the night of the dinner on the embankment, the twenty-eighth of February into the first of March. I want to know the hour Victor Reszke got up from that table and went out of this house.”

The charwoman’s pail moved a yard along the marble with a long wet sigh, and was still.

Doležal looked at him for what felt a long time and was perhaps three seconds, the reckoning a man makes who has decided already and is only choosing the words to spend. Hron had seen the decision come the other side of the door, in the relief; he let the man take his road to it.

“You’ll have heard him say two,” Doležal said at last.

“I’ve heard he says two.”

“He’ll say it again, and to your face, and he’ll say it well, because by now he half believes it himself — they do, the soft ones, they say a thing often enough to the men they owe and it sets in them like a bone that’s knit crooked.” He shook his head slowly. “Two o’clock. He told his men he was here till two. He’d want the room to swear it for him, I don’t doubt.” He spread his clean hands

flat on the marble between them, fingers apart, and looked at them. "He was gone by midnight."

Hron did not move. He had trained himself, over thirty years, in the great art of receiving the thing you have come for without showing the room that you have received it, and he received this one with his face quite still and his pulse, somewhere far down and disobedient, knocking once against the underside of it like a knuckle on a table.

"Midnight," he said. Flat. A man confirming a tram time.

"As near as makes no difference. I'll tell you how I have it, because you'll want it told." Doležal turned one hand over, palm up, the gesture of a man laying down a card he has held a while. "He went out on the count. We close a count at the turn of a man — when a player's done, cleared or cleaned, we square his marker against the house book before he leaves the table, so that what he owes is fixed and witnessed and can't be argued in the morning. Reszke the son was cleaned that night — cleaned early, before the good players had even warmed — and I squared his count myself, and I put the time to it in the house book the way I'm bound to, because a marker without an hour on it is a marker a man can lie his way out of. The hour I put was midnight. A few minutes the one side or the other. He got up off the chair losing what he hadn't got, and he stood a moment by the door there the way they do, looking back at the green as if it would change its mind, and then he

took his coat off the man at the door and he went out into the night. And the night, Chief Inspector” — the croupier’s voice did not change, but his eyes came up — “was a long way from over. It wasn’t gone twelve.”

“You’re certain of the hour.”

“It’s in the book in my own hand against his own marker. A count is the one thing in this house that doesn’t lie, because the house can’t afford it to.” He let that sit, and then, because he was an honest man in the one narrow place an honest man could be honest in a dishonest room, he added: “I’d swear to midnight before a magistrate, and I’ll tell you plainly I’d rather not be asked, for the door’s sake and the manager’s. But asked, I’ll swear it. Midnight. Not two.”

Midnight. Not two. Hron held the two words apart in his mind the way he had held the two dates apart in the dark behind his eyes in this same room a week ago, the marker-day and the death-day, fitting together with their small cold click. Only now it was not two dates. It was two hours, and the gap between them was the whole of the case.

For the thing the croupier had just handed him was not, on its face, evidence of anything. A man may leave a card table at any hour he pleases; it is not a crime to be cleaned out early, only a misery. But Hron did not deal in single facts, he dealt in their arithmetic, and the arithmetic of this one was murderous. Victor Reszke had told the men he owed, and would tell Hron, and would have his

landlady on Korunní half believe, that he had sat at this table until two and then gone home to his bed — that he had been *here*, in the warm green light, in witnessed view of a dozen men, through the entire dead hour in which his father drowned. The alibi was the whole of his defence, the wall he meant to stand behind; and the croupier, with a number in a house book in his own clean hand, had just walked round the back of the wall and shown that there was nothing behind it. Two o'clock had been Victor's roof and his floor both. Take it away, and the man did not have an alibi for the dead hour — he had a hole exactly its shape, midnight to two, empty and his own, and into that hole fitted, with the precision of a key Hron now understood he had been holding all along, a tram ticket punched at fifty-five minutes past one on the embankment under his father's windows.

The lie had not covered him. The lie had uncovered him. A true alibi conceals the hours a man spends; Victor's false one had been built to fill the very hours his ticket proved him spending on the river, and now that the false bottom was pulled out of it, the hours stood there, naked and his, with the killing in the middle of them.

"Thank you," Hron said. He stood. He did not put out his hand, because the man would not have wanted it and because Hron's hand, just then, was not a thing he trusted to be steady in the ordinary way. "You'll not hear from me again. If a paper comes to you from a magistrate, it will not say where the number came from, only that it is the

truth and that you can vouch it. I'll see to that much."

Doležal stood too, and took up his coat, and looked at it rather than at Hron. "He's a poor creature, the architect," he said, as he had said something like it a week ago at the door. "I keep thinking of it. A man builds houses and can't keep a roof over his own ruin." He shrugged into the coat. "Midnight, not two. You'll do what you do with it. I'll go home and sleep, which is the one thing this trade leaves a man unfit for." And he went out the way he had come, through the unmarked door, into the dark green room that the morning had not reached, and it shut behind him with a small upholstered sound, and Hron was alone in the long grey gallery with the charwoman and her pail and the soft beat of the clock above.

He went out into the cold. He did not feel triumph. He had told Bouda, on the corner of Korunní with the benzine at their backs, that he had long since stopped letting himself ride the high feeling of a thing solved, and he found the old caution holding now: the thing in him as he came down the marble step onto Národní Avenue was not elation but its opposite, a kind of cold completeness, the feeling of a man who has carried a heavy thing a long way and at last set it down and discovered that setting it down does not lighten him, only leaves his arms aching in the shape of the weight. The case was made. He knew it the way he knew, before a storm, that his knee

would ache. There was nothing left in it now that was loose.

He walked to Bartholomew Street rather than ride, because he wanted the cold and the cobbles and the time, and at the central criminal police he found Bouda already at the board, and the board as Hron had left it the evening before — the dinner and the dead hour, the two staircases, the two arrows of the trams correctly drawn, the silver man alone in his quarantine at the right margin with his single pin. Hron hung his coat, which did not steam today, the air being dry, and stood before the cork with his hands behind his back, and Bouda, who had read the door already, said nothing, only waited with two glasses of tea cooling on the sill.

“It was midnight,” Hron said.

Bouda’s head came up.

“He left the Louvre at midnight. Not two. The croupier squared his marker against the house book and put the hour to it in his own hand, because a marker without an hour can be lied out of, and the hour was midnight. He’ll swear it before a magistrate, unwilling but sworn.” Hron took up the pencil. Low on the board, under the word *bolt* where for days there had been a white space and the flat block words *The bolt. How.* — words he had been able, this week past, finally to rub out and answer — he wrote now, in the same flat hand,

against the left margin where the night began: *Louvre* — out by 00:00. And he drew the first arrow.

“Watch it build,” he said. It was not for Bouda’s benefit, or not only; a man assembles a thing aloud to hear whether it rings true in the open air or only in the warm dark of his own wanting it. He moved the pencil from the arrow.

“Midnight, out of the Louvre, cleaned to the bone, with men to pay by the first of March and no father he can go to any more without the answer being no — the codicil signed the twenty-fourth, though he believes, poor devil, that the signing was put off, so he goes out into the cold still thinking himself the heir, thinking the whole estate is one old man’s bath-night away from his hands.” The pencil moved along the river. “He has the dead hour to make the embankment in, because no one watches a cleaned-out man’s hours but the men he owes, and they watch only the day he’s due. And he has the key — the duplicate to the service door labelled *young master* in his father’s own ink, on a board his father never thought to change, because a father does not change the lock against his own blood until the very week he means to, and then dies first. Up the back stair the deaf side of the concierge cannot hear, into a flat where the bedtime tea was made and drunk and the things washed by a hand on a maid’s night off — and in the tea the veronal he had filled twice in one February at a Vinohrady chemist’s for an insomnia that needed it once. The old man drunk from his own dinner and slowed

with the barbiturate, in his bath, in the small hours. And his son holds him under." The pencil touched Stross's note, the bruise under the jaw, the burst vessels of a forced submersion and not a fall. "Near two o'clock. The surgeon's two hands. Held, not fallen — the one fact in the whole case that was never in doubt and that the suicide story could never swallow."

"And then the door," Bouda said, low.

"And then the door." Hron moved to where, this week, he had at last pinned the thing he had gone into the gutter below the service stair to find — the loop of waxed line, the hooked florist's wire, the homely learnable trick by which a man in the corridor draws a barrel bolt that every eye swears was thrown from within, the scratch on the door that had meant nothing in the first week now meaning everything. "He sets the bolt from outside through the grille, with the wire and the line he'd tied to the knob days before, and he draws the wire out after, and the line he means to flush is in the gutter where his nerve failed him or his haste, which is where it hanged him. He leaves by the service stair, into the alley, near five past two. And he is in such a state, or such a hurry, or such a need to be a man riding home like any man, that he had — an hour before, coming the other way — bought himself a tram ticket on the seventeen on the embankment, at fifty-five minutes past one, with his collar up, and put it in his coat and forgot it, the way a man forgets the one thing that hangs him."

He stepped back from the board and looked at the whole of it, and the whole of it held.

“There,” he said. “Read it across, Karel. Every link, and who forged it. The surgeon gives me the method — held, drowned, near two, not a man who took his own life and not a man who fell. The wire and the line in the gutter give me the door — how a corridor draws a bolt that swears it was shut from inside. The chemist gives me the means in the tea. The Louvre gives me the want, the marker due the first to men who lend against the body. The codicil gives me the cruelty of it — that he killed for an inheritance the paper had already taken off him days before, and never knew. And now —” he laid the pencil down on the tray under the board, the way you lay down a card you have no more use for, face up “— now the ticket gives me the place and the croupier gives me the time, and they fit, the place and the time, the one o’clock-fifty-five on the river and the midnight out of the cards, with not a minute of daylight left between them for a defence to put a wedge in. He had two hours unwatched and he spent them on the embankment. Until this morning he had a wall at two o’clock he could stand behind. He has no wall now. He has the hours, and the hours are his, and in the middle of them is his father, held.”

Bouda was quiet. Then: “It’s whole.”

“It’s whole.” Hron picked up the cold tea and drank it, the small punishment, because finding the thing whole was the most dangerous moment of any case and he distrusted the wholeness even

as he stood inside it. "There isn't a link a lawyer can bend. He'll run at every one of them, and every one is a door already shut. The trams — that Procházka's one-fifty-five man was the other passenger, the silver one; the depot books answered that a week ago, two columns, a coin that isn't a ticket, two men that were never one. The bolt — that no living hand could have thrown it, that the door proves the old man chose the water; the wire in the gutter answers that. The alibi — that his client sat at cards till two; the croupier's own hour against his own marker answers that. That's not luck, Karel. That's a week of refusing the easy joinings until only the true one was left standing." He set the empty glass down. "Take it to the magistrate. All of it, in order, the file the way we built it. Pelc's frightened-Jew suicide is dead the moment the magistrate reads the surgeon over the bolt and the croupier over the hour. Ask for the warrant."

Bouda was already reaching for his hat.

The warrant came back from the examining magistrate's chambers a little after noon, with the dry red seal and the dry formula, *that the named Victor Reszke be taken and held to answer*, and Pelc heard of it in the corridor before the paper was on Hron's desk, and came to the door with his hat on and did not, this time, come in. He stood in the doorway a moment looking at the board, at the suicide story he had wanted, dead now on the cork under the surgeon's flat hand and the croupier's flat number, and whatever he had meant to

say he did not say it. He had been wrong, and he was not a stupid man, and the two together made him silent, which was the nearest Augustin Pelc ever came to grace. He touched the brim of his hat and went away down the corridor, and the typewriters ran and stopped and ran.

Hron did not go with Bouda to lock the warrant in the drawer. He stayed before the board after the room had emptied toward the noon meal, in the knocking quiet of the radiators, and looked at the night laid out along the river from eleven to two, airtight, every link steel — and his eye went, as it had been going all morning, to the one place on the board that was not filled.

It was up at the dinner, at the head of the table, in the space he had quarantined on the first day with a single pin and no line, the space where the fourteen guests had set, in fourteen mouths, a fifteenth man the Leica had not caught and no record on earth could hold. He had written nothing there in all these weeks. He had not been able to. There was no ticket for it, no marker in any house book, no number, no coat, no cleaner's tin, no chemist's ledger, no key on any board — none of the homely paper residue by which a man is known to have passed through an hour and is therefore findable and therefore, if guilty, hangable. There was only the chair. He had drawn the chair, weeks ago, out of some instinct he did not examine, an empty chair at the head of the table opposite Reszke's, and under it he had not written a name, because there was no name to

write — only the line in the ledger in a hand that was not Reszke's, *The One Who Counts*, the one who counts, which was not a name a man wears in the street.

He took up the pencil again, the same pencil he had laid down face-up with the case complete. He looked at the empty chair a long moment. And under it, in the small white space, he wrote, in the flat block hand he kept for the things he meant to do — but there was nothing here he meant to do, and the hand knew it before he did — a single word, and stopped, the lead resting on the cork after it as if waiting for more that did not come.

Guest.

That was all. There was no surname to follow it, no hour, no arrow running to it or from it, because nothing the chair had touched advanced or obstructed a single link of the steel chain that lay below it along the river, and remove the chair entirely and the night solved itself the same, midnight out of the cards, the key, the tea, the water, the wire, the ticket, the man. The case was made without it. The case had never needed it. And Hron stood with the pencil at rest on the word and understood, with the cold completeness he had carried out of the Louvre that morning and would now carry, he saw, a great deal further than out of the Louvre — that he had closed the case, every link of it, beyond the power of any lawyer to bend, and that he had not closed, and would not close, the one space on the board he had left blank; that both of these were true at once and

would go on being true, the shut thing and the open one, the man he could hang and the guest he could not name, for the rest of his life.

The radiators knocked. Down the corridor a tram bell came faint through the cold glass, two notes and then one, the city going about the ordinary business of being awake. Hron lifted the pencil off the word at last, and looked at it standing there alone under the empty chair, and did not draw the line.

25. The Arrest

THE LIGHT WAS GOING OFF THE RIVER when they came for him, and it went the way it goes in March, not down behind anything but simply thinning, as though the day were a colour being rinsed out of cloth, and by the time Hron and Bouda stood on the embankment below the dead man's windows the water had no green left in it at all, only the flat pewter of the hour before the lamps. Victor Reszke kept a studio two streets back from the river, a cold north-lit room where he had once, the landlady said, meant to paint and now mostly slept, and Hron had timed it so that the man would be coming out into the early dark, because he did not want to take him on a stair, in a doorway, with a door to slam. He wanted the open quay and the water and the man's own father's windows three storeys up behind the frost, dark now, let to no one yet, the cold draught of them still on the case.

He saw Victor before Victor saw him: a tall young man in the grey ulster — recovered now from the cleaner's, the velvet collar still shiny at the fold — coming down the side street with his collar up against a wind that had nothing personal in it, walking the loose-jointed walk of a man who has not eaten properly in some days. He came out

onto the embankment and turned toward the bridge and the lights of the Café Slavia across the water, and Hron stepped off the rail where he had been leaning, unhurried, the way you step out to greet a man you have arranged to meet, and said his name.

“Mr. Reszke.”

Victor stopped. He was not a stupid man either — none of them in this case had been stupid, which was the grief of it — and he knew Hron’s face from the two interviews, knew Bouda’s from the door of the studio that afternoon, and he knew, in the half second it took the cold to find the back of his neck, what the two of them standing on the quay at dusk between him and the bridge could only mean. Hron watched it arrive in him. It arrived not as fear, first, but as a kind of tiredness, a settling, the look of a man who has been carrying a thing up a long stair and is told, at the top, to put it down.

“Chief Inspector,” he said.

“I’m going to ask you to come with us to Bartholomew Street,” Hron said. He kept his voice low and level, the voice for horses and for the newly bereaved and for men he was about to ruin. “There are questions about your father’s death that I think you would rather answer out of the cold.” He did not say *arrest*. He did not need to. The word was already in the air between them, the way the river was in the air, by smell and by cold, without anyone naming it.

Bouda had moved a half pace to the side, easy, his weight forward, between the man and the rail in case the man should think the water was a door. He need not have troubled. Victor looked once at the dark windows above them — his father's windows, the bath behind them where the thing had been done — and once at the river, and then he looked down at the wet stone under his good shoes, and his shoulders came down off their hooks, and he said, almost gently, as if it were a courtesy he could still offer:

“You needn't hold my arm. I'll come. I've been waiting for you for a fortnight. I thought it would be a relief and now it is, which I didn't expect.”

Hron did not hold his arm. He fell in on the man's right and Bouda on the left and they walked him off the embankment, the three of them, past the rail and the lamps just then coming on with their small electric sigh, away from the water and the windows, and a tram went by behind them with its bell going two notes and one, and the city did not look up.

They did not take a cab. Hron walked him the long way through the Old Town in the lamplight because a man who has decided to put a thing down will sometimes, walking, set the whole of it on the table before you have asked the first question, and a man in the back of a cab puts up his collar and his guard together. So they went up through the narrow streets with the frame-maker's smell of

glue giving way to coal and roasting chestnuts and the wet of the thaw, and somewhere off to the right the Orloj struck the hour over an empty square, the apostles going round their little round to no one, and under the going of it, between two of the strokes, Victor began to talk.

He talked the way everyone in this case had come in the end to talk — plainly, the plainness being the thing that landed. He did not perform it. He told it as a man tells a thing he has gone over so many nights in the dark that it has worn smooth, lost its edges, become merely true.

“I had a key,” he said. “To the service stair. He gave it me years ago, when I was still — when there was still a *when I was still*. The back stair, the one the deliverymen used, with the door into the alley. He cut me out of his house and off his table and out of his will, and he never changed that one lock, because” — Victor’s mouth did something that was not a smile — “because it would have meant going down to the concierge and asking for the locksmith and explaining, and he would sooner have died than explain himself to Kühn. So I had a key to my father’s house the whole time he was pretending I had no father.”

Hron said nothing. Bouda, on the far side, had got his notebook out but Hron caught his eye and shook his head a quarter of an inch: *not yet*. What a man says walking is air. What he signs at a table under a lamp is a confession. Hron meant to have the second and was content, for now, to listen to the first the way he listened to the river, letting

the words go past and keeping only the shape of them.

“There was a marker due,” Victor said. “The first of March. To men who don’t lend against a name. I had three days and nothing, and the thing about owing those men is that the not-paying is not a debt, it is a wound they open in you slowly to make an example. I am not brave, Chief Inspector. I want it on the record that I am not brave. I did it because I could not stand to be hurt, which is a smaller reason than the newspapers will give me.”

“And your father had money,” Hron said. It was the first thing he had offered. He offered it flat, without weight, the way you put a single stone on a scale to see which way the pan goes.

“My father had money and a will that left it to me. He’d told me the will was as it had been since ’twenty-eight. The codicil — Schück’s codicil — he told me the signing had been put off, that he’d not got round to it, you know how the old put things off. So I knew, *knew*, that the night he died I was still his heir. The flat, the collection, the loans, the money. Enough to tear that marker up ten times over and have my life back.” He stopped on the cobbles, and Bouda stopped, and Hron stopped, the three of them under a lamp by a shuttered haberdasher’s, and Victor looked at Hron with the look of a man told his wound was mortal after he had begun to hope. “He had money, and a will that named me, and three days was all I had. So yes. Yes.”

They walked on.

He gave it then, the whole of it, in the worn smooth voice, point for point, and Hron listened and matched each point against the cork board in his mind — the board he had built in pencil and pinned only when it held — and found that the man's confession lay down over his reconstruction like a tracing laid over a map, line for line, with nothing left hanging off the edge.

The veronal — his own, prescribed for his own sleeplessness, filled twice in February at the Vinohrady chemist's, which he had taken to carrying. He had come up the back stair earlier in the week, while his father dined elsewhere, and made himself familiar again with the dark of the flat, the bedtime habits the old man kept like liturgy: the tea at eleven, made in the kitchen, the maid away three nights in the week now that the household was run thin. On the night, he had let himself in near one in the morning, after the dinner guests were long gone and his father drunk and heavy and alone, and put the veronal in the tea things still warm on the tray — “he never noticed, he was three-quarters under from the wine already, he drank it like a child, he even thanked the empty kitchen for it, I heard him” — and waited in the cold of the back passage until the old man went under, deeper than sleep, and then —

Here Victor's voice did not break but went very quiet, and Hron had to lean to it over the going of a passing tram.

“He was in the bath. He took one last thing, always, for his joints, the doctor had told him hot water for the joints. He was in it asleep with the veronal and the wine in him, an old man asleep in his bath, and I —” The smooth wore through at last, just there, just for a syllable. “I held him under. It isn’t a thing you do quickly, Chief Inspector, an old man, even a sleeping one — the body argues with you even when the man is past arguing. I held him by the jaw and the shoulder and I looked at the wall the whole time. There’s a tile come loose above the taps, the grouting gone. I looked at that. I have looked at that tile every night since.”

Stross’s note rose in Hron’s memory, flat and exact: the bruising under the jaw, the burst capillaries of forced submersion, *the man was held*. The man was confessing the autopsy to him, sentence by sentence, without knowing it.

“And then the door,” Hron said.

“And then the door.” Victor drew a breath that shook only a little. “That was the part I was proud of, God forgive me. The barrel bolt, and the grille above it in the upper panel, the ventilation louvre — you’ll have seen it. Earlier in the week I’d tied a length of waxed fishing line round the knob of the bolt and led it up over the top slat of the grille so it hung down the corridor side, the end tucked out of sight. When it was done I pulled the bathroom door to from the corridor, and I had a wire — a florist’s wire, stiff, a little hook bent in the end — and I reached through the grille and hooked the

line and drew the bolt across, *shot* it home into the keeper, from outside, with the door shut and me on the wrong side of it. Then I drew the wire back out through the slat and pulled the line out after it, all of it, and there was nothing left but a bolted door with a dead man behind it and no one in the room. I put the wire and the line in my pocket. I dropped them in the gutter on Křižovnická on my way to the tram. I thought no one would ever —”

“There was a scratch on the lower slat of the grille,” Hron said. “And a fibre. Waxed.”

Victor stopped walking again. They were near the square now, the Týn towers black against a sky that had gone the deep blue-violet of full dark, and the lamps made their pools, and in one of the pools the man stood and understood that the police had been holding, all this while, the small bright end of the thread he had dropped in a gutter a fortnight ago.

“Then you had it,” he said, “before I told you.”

“I had the door,” Hron said. “I did not have the hand that worked it. Now I have both.”

It was Hron who told him about the codicil. He had not meant to — it served no purpose in the case, the case was made — and a kinder man would have let him learn it from Schück in the cold of probate. But Victor, as they came into the lamplight of the square, said the thing that decided it. He said, with a terrible small lift in his voice, the lift of a man reaching for the one timber still

floating: "At least it wasn't for nothing. Hannah will fight it, and there'll be the scandal, but the estate is *mine*, Chief Inspector, the will is the 'twenty-eight will, I am the heir, and whatever they do to me there'll be money to —" and he could not finish it, because he did not know himself what the money was now to be for.

And Hron, who knew exactly how ordinary and how cruel the next sentence was, said it plainly, because the man would hear worse said worse later and Hron would rather it came once, level, from someone who took no pleasure in it.

"The codicil was signed, Mr. Reszke. On the twenty-fourth of February. Four days before the dinner. Properly attested, witnessed, sealed. Your father told you the signing was postponed. It was not. By the time you came up the back stair you had not been your father's heir for five days." He let it stand a moment in the cold. "You killed him for an estate already gone to a foundation for the refugees coming over the border. You are not the heir. You inherit the contents of his ashtray. Schück's own words."

For a moment Victor did not move at all. The square was nearly empty, a man wheeling a bicycle, two girls laughing toward a tram, the ordinary indifferent business of the city being alive, and Hron watched the thing go into the young man like cold water into a coat — slowly, then all at once, then through to the skin. He saw him do the arithmetic, the appalling simple arithmetic of it, the held breath and the looked-at tile and the

marker torn up on the second of March bought with money that had never, not for one hour of that night, been his to spend.

And Victor Reszke broke. Not theatrically. He put his hand out and touched the cold iron of a lamp-post as if to be sure of one solid thing, and his face came apart in the way a man's face does when the structure under it gives, and he said, not loudly, "Oh," only that, "oh," the way a man says it when he has dropped something that cannot be mended, and then he wept, standing in the square under the lamp with his good coat and his shiny collar, and Bouda looked away because he was young and it was not decent to watch, and Hron did not look away, because part of his work was to be the one who looked.

It was after that — wrung out, leaning on the lamp-post, his wrists by now in the plain steel Bouda had brought across his coat sleeves at last, quietly, almost apologetically, there in the square — that Victor told Hron the thing Hron had not asked for and could not use.

He told it in a flat exhausted voice, looking at nothing, the way a man tells a dream that has stopped frightening him only because nothing can frighten him further tonight.

"When I came up the back stair," he said. "At one o'clock. Before — before the rest of it. The service stair lets you onto the corridor by the kitchen, and from there you can see along to the

dining room, the doors stand open. The guests were long gone. Everything cleared. Kühn's girl had done the table down to the cloth, you understand, it was bare, I could see it was bare in the dark." He stopped. "Except for one place. One place still set, at the head, opposite where my father sat. A plate, a glass, the silver laid. And a man sitting at it."

Hron stood very still.

"A thin man," Victor said. "In a dark coat, an old-fashioned cut, the kind of coat you see in the portraits in my father's books, the high collar, the long line of it. He had the ledger open in front of him — my father's guest-book, the one he kept forty years — and he was writing in it. By a candle. There was a candle burning at the head of the table and I knew, I *knew*, Chief Inspector, that no candle had been lit, the flat was dark, the guests were gone, the girl had put everything out, and there was a candle burning that no one had lit and a man writing in my father's book in the dark." His bound hands moved a little. "I told myself I'd imagined it. I was half mad that night, the veronal in my pocket and the thing to do still ahead of me. I told myself it was the wine in *me*, or a coat on a chair. I ran past. I did the thing I came to do, and I was in there a long time, the bath, the door, the bolt, the wire. And when I came back out, past the dining room, to go down the back stair —"

He looked up at Hron then, and his face was perfectly empty of cunning, emptier than it had been all evening, the face of a man who has noth-

ing left to gain by lying and is therefore, for the first time, simply telling the truth and frightened by it.

“The candle was gone. The man was gone. The place was cleared like all the others, bare to the cloth. And the ledger lay open on the table where my father always kept it, open at the last page, and there was a new line on it. A name. At the bottom. In a hand that wasn’t my father’s. I didn’t read it. I didn’t go near it. I went down the stairs and out the alley and I have not slept a whole night since, and it is not the drowning that keeps me awake, Chief Inspector, God help me, I can bear the drowning, I did it, it was mine to bear.” His voice dropped almost to nothing. “It’s that I don’t know who was at the table. I killed my father at two in the morning and at one in the morning there was a man already sitting at his table, writing him up in his own book, by a light no one lit.”

Hron did not write it down.

He stood in the cold square with the lamp hissing faintly over them and the last tram of the line going off toward the river with its bell, and he held the man’s eyes, and he understood several things at once and very clearly, the way he understood timetables. That this was a fourth voice, independent of the other three — the concierge, the conductor, the bookseller’s widow — and the only one that had seen the man *write*. That it changed nothing of the case. That Victor Reszke had murdered his father by veronal and water and a length of waxed line, alone, by ordinary means, for mon-

ey already lost, and that the man at the head of the table had not lifted a finger toward any of it and had not needed to. That whatever Victor had seen at one o'clock, it had done one thing and one thing only — it had *witnessed* — and that a witness is not a cause, and that the difference between those two words was the whole of what Hron could lawfully put in a file.

And so he did not write it down. He could not. There is no column on the form for a man at the head of a cleared table writing by an unlit candle. He had learned long ago that the only defence against a thing you cannot explain is to write down exactly its size and not a hair more, and this thing had no size he could set down without it bleeding into the clean human page of the confession. He would record the key and the veronal and the wire and the bolt and the drowning, every word of which the morgue and the chemist and the gutter and the door corroborated. The rest he would carry, uncolumnd, the way he carried other things.

“Mr. Reszke,” he said quietly. “We’ll go to Bartholomew Street now. You’ll say all of it again, the true part, the part I can use, to a magistrate, and you’ll sign it, and it will be done properly so that no clever man can take it off you later and put you back in the street to do worse. Do you understand me.”

Victor nodded. He had stopped weeping. He had the spent, clear look of a man after a long fever.

“You don’t believe me,” he said. “About the table.”

Hron took his arm at last, lightly, to turn him toward the street that led down to the police, and he gave the man the only honest answer he had.

“I believe you saw something,” he said. “I can’t use it. And you’re not to speak of it to the magistrate, because it won’t help you and it will let a sharp lawyer call you mad and call the rest of it madness too, and the rest of it is true and you’ll answer for it. Keep the table for yourself.” He almost said *as I will*, and did not.

They walked him down toward Bartholomew Street, the three of them, out of the square and into the narrower dark, and at the corner Victor stopped one last time, not to resist, only to say it, the bound hands held a little before him, his voice gone past grief into something flatter and worse, and Hron knew before he spoke that this was the sentence he would carry home and that it would keep him from sleep the way the looked-at tile kept Victor from his.

“He wasn’t there for me, Chief Inspector. He never looked at me. Not once, the whole time I stood in that doorway — he never lifted his head. He was writing my father’s account, the whole of it, in a hand like frost. I killed a man who was already being judged by someone who didn’t need me at all.”

And then he wept again, and it was only the ordinary weeping of a ruined son, a man who had gambled and feared and murdered for money and

lost even the money, who would go down whatever stairs were left to him to a cell and a court and the rope or the long years; and that weeping, at least, Hron understood entirely, and could put a name to, and would have written down if there had been a column for it; and he stood with his hand on the man's arm in the cold and let him finish, because part of his work, the oldest part, the part that was not in any procedure, was to be the one who stayed and looked while a man came apart, and did not turn away.

The lamps burned. A tram bell sounded once, far off, down by the river, and did not sound again.

26. Three Residues

IT WAS A SUNDAY, AND HRON SHOULD have been in Vinohrady. He had told his sister he would come at eleven and read to Agnes the next chapter of the long English book about the boy and the river — they were near the end of it, where the raft comes apart and the boy chooses to be damned rather than send a letter — and instead he had telephoned the porter's lodge from the call-box on the corner of Bartholomew Street and asked the man to walk up and tell Marie her brother would not be at eleven, that something had kept him, that he would come before dark if he could. Then he had stood a moment in the cold glass box with the crown's worth of click still in his ear, and thought of the chapter unread, and of his sister's face at a door opening on no one, and of the fact that the case was solved and there was no reason on earth he should be doing what he was about to do.

The case was solved. That was the thing. Victor Reszke sat in a cell on the floor below, and had signed, in a hand that shook only at the loops, an account of the key and the tea and the veronal and the wire and the water — the whole humble machinery of a son drowning a father for an inheritance he had already lost and did not know he had

lost. The magistrate had the confession. The croupier had broken the alibi. Stross had the bruising under the jaw written up in his small even Latin. There was nothing left that a court would want. The file could be tied with its red tape and carried up to the examining magistrate and put away among the year's other griefs. Pelc wanted it tied. The magistrate wanted it tied. Hron's own tiredness wanted it tied — the particular tiredness that came after the arrest, when the thing was done and the dead were no less dead.

He went up to his room and took down three things from the steel cupboard and laid them on the desk in the grey light of the window, side by side, the way Stross laid out instruments before he opened a body.

A coin, in its twist of handkerchief.

A photograph, glossy, of a wine glass dusted grey, the loops and whorls of a single thumb standing up out of the powder like the rings of a felled tree.

And a second photograph, of the last page of a dead man's book.

He sat down to them. The radiator was off — it went off on Sundays, the building keeping its own poor economy — and the room held the brass cold of the door handle and the cold off the glass and the older cold of a place where men sat alone and wrote down what they could prove. He would prove these were nothing. That was the work he had given up his daughter for. He would walk through each of the three doors the rational world

held open — the three convenient explanations a tired man could lean on — and come out the other side with the residues reduced to error, to the ordinary muddle of an ordinary night, and then tie the file and go to Vinohrady, late, and read to the girl, and be a man who had finished a thing.

He started with the coin, because the coin was the one he wanted least to keep.

The dealers in old coins were a small guild, and on a Sunday a closed one, but Hron knew where two of them lived, and one — Lówy, on the third floor over a shuttered shop on Kaprova — opened his door in his shirtsleeves with a napkin in his collar and a Sunday smell of carp behind him, and looked at the rank in Hron's coat and sighed the sigh of a man whose religion is interrupted by other people's republics. But he was a dealer, and a dealer cannot help himself in the presence of a coin, and when Hron unfolded the handkerchief on the oilcloth Lówy forgot his dinner.

He turned the thaler under a loupe screwed into his eye, breathed on it, weighed it in a little brass balance he kept on the sideboard the way another man keeps the salt; and he was a long time, and Hron watched the carp go cold through the open door and did not hurry him, because he had not come to be told what he wanted. He had come to be told the truth, and the two were not the same, and he had learned the difference at a great price.

“Genuine,” Lówy said at last, with the flat certainty of a man whose whole life had taught him this one thing. “Rudolf the Second, Prague mint — the style in the eagle’s wing. No forger does the wing. The wing is forty hours’ work for no profit.” He set the loupe down. “And the wear is right. That is always the thing, Inspector. A faker can cut you a die. He cannot give you three hundred years of pockets. This has been in pockets, in purses and poor-boxes, in the bottoms of drawers, and once — by the green in this groove — in the ground. It is what it says it is.” He pushed it back with one finger, gently, the way you push back something you would have liked to keep. “Where did you get it?”

Hron told him. He told him plainly, because he had found that the plain telling of an impossible thing was the surest way to watch a clever man fail at it, and Lówy was clever. A conductor took it for a fare on the night seventeen on the first of March. Two crowns. From a passenger.

Lówy laughed, the short laugh of a man handed an easy puzzle. “Then it is simple. Your dead man had a thousand such. He gave it away — a tip, a flourish; the rich ones do it when the wine is in them. ‘Here, my good fellow, a thaler of the old Emperor, drink my health.’ And the fellow, not knowing brass from his own grandmother, spends it on a tram.” He spread his hands. There. Solved. He reached for his napkin, the carp recalled.

“He did not leave his flat,” Hron said.

Lówy stopped, the napkin half-lifted.

“The whole case stands on it. He was three storeys up with the door bolted from two in the morning until they broke it at half-past seven, and dead in the water for five of those hours. He gave no thaler to anyone on the embankment at midnight, because he was not on the embankment at midnight. He was upstairs, dying. And his coins —” Hron had thought this through in the night, the way he thought all his walls through, testing each stone with his thumb. “His coins were in a collector’s cabinet with a glass lid, locked, and Wertheimer made the inventory the morning after, and not a coin was out of its bed in the velvet. Every Rudolfine thaler he owned — he owned four — is under the glass, where the catalogue says. This is a fifth.”

The dealer sat down slowly. He was no longer thinking about carp. He turned the coin again, but differently now, the way a man turns over a thing that has begun to weigh more than it did.

“Then it is not his,” Lőwy said, but the certainty had gone out of his voice and left only the words. “The passenger brought it. He had it before he ever came near your dead man.”

“Yes,” Hron said. “That is the only door left, and I have walked through it, and there is a wall behind it. The passenger came up to the flat at midnight and was seen to go up and not to come down. Then he was seen to come down by no one but the conductor, who put him on the tram at the embankment, where he had no business unless he came from the flat. The thing makes a circle,

Lówy. He came from the man who had the coins. He paid in a coin no living man carries. And the man he came from never left the room he died in.”

Lówy had the loupe in his fingers again but did not raise it; he only turned it, as Hron turned things. Then he did what the others had done — Vacek, Kühn, Procházka, the involuntary honesty of practical men at the edge of their competence — he pushed the coin away across the oilcloth, all the way, until it lay nearer to Hron than to himself, and wiped his fingers on the napkin though there was nothing on them.

“I cannot help you, Inspector. It is a true coin and a false story and I cannot make the one fit the other, and I have been forty years at this table and I do not like the feeling.” He looked at the carp going cold, and back. “Take it away, if you would. It is a beautiful thing. I find I do not want it in the house tonight.”

The thumbprint was easier and worse.

Easier, because the work was done; it lay in the fingerprinting files in the basement, the patient labour of three weeks, and on a Sunday afternoon Hron had it to himself — the long deal table under the bare bulb, the card-drawers, the loupe on its brass arm, the silence of a department whose men were home with their families. Worse, because there was nothing left to do but read what the work said, and the work said nothing, which is the loudest thing a file can say.

He laid the glass-plate card of the unknown print under the loupe and the cards of the excluded beside it in their long row, and went down the row again though he knew the answer the way you know a stair in the dark.

The fourteen guests, printed with the bad grace of the respectable — Schück white with affront, the bookseller's widow holding out her inked fingers like a child made to show clean hands — and excluded. The household: Hannah, the maid, the cook, the man who carried the wine. Excluded. The caterer and his three men — and this was the wide easy door the rational world held open here, the door marked *caterer*, because a hired man handles a hundred glasses and goes home unremembered — but Hron had sent Bouda to the premises on Spálená with the ink pad in the first week, and the four cards were in the file, the patron and his journeymen, and not one was the thumb on the glass. Reszke himself, printed in death on Stross's table as he had printed his guests in life. Excluded. The delivery men, the laundry, the sweep who had come that month — Bouda had run them all to ground with the dull thoroughness Hron prized above any brilliance, dozens of cards, and not one was the thumb. And the great anthropometric collection itself, the whole criminal memory of the Republic, searched by the pattern and the ridge-count and the Galton points in the slow weeks the system needed. No match. No man in the files of the state had pressed that thumb to that glass.

Hron sat under the bulb and thought about what a print was. The simplest evidence there was, simpler than a coin, simpler than a hand of writing, because it could not lie and could not be argued and belonged to one living man and to no other man who had ever lived — that was the whole faith of the science, the thing the textbooks put in their first chapter: *no two alike, and unchanging from the womb to the grave*. A name written by the body itself, in a script no one had ever found how to forge. And here was one, clean and deep, the thumb pressed once to a glass and lifted, the print of a man who had drunk at a dead man's table — and it matched nothing. Not the living, not the recorded dead, not the hired or the housed or the swept. A name in a language with one speaker, and the speaker not in the room, nor in the files, nor — Hron thought, looking at the rings of it standing out of the grey powder like the river seen from very high — anywhere a man with a loupe and a card-drawer could go.

He had done the rational work entire. He had skimped no door. And the work had brought him here, to a print that belonged to a thumb, and a thumb that belonged to a hand, and a hand that belonged to no one — honestly, completely, every drawer pulled and every card turned, to a wall.

He put the cards back in their order, because a thing set back in order is the only comfort such a room offers, and turned off the bulb, and went up.

The ledger he had saved for last, because the ledger was the one Brod had already closed against him, and a man does not like to be told twice by the same shut door.

But he made himself sit with it in his own room, the afternoon going down outside the window into the early dark of a March that had not yet decided to be spring. The photograph of the last page. Fourteen names in Reszke's small upright hand, the dinner of the twenty-eighth, the seating set out as the man had set out forty years of his dinners. And the fifteenth line, a little apart, at the head, opposite the host's own place — in the other hand. The old German hand. *The One Who Counts*. The one who counts.

Three things forbade the comfortable answer, and Hron took them up one at a time and pressed each with his thumb and found it sound, which was the opposite of what he wanted.

The graphology, first. He had sent the page to Hejduk at the institute, the best the Republic had at hands, a sour exact man who had unmasked two forged wills in the years Hron had known him and took a professional pleasure in calling a thing false. Hejduk had spent a week with the page and the comparison hands — every living person who could be put near the ledger — and come back not with a name but with a refusal. The hand matched no one. And more: it could not have been *made* by anyone in the set, because it was not a hand a living Czech or German formed and disguised; it was a hand learned whole, in another century's

schoolroom, by a man whose letters had set like plaster before he was thirty and never moved again. *You cannot fake what you did not learn young*, Hejduk had written at the foot of his report, in his own clipped hand. *The boyhood is in the down-stroke. This boyhood is not ours.*

The ink, second. Reszke had written his fourteen names that night in his own iron-gall ink, that browned with the years, and the chemist at the institute — there was a little chemistry the year allowed, enough to age an ink by its oxidation if not to do the wonders the films promised — had compared the dried fifteenth line to the fourteen above it, and to the dinners of January and December going back, and found it aged *exactly* as the names it sat among. Not later. Not a forgery slipped in after the death, when the ledger lay on the dining table and then in police hands and might by some long reach have been got at. The fifteenth line had dried on the night of the twenty-eighth, in the same hour as the names around it, and browned ever since at the same patient rate; and no chemistry in Prague could make a new line lie about its age so well, because the aging was not a look but a process, and a process takes the time it takes.

And the third thing, the human thing, kept for last because it was the one a policeman could use, and the cruellest of the three. *Who could have written it.* Set aside that the hand was old and the ink was old, and ask the flat question the trade asks of every false document: who, among the living, had

the skill? Who in Reszke's world could form an old German hand well enough to fool Hejduk? There was exactly one. Rabbi Elias Brod, who had spent his life over old hands, who could read the fifteenth line aloud and tell you the century of its schoolroom — who alone of every soul in the case had the learning in his fingers to have made the thing, if any living man had.

And Brod had been at evening prayers.

Hron had checked it, quietly, not because he believed it of the Rabbi but because the trade did not permit a man to leave a door unopened merely because he liked the man behind it. The twenty-eighth was a weekday evening: the ma'ariv prayer, thirty men in the small room off Široká, the boy of nine among them, the Rabbi at their head from before the dinner sat down on the embankment until well after it rose. A score of witnesses, none of them friends of Reszke, none with cause to shelter a forger. Brod had been a mile across the city, on the far side of the river of rooftops, leading the prayers of his small congregation at the very hour someone wrote a line into a dead man's book in a hand three hundred years old. The one living man who could have done it had been, demonstrably and under oath, doing something else.

And he would not have done it in any case — and this Hron knew not as evidence but as the residue a man leaves in another man's judgment after an afternoon in a warm room full of books. *I am too honest to give you a forger I cannot find*, Brod had said, *and you, I think, are too honest to want one.* It

had not been a refusal to help. It had been the help.

He laid the three out on the desk again in the last of the light, the coin and the two photographs, and looked at them together — which he had avoided all day, because together they made a shape he did not want to name.

Each door had been real. That was the thing, almost worse than if the doors had been false from the start. The tip-theory of the coin was a true door — collectors did tip in such coins, it was the likeliest thing in the world — and it had opened onto a wall, because the man who owned the coins had not left the room he died in. The caterer-theory of the print was a true door — hired hands handle glasses and go unremembered — and it had opened onto a wall, because every hired hand was printed and none was the thumb. The forgery-theory of the ledger was the truest door of all, the one a policeman was *required* to walk through, and it had opened onto a wall built of three stones — the hand, the ink, the alibi — any one of which alone he might have found a way round, and all three of which together he could not.

That was the pattern. Not one door slammed in his face. Three doors that opened, courteously, onto walls. Each mundane explanation almost sufficient — *almost*, the cold word, the word Brod had not said and had meant — each falling short by

exactly the distance a draught comes under a door: not enough to call it open, not so little you could call it shut. He had built his whole life on the conviction that there were no such doors; that every wall, given patience and timetables and the unglamorous residue of the ordinary hour, became a door at last; that a man who reconstructed the ordinary hour faithfully enough would always find the human hand that had moved through it. He had reconstructed this hour to the minute. He had the human hand: it belonged to Victor Reszke, and it had drowned an old man for money. And there remained, when all of that was done, three things on his desk the human hand did not account for, and no further patience was going to turn them into doors, because he had already given them all the patience there was.

He did not force a verdict. That was the discipline, and he held to it now as he had held to it in the depot canteen with the dead emperor's silver going cold against his heart. He would not call it a hoax, because he had failed — honestly, completely, every drawer pulled — to find the hoaxer, and a man who cannot find the hoaxer has not earned the word. He would not call it the other thing either, the thing with no place in a police file, that Pelc would strike out with one stroke of a pencil and the magistrate would thank him for striking. He took his pen, and under the closed and provable account of the murder of Simon Reszke by his son Victor, he wrote three entries in his own plain hand:

The coin: genuine; provenance unestablished; tip-theory excluded by victim's confinement. Unresolved.

The thumbprint: matched against all living and filed candidates; no match. Unresolved.

The ledger entry: forgery excluded by hand, ink-age, and alibi. Author unestablished. Unresolved.

Three times the word, like a stamp brought down three times on a paper that would not take the ink. It was the truest report he had written in twenty years and it would be the one they liked least.

It was full dark when he came out of Bartholomew Street, but he did not go to the tram for Vinohrady. He went the other way, toward the river, with the thaler in its handkerchief in the inner pocket over his heart where it had ridden since the depot, and found that his feet had taken him, without his deciding it, out onto the Charles Bridge.

It was empty at that hour, the Sunday strollers gone in to their suppers, the first lamp not yet lit, and the great blackened saints stood along the parapets with the dark coming up off the water to meet the dark coming down out of the sky, so that they seemed to stand in their own night — older than the gas, older than the Republic, older, some of them, than the coin in his pocket. The river ran below, the green-black it went at dusk, the particular green of the Vltava that was like no other water, and somewhere upstream a barge showed one

low light and was gone under the arch. The cold came off the water and found the old place above his knee.

He stopped midway, between a saint with his arms out and a saint with his hands folded, and took the coin from the handkerchief and held it up to the last of the light, which was not in the sky any more but only on the river, a grey shine the water gave back after the air had let it go. Rudolf's worn profile caught it — the ruffed throat, the pointed beard, the sidelong eye that still, after three hundred years, looked at something just outside the frame. Three centuries old, and warm now. That was the thing his thumb kept telling him against all sense: it was warm. It had been against his heart all day and taken his heat the way any silver would, and it lay in his palm warm as a living thing, the only coin in the Republic he could not have spent in any shop, warm from his own hand.

He could drop it in the river and be done. The thought came clean and complete. One small movement of the wrist and the dead emperor would go down through the green into the mud where the city kept its drowned things, and there would be one fewer object in the world that did not account for itself, and he would walk off the bridge a man whose case was closed in every particular, and go to Vinohrady and read the girl the chapter where the boy chooses to be damned. No one would ever know. The file already said *unresolved*; a coin in the river changed no word of it.

He would simply have stopped carrying the thing that asked him to believe what he had spent his whole life refusing to believe.

He turned it once more, Rudolf's eye going into the dark and coming back. Then he wrapped it in the handkerchief, carefully, the way Brod's old finger had traced the air above the letters, and put it back in the inner pocket over his heart.

Some accounts, he thought, you do not get to close.

He had spent forty-nine years refusing to believe that. He had built the refusal into the man he was, stone by stone, timetable by timetable, every ordinary hour reconstructed until the dramatic one had nowhere to hide; he had made it the floor he stood on after the influenza winter took Clara and locked his daughter's voice behind a door no doctor could pick — for he had needed, then, to believe the locked things would open, that patience was a key that fit every lock if you turned it long enough, because the alternative was a thing he could not have lived in. And here, in the cold, with the river going dark and a warm coin against his heart that should have been cold, he found that he believed the other thing now. Not as a defeat. As a fact, laid down plainly like all his facts, in its own light. There were locks not given to him to pick. There were accounts a man did not get to close. He had known it about his daughter for five years and called it grief and kept it off his work; and now his work had brought him, by every honest road it had, to the same shut

door, and the draught was coming under it, and he stood and let it come.

The first lamp on the bridge took light behind him. He turned up his collar, and went to find a tram, and the saints stood on in the dark above the water, counting, as they had counted three hundred years, the men who crossed and the men who did not.

27. Pelc's Report

MONDAY THE NINETEENTH OF MARCH came up clear and cold over Bartholomew Street, the thaw of the week before frozen again in the night so that the gutters had grown small grey tongues of ice and the cobbles of the courtyard rang under a constable's boots the way they had not rung in days. Hron had been at his desk since seven with a cup of the central criminal police's coffee gone cold at his elbow, and he had not drunk it, and he had not, for the better part of an hour, written anything, because the report a man writes at the end of a case is the easiest of all reports and the hardest — easiest because there is nothing left to find, hardest because everything that will ever be known of the dead is about to be fixed in typescript and tied with string and put in a drawer. A man who has carried a body for nineteen days is reluctant to set it down. Victor Reszke was in a cell across the courtyard. The croupier from the Louvre had unmade his alibi with a single pull, and the young master had broken in the small interview room three days ago and told Hron, weeping, the whole of it — the key, the veronal in the bedtime tea, the wire and the waxed line drawn through the grille from the corridor, the old man held under the cold water by a

son's two hands — and had told him, after, the one thing Hron had not asked and could not use. The crime was solved. Wholly, cleanly, provably solved. That was not why Hron sat unmoving. He sat unmoving because there was a part of the file that was not the crime, and he did not yet know how to write it, and he suspected he would not be allowed to.

The summons came at half past eight, by a uniformed messenger with a chit in Kreutz's square hand. *Lederer's office. With the file.* Hron drank a mouthful of the cold coffee after all, to have something behind him, and took up the file, and went down.

The examining magistrate Lederer kept his rooms in the courts wing across the inner court, and the room was warmer than the superintendent's and smelled of good cigars he did not smoke at this hour and of the floor-wax the building used, and the magistrate was at the window with his rimless glasses pushed up onto his forehead when Hron came in, looking down into the frozen court, a thin precise man of sixty turning a paper-knife over and over in his fingers the way another man would turn worry beads. Pelc was already there. Of course Pelc was already there. He stood at the side of the desk in his coat, as he always stood near a seated superior, though Lederer was at the window and not seated at all, so that Pelc was standing for no one and stood anyway, out of the

long habit of standing, and Hron thought, not for the first time, that the man had arranged his whole body around the principle of being looked up at and could not now put it down.

“Chief Inspector.” Lederer turned from the window and brought the glasses down onto his nose and became, with that small gesture, the magistrate again rather than the man at the window. “Sit. You have brought it.”

“I have brought it.”

“Good.” Lederer took the file but did not open it. He laid it square on the blotter and rested the paper-knife across it like a man weighting down something that might otherwise lift in a draught. “Then let me first say the thing one ought to say at the beginning and not the end, because at the end everyone is too tired to mean it. You have done a fine piece of work. I have learned to tell the cases that are solved from the cases that are merely closed, and yours is solved. The two staircases. The duplicate key the old man never changed. The veronal twice filled in a single February. The bolt drawn from the corridor with a florist’s wire and a line of waxed gut through the grille — that humble, learnable little trick, found in the gutter where the boy dropped it, the scratch on the door-edge matching it to the millimetre. The ticket punched at fifty-two minutes past one. The croupier’s hour against the son’s.” He tapped the closed cover once with a thin finger. “It is a true case, built true, brick on brick, and it will stand in any court of this Republic, and the boy will hang

or not hang by it and either way it will be justice and not luck. I tell you so before the rest, so you will know the rest is not a complaint against your work.”

“Thank you, magistrate,” Hron said, and waited, because he had heard the word *but* coming the way one hears a tram three streets off, the rail singing before the bell.

“But.” Lederer took off the glasses again and held them to the window light, his old trick, looking through them and not at the man. “There is a part of your file, Chief Inspector, that is not your case. You know which part. I have read it three times now and each time I have liked it less, not because it is badly written — it is written better than the rest, which is itself a small alarm — but because I do not know what it is doing in a document that will go to a court and a registry and, in the end, to the historians who pick over us. You have a dead man, drowned by his son for an inheritance the son did not know he had already lost. That is your file. And folded inside it you have an extra plate, and a coin three hundred years out of currency, and a line in a guest-ledger written in a hand that belongs to no living person, and a wine-glass with a thumbprint on it that matches nothing on God’s earth — and you have written all of it down, soberly, exactly, the way you write everything, and you have not said what it is, because you cannot, and I am asking you now, before this goes any further, to take it out.”

There it was, laid flat on the blotter beside the paper-knife. Hron looked at the file and did not reach for it.

“Take it out,” he said.

“Dispose of it.” Pelc had been waiting, Hron saw, the whole length of Lederer’s praise, spending no card until the table was open to him. He spoke now in the reasonable register, the dangerous one, the one that made everything sound like the only sensible thing a sensible man could think. “Not destroy it, Hron — no one is asking you to burn evidence. Dispose of it. Give it a heading and file it where such things belong. A guest’s prank. You had a bookseller’s widow with a taste for the dramatic at that table, and among fourteen frightened, drunk, suggestible people there is always one who will swear to a phantom and three more who, told there was one, will remember it. *Mass suggestion*. It has a name; the alienists have written books on it; it stands up in court because the court already believes it. The widow saw a thin man in a dark coat because the concierge said she saw one, and the conductor remembered an old coat because by then half the embankment was telling the tale, and somebody — a footman, the boy himself for all we know, up the back stair early to scout his work — laid a fifteenth place as a cruelty or a joke or by simple miscount. Write *that*, Hron. It is even half true. And no court will ever have to read the word *ghost* in a Czechoslovak protocol, which is a thing the Republic will thank you for whether it knows it or not.”

The radiator ticked. Out in the court a pigeon went up off the frozen cobbles with a clap of wings and the constable's boots went on ringing.

"Is it half true," Hron said.

"It is as true as it needs to be." Pelc spread his hands, the conjuror, the empty palms. "Which is the only kind of true a file requires. A file does not have to be the world, Hron. It has to be the part of the world a court can hold. You taught me that twenty years ago, only you've forgotten it on this one case, because this one case has got into you."

Hron let that go past like the river. He had heard it from Pelc before, on a landing, in a third voice; he did not need it again in the first. He turned to Lederer, because it was the magistrate's pen that would decide it and not the inspector's mouth.

"Magistrate. I will tell you what I will write, and you will tell me whether you can sign it." He drew the file back across the blotter to his own side, gently, the way Rose Wertheimer had drawn the lending book to herself, and opened it, not to read it — he knew it by heart — but to have it open between them, an honest thing with its face up. "I will write the crime entire. Victor Reszke, the key, the veronal, the wire, the bolt, the cold water, the two staircases, the hour. Every brick, so plainly that a defence lawyer will find no air in it. That is the file, and I will stand in the box and say it under oath and not blush. The boy did it alone, by ordinary means, for money, and the means are in my hand and the money is in the ledger and the

hour is in the conductor's log. There is no mystery in the murder of Simon Reszke. The mystery is somewhere else, and it did not kill him, and I will say so."

"Then say so," Lederer said, "and stop there."

"I cannot stop there and write a true report. Because there are three objects on the dead man's account the night he died that I cannot explain, and a man who finds three such objects and writes a report that does not mention them has not written a true report; he has written a comfortable one. So I will record them. Factually. The way I record a fibre — which is what they are. Residue. One." He did not look at the file; he counted on the air above it, the way he counted his certainties, small, so they could not be taken from him. "An extra place setting, the fifteenth, where the ledger and the cataloguer both swear fourteen were laid; used, cleared, the glass a sealed Rudolfine glass from a cabinet the dead man kept locked on his own chain — found locked, the key on his chain still. I cannot account for how it came out. I record that I cannot. Two. That same wine-glass, bearing one thumbprint the fingerprinting has compared against every living soul in the case — son, wife, cataloguer, lawyer, all fourteen guests, every caterer, the dead man off Stross's table — and against the anthropometric files of the Republic, and it matches none of them. I record that it matches no one. I do not say whose it is. I do not know whose it is. Three." He paused. The pigeon had settled again somewhere out of sight.

“A line in the guest-ledger, in the entry for the twenty-eighth of February, reading *The One Who Counts* — in the place of the fifteenth diner, at the head of the table opposite the host. In a hand that is not the dead man’s, that Hejduk the court graphologist has matched against every exemplar we hold and found to match nothing living, and to resemble only hands that stopped being written a great while ago. In ink he finds aged to precisely the degree of the fourteen lines the dead man wrote around it the same night. Not laid down later. Not a forgery a later week can explain. I record that too. As an unmatched hand and an unexplained line.”

He closed the file.

“And then I will write one sentence, magistrate, and it is the only sentence in dispute between us, and it is this: *that the presence of a fifteenth diner at the last dinner of Simon Reszke, attested by three independent witnesses and by three physical residues, cannot, by any means available to this investigation, be accounted for.* That is all. I do not write *ghost*. I do not write *mystery*. I do not write that a man came up who could not come down. I write that I cannot account for it, which is the truest sentence in the file, because it is the only one that says exactly how much I know and stops there. Everything else I have written, I have proved. That one sentence is the one place I have written the size of my own ignorance instead of papering over it. And I would rather a registry held one true sentence about what we could not do than a comfortable lie about

a mass hysteria I cannot demonstrate and do not believe.”

The room was quiet a long moment. Pelc had not moved. Lederer turned the paper-knife over once, twice, and set it down, and drew the file toward himself across the blotter, and opened it, and turned the leaves with his dry finger until he came to the last pages, the ones not of the crime, and he read them, slowly, the way he read everything, his thin lips moving very slightly over the worst of it the way a man's lips move over a prayer he is no longer sure of. He read the three residues. He read them twice. And he came to the sentence, the single sentence, and Hron watched the magistrate's finger stop on it and rest there, on the line that admitted the unknown, and the office was so still that the ticking of the radiator was the loudest thing in it.

“It is a beautifully exact sentence,” Lederer said at last, not looking up. “That is the trouble with it. A sloppy sentence I could leave; the registry is full of them. But this one is exact, and cannot be misread, and that is why it cannot stand.” He looked up then, over the rimless glasses, and his face was not unkind; it was tired, and a little ashamed, and entirely certain, the face of a man who has read fourteen statements about a man in no photograph and felt the draught and decided, because the office runs on money and a court runs on what twelve solid men can hold in their heads, that the draught is not for him. “I will sign your file. The whole crime, exactly as you have built it.

I will sign the three residues, because a fibre is a fibre and any honest man can read those three paragraphs and draw his own conclusions in the privacy of his own skull, where the Republic has no jurisdiction. But this sentence I will strike. Not because it is false. Because it is true in a way the record cannot hold. The record can carry what we found. It cannot carry what we failed to find, written so plainly that a man in a hundred years must feel the cold of it. That is not for the registry. Take it where you like. It is not going in my file.”

And he drew the cap off his pen.

Hron did not move to stop him. He had known, coming down the stairs, that it would end here or somewhere like here, and he had argued not to win the sentence but to be on the record as a man who would not strike it himself, and there is a difference, and it was the whole of the difference he had left. He watched the magistrate’s pen come down on the line — one stroke, level, drawn with the unhurried hand of a man who had struck a great many lines in his service and felt the weight of none of them as he felt this one, which he carried in the small hesitation before the nib touched, and then did not carry, because a magistrate of the Czechoslovak Republic cannot afford to carry it. The ink went through the words. *Cannot, by any means available to this investigation, be accounted for.* A single firm line, edge to edge, and the sentence was under it, still legible, the way a struck thing is always still legible, which is the small mercy and the small cruelty of striking

rather than erasing. Lederer capped the pen. He turned back to the first pages, the crime, and at the foot of the last page of it he signed his name, full, with the date, the nineteenth of March, and the case of Simon Reszke became, in that signature, a thing the Republic had decided and need decide no further.

“It is a good file, Hron,” the magistrate said, blotting his own signature. “It is a good file with one fewer sentence in it. Most files are.” He pushed it back across the blotter, closed, tied. “Go and rest. You look like a man who has been carrying something.”

Pelc walked out with him. He always did; Hron had stopped being surprised by it. The corridor of the courts wing was long and cold and floored in stone worn to a shallow trough down the centre by a century of feet going to be judged, and the two of them went down it side by side, the rival of twenty years and the man with the closed file under his arm, and for a while neither said anything, and the only sound was their two pairs of shoes on the stone and, far off, a door, and a typewriter, and the small frozen ring of the city outside the high windows.

“You’ll not believe me,” Pelc said, when they had nearly reached the stair, and he said it to the corridor ahead of him and not to Hron, the way he had spoken on the landing that other morning, in the third voice, the one without the standing in it.

“But I’d have written it near enough the same as you. I’d not have fought for the sentence — I knew Lederer would take it the moment you read it out — but the three things, I’d have put the three things down. A coin’s a coin. A print’s a print.” He stopped at the head of the stair, and Hron stopped with him, because something in the man’s voice asked it. Pelc looked down the cold well of it, anywhere but at the man beside him. “I banked the thaler, Hron. The depot wouldn’t keep it once it was evidence, and it came across to us with a docket, and last week I drew it for the inventory because somebody had to, and I held it to read the number off the rim.” He was quiet a moment. “It’s cold, that coin. Everybody who’s held it says the same and everybody who hasn’t says it’s only silver, and they’re right, silver’s cold, I’m not a child.” He turned, finally, and looked at Hron, and there was none of the gentleness he used as a weapon and none of the needle he used for sport, only the plain offended honesty of a practical man at a thing that had no business being true — the exact look Hron had seen on a tram conductor and a deaf concierge and a precise woman behind a closed ledger. “It’s a colder cold than silver. I held it four seconds and put it back in its envelope and washed my hands, and I don’t wash my hands at things, I’ve held worse than a coin in thirty years. I’ll deny I said it. But I felt it, and I struck it out of my own report the same as Lederer struck your sentence, because I’m not going to be the inspector who wrote *the coin was un-*

naturally cold in a property docket and have the superintendent laughing at me till my pension." He went down two steps and stopped, and did not look back, and said the last of it to the stairwell. "So we're the same that far. We both felt the draught and both kept it out of the file. The only difference is you'll keep your own copy with the sentence in it. Don't tell me you won't. I've known you twenty years. There'll be a drawer somewhere with the true one in it. There always is, with you."

And he went on down, his footfalls even on the worn stone, a man who had lost the morning's argument again and again said, going out of it, the only wholly honest thing in the room.

Hron stood at the head of the stair a while after the sound of Pelc was gone, with the closed and signed file under his arm and the cold coming up the stone well of the building, and he thought that this was how it always was: the world cannot bear an open account, a sum at the bottom that will not come right, and so it closes the book, and rules the line, and signs its name under the closing, and calls the closing the truth. He did not blame Lederer's pen. The magistrate had signed the crime entire and signed it true, and the boy would answer for the old man in the cold water, and that was justice, the human kind, the only kind the building was built to make, and it had been made this morning, and it was good, and it was enough for the Republic and very nearly enough for Hron.

But not quite. He went back across the inner court, the frozen cobbles ringing under his own feet now, to his own desk in the central criminal police, and he set the signed file in the tray for the typists to copy fair, and then he took from the bottom of his case the carbon — his own carbon, the first draft, struck through nowhere — and he read down it once to the last page, to the sentence, *cannot, by any means available to this investigation, be accounted for*, whole and unlined, and he watched, out of an old habit, the ink that was not wet, that had dried days ago, the way the ink dries on every true thing a man writes before the world gets to it with a pen. Then he opened the drawer at the bottom right of his desk, the deep one, where he kept the things that were his and not the office's — a photograph he did not look at, a child's drawing folded once, a handkerchief with a coin's weight gone out of it — and he laid the carbon in, face up, and he closed the drawer, and he did not lock it. It was a drawer he never locked. He had a key for it somewhere and had not used it in years, because a thing a man does not lock is a thing he has decided not to be afraid of, and he had decided, a long time before this case, in a flat in Vinohrady where a girl drew the legs going the wrong way, not to be afraid of the things he could not account for. He let the world have its clean file. He kept his own, with the sentence still in it, in a drawer he did not lock, and he went to the window, and below him the river went by the colour of a coin left too long in a pocket, indifferent and enormous,

about the ordinary business of being a river, and somewhere a tram bell rang twice, then once, and Hron stood and watched the water and did not board it.

28. Returning the Ledger

HE BROUGHT IT BACK ON THE MONDAY, the nineteenth, in the late afternoon, with the case shut and the city beginning to believe, in its slow municipal way, that the matter of the antiquarian on the embankment had been a thing of debts and a son and was over. The ledger came back the way it had gone out, in the flat grey box the police photographer used for his largest plates — the same box that had held the print Hron had carried up these stairs a fortnight before and laid over an open book and asked an old man to read for him only what he saw. It was heavier now, the whole book in it instead of one photograph of one page. Hron carried it under his arm the length of Maiselova, and this time he did not stop at the long blank wall of the cemetery to look at the gravestones leaning on one another behind it, twelve thousand deep; he walked past the gate the way a man walks past a thing he has already decided about, and turned into the narrow streets the wreckers had left, and the still cold of Josefov closed over him with no river in it to carry the cold away.

The forms had been finished that morning. The examining magistrate had signed where signing was wanted; Pelc had his file, tidy on the human

side and scored through on the other where the magistrate's pen had taken out the one sentence that admitted what could not be written; and Victor Reszke sat in a cell on Bartholomew Street. The ledger was no longer evidence; the state did not keep what it could not use. By the ordinary order it would have gone to the executor, into a crate of the deceased's papers, and from there to whoever bought the lot, and from there to a barrow on the embankment with two crowns chalked on it. Hron had taken it instead. He had asked no permission, because there was no one whose business it was to give it, and he had told no one where he was carrying it, because there was no one who would have understood the carrying.

The boy let him in without surprise, a fortnight older, and led him along the passage that smelled of paper and of the dust that lives only in books, and knocked, and went away into the cold house. The study was as warm as before. The iron stove ticked in its corner. Three books lay open on the great table, face down upon one another, though Hron could not have said whether they were the same three; it was that kind of room, where a man's reading went on whether he was in the chair or not.

Brod rose. The ash-grey beard, the dry quick eyes. He looked at the grey box under Hron's arm before he looked at Hron's face, and Hron understood that the Rabbi had known what was in it from the weight of it across the room, the way he had known about the leg.

“You caught the son,” Brod said. It was not a question. The newspapers had carried it, briefly, on an inside page — *SON ARRESTED* — between the price of coal and a notice of a concert at the Mánes.

“I caught the son.”

“Sit. You are still standing on the bad leg.” Brod came round the table and took the box from him with both hands, gently, the way one takes a thing one has been asked to hold, not the way one takes a gift; and he set it among the open books and lifted the lid and looked down at what was inside without touching it. The ledger lay face up, the half-leather spine cracked and re-cracked, brother to the working books Rose Wertheimer had laid out for Hron on Maiselova — the same paper, the same hand for forty years and then, on the last page, the other hand. Brod did not open it to the last page. He did not open it at all.

“You have brought it to me,” he said.

“I had nowhere to put it.”

The Rabbi looked up. Something moved at the dry corner of his mouth that was not quite a smile and was not its opposite. “That is an honest sentence, Chief Inspector. You had a place for everything else. The son to a cell. The wire and the line to the magistrate, I should think, in a paper envelope with a number on it. The wife back to her own grief, which you let her keep. Every thing of this affair you have put where it belongs.” He laid one finger, not on the ledger but on the lid of the box beside it. “And this one thing you could find

no shelf for, in the whole of the Police Directorate, in the whole of the law. So you carried it across the river to a man who reads old books. Why?"

Hron had thought he would have an answer ready and found that he did not. He sat in the chair he had stood beside a fortnight ago, and the knee took his weight badly and settled, and out in the court a pigeon clattered onto a sill and the pipes knocked below as a kettle was filled — the same small domestic noises as before, as if the house kept its own ledger and entered each visit twice.

"Because you are the only man," Hron said slowly, "who will neither explain it to me nor explain it away."

Brod inclined his head a fraction, as a man acknowledges a fee correctly counted.

"Schück would have it valued," Hron went on, finding it as he said it, the way he found most true things, by setting them out in the air and seeing whether they stood. "An old guest-book, forty years, the signatures of half the dead notables of Prague — there is money in such a thing for the right collector. He would not read it. Pelc would burn it, or wish to; to Pelc it is the one loose thread in a sewn-up file, and he does not like a room with a draught in it, so he would shut the draught by shutting the door on the whole room. The collectors who came to Reszke's shop would cut the leaves and sell them singly for the autographs. Any one of them would do something to

it. Make it a relic or make it a fraud. And it is neither.”

“No,” said Brod. “It is neither.” He sat down across the table, the box between them, and folded his hands upon it lightly, the backs of them spotted and very still. “You want me to tell you what it is.”

“I have given up wanting that, Rabbi. You told me a fortnight ago I would solve the one and not the other, and not to mistake them. I have not mistaken them. The son is solved. A key his father gave him as a boy, a barrel-bolt and a piece of fishing line; he sedated an old man with the same drug he takes for his own sleeplessness, and drowned him for an inheritance he had already lost and did not know he had lost. There is no draught in any of that. It is a man and his reasons, ugly and complete; I could draw the whole of it on one sheet and there would be no line I could not prove.” He looked at the box. “And then there is this. The fourteen names in his hand and the fifteenth in a hand that is no one’s. A wine glass with a thumb on it that is no man’s thumb in any file in the Republic. A silver thaler three hundred years out of currency dropped into a tram conductor’s till on a night the man who might have given it as a tip never left his rooms. Three things, Rabbi — three small physical things that should each have a small ordinary door behind them. I have spent the last days of a closed case walking through those doors one after another, against my own interest and the wishes of everyone above

me, and each one opens onto a wall, and under each wall there is cold air coming from somewhere I cannot find.”

He had not meant to say so much. He heard the dryness leave his own voice as he said it, the policeman’s flat manner thinning to something underneath, and he let it thin, because there was no one in the room who would write it down and use it against him.

Brod was quiet a while. The stove ticked. Below, the kettle had come to its filling and stopped, and the pipes were still.

“You came to me in February with the same trouble,” he said at last, “though you did not know it was the same trouble then. You held a photograph and asked me to read it and tell you only what it was, not what it meant. And I read you the words and refused you the feeling of them. Do you remember what I said the words were?”

“The One Who Counts.”

“The one who counts.” Brod turned one of the open books slightly, as he had done before, to have somewhere to put his hand. “Simon kept accounts all his life. Money lent, money owed, the day the interest fell due, the day a man’s excuses ran out. And beside the money-books he kept this other one — who came to his table, where they sat, what year it was. Two ledgers, Chief Inspector, the same as I keep two: the book of what was owed to him and the book of who had broken bread with him, and he thought, I am sure, that

between the two he had set down the whole of his life and accounted for it." The finger moved a hair's breadth on the cover. "The old idea — it is older than this city, older than any bridge over your river — is only this: that a man does not keep his own accounts. That the keeping of them is not his to do. That every loaf broken and every coin lent and every debt forgiven or not forgiven is written down, somewhere, in a hand that is not the man's own, in a book he never sees, by —" he lifted the finger and let it fall — "by a witness. Not a witness in your court. A witness who sees what is owed. Who sits at the table whether he is asked or not, and counts, and is not deceived, and does no other thing — lays no hand on anyone, alters nothing, requires nothing of the night — but is present, so that afterward it cannot be said the thing was done unseen."

"You told me that in February," Hron said. "Or near it. You told me Reszke read it to you out of the ring's book and then asked you whether one could un-invite what one had invited."

"And I refused him the question. I refuse it still." Brod said it as mildly as the first time, refusing a second helping. "I am a man who reads texts, and a text is not a door, and I will not pretend at this table that I can open one. I cannot tell you the fifteenth guest came. I cannot tell you he did not. I can tell you only what I told you before: that the hand that wrote the last line learned to write in a place that no longer exists, and never changed, because a hand does not change after a

man is thirty, and that it is the hand of no forger I have read, and I have read the great ones. That the ink of that line has aged exactly as far as the ink of Simon's own lines from that same night — your magistrate had a graphologist look, I am told, and the graphologist said as much, and then your magistrate struck the sentence that said it, because a thing that cannot be filed cannot be allowed to stand in a file." A dry flicker. "He did not strike it from the world. Only from the paper. The world is harder to edit."

Hron found he had taken out his Zorky and was turning the packet in his fingers without opening it, and he put it away. He thought of Pelc's report, the clean columns of it, the one sentence the magistrate's pen had gone through twice for good measure, leaving the page entire and the file closed and correct and untrue by exactly one omission. He thought of his own report under it, the truthful one, the provable crime set down whole and the three residues beneath it as *unresolved* — the only honest word, and the word the magistrate would not let into the binding.

"It troubles me," Hron said, "that I will go to my grave not knowing. Not him — the son, the bolt, the line, I know all of that, it is finished and it sits right. The other. I have built a life, Rabbi, on the principle that a patient man with a notebook can reconstruct the ordinary hour and find in it everything the dramatic hour pretends to hide. Timetables. Laundry lists. Who washed the tea things and when. I do not believe in the locked

room; I believe in the second staircase. And I found the second staircase every time, in everything — except in this. There is none under the fifteenth guest. I have looked. There is only the wall and the cold.”

“And it troubles you,” said Brod, “to set down a thing you cannot account for and let it stand.”

“It is against everything I am.”

The Rabbi looked at him for a long moment with the dry steady eyes, and Hron had again the brief discomfort of being himself read, his own hand traced in the air a few millimetres above the page, the loops and the pressures of a man examined and not flattered.

“You are a better witness than you think, Chief Inspector,” Brod said, “and a worse accountant. Let me give you back something you brought into this room without knowing you had brought it. You said, the first time you sat there, on your way out the door — you did not say it, your refusing said it for you — that you had learned which doors not to put your shoulder to. A man does not learn that from policing. Policing teaches the opposite; policing is all shoulders. You learned it somewhere the shoulder failed.”

The room was very quiet. The pigeon on the sill outside shifted and was still.

Hron had spoken of it to no one — not to Bouda, who knew the fact of it the way the whole directorate knew it and had the courtesy not to touch it; not to his sister, who lived inside it with him and so could not be told it. He looked at the

grey box on the table, the lid still open and the cracked spine inside, and found that the box made it possible, that he could say it to the box and let the old man overhear.

“I have a daughter,” he said. “Agnes. She is fourteen. When her mother died — the influenza, the winter of twenty-nine, she was eleven — she stopped speaking. Not at once. Over a week, two weeks, a word fewer each day, the way the March light goes, not failing, only thinning, drawing back into a drawer. And then it was gone, and it has not come back. Five years. The doctors looked. They looked the way I look — patient men with notebooks, asking when did it begin and was there a shock and is there damage in the throat, the ear, the brain — and they found nothing they could file. No second staircase. No lesion, no cause they can write in a column and total. A girl who hears everything and understands everything and draws what she sees in a careful hand, and who has not said a full sentence since her mother went into the wall with the rest of this city’s dead.” He stopped. The knee ached. He let it. “I go on Sundays. I read to her. I have stopped —” his voice did the small thing his voice did, and steadied — “I have stopped putting my shoulder to that door. That is the one I learned on.”

Brod did not move to comfort him. That was the thing Hron would remember afterward, on the embankment and in the years he could not yet name — that the old man did not lean across the box and lay a hand on his arm, did not lower his

voice into the warm register men used at a graveside, did not say that the doctors might yet, that one heard of such things resolving, that there was always hope. He did none of it. He sat with his spotted hands folded on the lid of a dead man's ledger and let the silence be as long as it needed to be, and the stove ticked into it, and the cold of the unheated house pressed at the door of the warm room and did not come in.

"I will not tell you she will speak," Brod said at last. "I do not know that she will. A man who tells you he knows the unsaid is a liar or a fool, and I have tried in a long life to be neither and failed only at the edges. I will tell you what I told Simon, who asked a different question out of the same fear and went away and was not helped, because he wanted to be cured of the question and there is no cure — there is only the carrying. There are accounts that are not ours to keep, Chief Inspector. Your daughter's silence is one. The fifteenth guest is another. You summoned neither and you cannot send either away, and the whole of your peace — what little a man of our trade is given — is in learning the difference between the door you have not opened and the door that is not yours. You broke the first kind your whole life. You have learned, late and at a price, not to break your shoulder on the second. That is not a failure of the patient man with the notebook." He paused. "It is the only honest thing a man can stand on when he has come to the end of what the notebook holds. To say: this is true, and it is mine, and it is fin-

ished — and this is also true, and it is not mine, and it is not finished, and I will let it stand.”

Hron sat with that. Outside the strip of window the afternoon had begun its thinning into evening, blue between the high walls of the court, the light drawn back into the drawer for the night. Somewhere out beyond the rooftops the backward Hebrew clock would be telling its leftward hour, the same hour the forward clock told, against the grain, and he found he did not mind, today, not knowing which of the two he lived in.

“You will keep it, then,” he said, and nodded at the box.

“I will keep it.” Brod rose, and lifted the ledger from the box with both hands — not opening it, even now — and turned to the wall of shelving that climbed past the reach of any broom, and went up a small library stair that stood folded against the books, two treads, an old man’s slow and certain climb, and found a place near the top among volumes whose spines Hron could not read and whose age he could only guess at, brown and black and the no-colour of old vellum — books copied by hand in rooms that no longer existed, that had crossed borders the maps no longer drew, that had outlasted the men who wrote them and the men who burned other men for them and the men who came after to put glass over the streets where it had happened and sell gloves and chocolate above the bones. He slid the dead man’s guest-ledger in among them, flush, so its cracked spine took its place in the row and was, at once,

only one more old book on a high shelf, indistinguishable at six feet from any other.

He came down the little stair and folded it back against the wall.

“I will keep it as I keep the others,” Brod said. “Not because I understand it. I understand very few of them; that is not why a man keeps a book. Some things must be kept by someone, Chief Inspector, and the keeping is best done by a man who has stopped needing to understand them — who can let a thing sit on his shelf and be true and be strange and ask nothing of him but the shelf.” He turned from the wall, and the dry quick eyes were on Hron, and something in them was almost kind and did not condescend to be. “You caught the son. That was yours to do, and you did it well — better than well; you did it when the easy false story stood ready to take it from you, and you would not let it. That was a hard thing and a clean one and you should carry it home tonight and let it warm you. The fifteenth guest was never yours, Chief Inspector. He was only ever the dead man’s. And now he is mine.”

He laid his hand flat against the spines of the high shelf, lightly, as on a thing entrusted.

“And one day,” he said, “he will be no one’s, and the cold will go out of the room.”

He smiled then, the first full smile Hron had seen on him, brief and entirely without comfort and entirely true.

“But not yet.”

29. The Table of Fourteen

THE SUNDAY CAME IN ACROSS THE Vinohrady rooftops the way March Sundays did, low and yellow and without conviction, and Hron climbed the stairs to his sister's flat with the leg held a little stiff on the turns and a paper twist of liquorice for Agnes in his coat pocket, gone soft and warm against his side. He had walked up from the tram at Peace Square rather than wait the second line that would have set him down nearer, because the air had wanted walking in and because he had wanted, for a quarter of an hour, to be a man going to see his daughter on a Sunday and nothing else, no rank, no file, no dead man behind glass. The coal smoke lay over the district in its thin Sunday version, fewer chimneys drawing on the day of rest, and the church of Saint Ludmila stood up against the sky with its two dark spires and let its bell go once for the hour, a single fat bronze note that rolled away over the roofs toward the river he could not see from here.

His sister Marie let him in. She had goose in the oven from yesterday warmed for today and the whole stairwell knew it; the smell met him at her door like a third person, the rendered fat and the caraway, and behind it the wet-wool smell of the runner and the dry hot dust of the radiators that

was, he thought, the smell of a winter not quite willing to end. Marie took his hat and his coat and felt the leg in his face without his having to say it and did not say it either, which was the kindness in her he relied on. "She has been at the window," Marie said. "She had her book out for you already." And she went back to her kitchen and her goose, and left him the front room and the slanting light and the girl in it.

Agnes was in the chair by the window with her knees drawn up and her notebook open on them and the light lying across her hands, and she did not look up when he came in, which was how he knew she had heard him on the stairs and was glad. She had her mother's hair, exactly, the dark of it and the way it fell forward when she bent her head; that had been a hard thing for a long time and had become, by some slow turning he could not date, a soft one. He crossed and put the liquorice on the windowsill at her elbow where she would find it without his making a ceremony of it, and he kissed the top of her head, which smelled of soap and of the cold she had carried in from the window glass, and he sat down in the second chair with his bad leg out straight in front of him into the patch of Sunday sun, where the warmth of it was the only medicine the leg ever properly took.

"Where were we," he said, and did not expect an answer and did not need one. He had the book; she had marked his place herself, with the flat-tened silver paper from a tablet of chocolate, three

weeks ago, and the paper had stayed where she put it because they read slowly, an afternoon at a time, in no hurry to arrive. It was a book about a boy and a dog and a long foolish walk through Bohemia, the kind of book that did not matter and was therefore exactly right, and he found the silver paper and opened to it and began to read aloud in the low even voice he kept for this, the voice that went on like a road. He read in his mother tongue, slow, leaving the German in him at the door with his hat, because his own tongue was the warm one and she liked the warm tongue, and he let the sentences come out one after another with no particular weight on any of them, the boy and the dog going down a white road between fields toward a town they would reach in a chapter or two, or not.

She drew.

He did not watch her draw. He had learned that a long time ago, in the bad first year, when watching had been a kind of asking and asking had been a door slammed on his fingers; he had learned to let his eyes go to the page or the window and his voice go on and leave her hands alone in their corner of the light, so that the drawing could be the one thing in her week that was not a question put to her by a man with a wooden stick and a *now then*. So he read, and looked at the white road in the book, and looked now and then at the grey afternoon over the rooftops where, three districts off and down a long fall of streets, the river ran past a building with frost-feathered windows

that he had stood under in the cold not yet four weeks before and watched a barge cough upstream while a young constable talked.

He did not mean to count. That was the trouble with the thing he was; it ran on under the rest of him like the second hand under the face of a clock, asking nothing, stopping for nothing, counting whether he set it to count or not. From the side of his eye, not looking, reading the dog over a stile, he saw her pencil going down the page in the small even strokes he knew, the round-headed shorthand that was her whole alphabet now, and the part of him that had spent thirty years in ledgers and laundry lists and the unglamorous residue of other people's hours counted the strokes the way it counted everything, without permission, the way a man's foot counts stairs in the dark. Down one side of something. A figure, a figure, a figure. Down the other side. He read on, the boy whistling for the dog, and the counting went on under the reading, idle, harmless, a habit of the hand he had never managed to put down.

Seven on the near side. He had not meant to know that. Seven on the far. He turned a page; the dry small sound of it; the boy and the dog came into the outskirts of the town. Fourteen, then, the counting said, and set it down like a stamp, fourteen small bell-bodied figures down the two long sides of a long table she had drawn going away across the page from above, the way she liked to

draw a table, a held breath of a table with the spacing right.

And then his eye, going back to the book, snagged, and came back, the way the eye comes back to a face in a crowd a half-second after it has already known it.

At the head of the table, at the short end, apart from the rest and a little above them on the page, she had set a fifteenth.

He stopped reading. He did not decide to stop; the road of the voice simply ran out from under him and was gone, and the room was very quiet, only the radiator ticking and, far below the window, a tram coming up the slope toward the square. The fifteenth figure was not a bell. She had not drawn it the way she drew the others. It was a long upright stroke, narrow and dark and standing very straight, a man made the way a candle is made, and where the fourteen had each the round face with its two dots and its small line of a closed mouth, this one had a face she had left an open O, a ring of pencil with nothing inside it, a window with only the white of the paper behind it. It stood at the head, opposite a place down at the near end that she had drawn a little fuller than the rest, and beside its hand, where the others had plates, it had only a small upright oval. A glass.

He sat with his bad leg in the sun and did not move, and the part of him that counted, the part that never stopped, stopped.

He knew the thing he was looking at. He had a copy of it in a buff folder in a drawer in

Bartholomew Street, photographed under a lamp by a police camera and signed across the corner by the man who had taken it; he had carried it in his hand for three weeks; he had looked at it so often the looking had worn a place in him. Fourteen names in a dead man's careful hand down the page of a guest-ledger, and at the head, at the short end, in a fifteenth line, in an ink that a graphologist had matched to no living hand and that had dried, the chemists said, to exactly the age of the entries Reszke himself had made that same February night. He knew, without crossing the room, without bending to read it, what would be under the thin figure when he let himself look, because he had read it a hundred times off the photograph in the drawer and it was already in the room with them, standing in the cold draught under the door the way it had stood under every door of this case.

She bent her head and wrote it.

He watched her do it. He had not watched her draw in years and he watched her write now, the dark hair falling forward, the pencil held the careful child's way between the first finger and the thumb, the small effortful evenness of a girl forming letters she has decided shall be neat. She wrote it under the thin figure, low on the page, the way you write a name under a portrait so that those who come after will know who was sat for. Three short words and then a longer one. The pencil pressed and lifted and pressed. *T. h. e.* — a space — *o. n. e.* — a space — *w. h. o.* — a space —

and then the longer word that took her two careful tries at the *t*, and when she had it she sat back the small distance a child sits back from a thing finished, and laid the pencil down across the page, and let the light lie on her hands.

the one who counts.

The One Who Counts.

Hron's whole body went still, the particular stillness he kept around the dead, the stillness Bouda had it from him and never knew the source of. He did not move and he did not speak and the leg in the sun stopped aching, or he stopped feeling it ache, which on a Sunday came to the same thing. The phrase sat on the page in his daughter's hand. It was the phrase from the ledger. It was the exact phrase from the ledger, word for word, *the one who counts*, the line Reszke had not written, the fifteenth name in a hand that was no one's, that the graphologist had turned over under his lamp and laid down and said, quietly, the way a careful man says a thing he does not like to say, that he could put no name to it, none, living or filed. And here it was again, the same four words, in the one hand in all of Prague that could not have copied them.

Because she had not seen the ledger.

He went over it the way he went over everything, fast and flat, because that was the iron in him and the iron did not stop for Sundays. The folder had never left Bartholomew Street but for the morgue and the magistrate's chambers and his own coat once, the night of the false solution,

when he had carried it home to Smíchov and looked at it till the plum brandy was gone and no answer came. It had never been here. He never spoke of the case in this room; he set it down at the door with his hat; Marie did not read the police court and would not have carried it to the girl if she had. The phrase was not in the newspapers — Pelc and the magistrate had seen to that, the fifteenth guest struck out of the public file as a hysteric's invention. There was no road by which those four words could have come from the locked drawer to the notebook in his daughter's lap. He looked for the timetable, because reconstructing the ordinary hour was the whole of what he did; and there was no ordinary hour here. There was no hour at all. There was only a girl of fourteen who had not spoken a whole sentence since the influenza winter took her mother, drawing a table she had never sat at and writing, at the head of it, a name she had never read.

He had spent four weeks proving that a man could draw a bolt from the wrong side of a door with a loop of waxed line and a florist's wire, that two staircases could swallow an impossible descent, that the dead hour on the embankment held one passenger and then another and not the same man twice. He had done the rational work entire — every caterer printed, every guest accounted, every coin chased to its tin — and arrived, honestly, at three walls with a draught beneath each, and written that down in his truthful report and let the magistrate strike the sentence.

He had become, against everything in his training, a man who held two things at once: the crime solved to the last waxed inch, and the guest who could not be. He had thought that was the end of it. He had thought he had taken the measure of the cold draught, had made his certainties small enough that nothing could be taken from them.

And here, in the one room in the world he kept the case out of, the draught was under the door again, and it had come up the long fall of streets from the river and three districts across the city and had got in past the goose and the radiators and the closed door of his silence, and it had used his daughter's hand to write its name.

He did not ask her.

That was the thing he understood, sitting there, the way you understand the floor under you only when it tilts. Every instinct the iron had drilled into him stood up at once and wanted to ask — *where did you see this, Agnes, who told you, what is this, where, when, how* — the whole apparatus of his living came up to the very edge of him and stood on the threshold in the cold draught of her silence and looked in. And he laid the iron down. He laid it down the way he had laid it down a thousand Sundays, because he loved her too much to leave a question lying between them that she could not answer; because asking would make this into evidence, into a folder, into a thing photographed under a lamp, and it was not that and he would not make it that. He had a buff folder full of what asking got you. He had spent his

whole working life refusing to believe that some things are simply not given to us, refusing it on every case but his own grief — and his own grief sat beside him now with the dark hair forward and the pencil laid down, and had just told him, without a word, that the refusing was over.

He did not test it. He did not reach for the buff folder in his mind and lay it beside the page to compare the hands, though the comparing was already done, had done itself, the way the counting did itself. He did not look for the hoax, the seam, the ordinary explanation with the draught beneath it. He had failed to debunk the fifteenth guest three times with all the apparatus of the central criminal police of the Czechoslovak Republic behind him, and he was not going to debunk his daughter on a Sunday with a goose in the oven. There was nothing to debunk. There was only a true thing, told to him in the only language she had, and the true thing was not the case. The case was solved. Victor was in his cell with his confession and his ruined inheritance, the two staircases mapped, the wire in evidence, the codicil filed; the crime was whole, accounted for, closed, a thing he had counted down both its sides and set like a stamp. This was the other thing. This was the part that did not close. And his daughter had known it before he did, had known it all along, had been drawing it for him every Sunday for he did not now want to think how long, the long table and the thin one at the head and the host's place filled a little fuller than the rest — and he had read

about the boy and the dog over the top of it and not seen, because he was a grown man and could not bear a thing that would not close, and she could, she had always been able to, she closed nothing and was not afraid.

She was not afraid. He looked at her now, openly, which he almost never let himself do while she drew, and there was no fear in her at all. She had her face turned a little to the window and the light on it, and the thin figure under her hand with its empty O and its small glass, and she was as calm as the radiator, as the goose, as the bell of Saint Ludmila that had rolled away over the roofs. She had not drawn a horror. She had drawn a guest. She had given him his place at the head where the host could see him and filled the host's place fuller and gone on, the way you go on, and she had labelled him in her careful hand not as a thing to be feared but as a thing to be understood, *the one who counts*, who carries nothing and asks nothing and takes nobody, who only sits at the short end and accounts for the table, and what he counts is not lost by being counted but, at last, only held.

Hron reached across the small distance between the chairs and closed her notebook. He did it gently, his hand flat over hers a moment first so that she would know it was not a taking-away, and then folding the cover over the table and the thin figure and the four words in her child's careful hand, and she let him, she did not hold it, she turned her hand under his so that for a moment

they were palm to palm with the closed notebook beneath, warm. He had no word for what he felt and was glad of it; a word was a handle you put on a thing to carry it to someone else, and he had no one to carry this to, and so it stayed whole, and heavy, and very bright, and that, he understood, looking at his silent daughter in the failing yellow light, was how she had carried everything, all these years, all of it whole and heavy and bright and unspoken, and he had pitied her for it, and had been wrong. He bent and kissed her hair where it smelled of soap and window-cold, and for the first time in five years he did not need her to say a thing to know that she had told him something, and that it was true, and that he could not, and need not, and would not ever know how she knew.

He closed the notebook. Outside, below the window, the tram came up the slope toward Peace Square and rang its bell, twice, and then once — the way a tram bell had rung over the river the morning he stood at the embankment rail below a dead man's windows and watched a barge nose upstream, when all of this began, when he had thought it would be a case like the others, a wholly human reckoning to be reconstructed hour by ordinary hour and set down. The glass took the sound and held it a moment, the way water holds a stone before it lets it down. Agnes leaned her head against his arm, her whole warm weight of it, and reached past the closed notebook for a fresh page, and uncapped nothing, only turned the

pencil in her fingers and bent to the paper, and drew — and he watched her now without pretending not to — the river. The river going away across the page the way she liked to see things, from above, a long grey ribbon of it, and on it the small blunt shapes of the barges nosing upstream against a current she drew as little ticks of the pencil all running one way, and the bridges across it in their arches, and she did not draw the thin figure again. She drew the river and the barges and an arch and another arch, and the thin one stayed in the closed book under his hand, given his place and left there, counted and held.

Hron sat with his solved crime and his unsolved guest, the certainty he had built with his own hands and the cold draught he had failed, honestly and completely, to close, and he waited for the old familiar thing, the dissatisfaction, the iron's refusal, the need to know that had run him all his life — and it did not come. What came instead surprised him, sitting there in the last of the Sunday light with the goose-smell and the radiator and his daughter's warm head against his arm: that he could hold them both. The solved and the unsolvable, side by side, the one accounted to the last waxed inch and the other accounted to no name in any file living or dead, and the holding of both was not, he found, the same as failing. It had felt like failing in Bartholomew Street under Pelc's eye and the magistrate's pen. It did not feel like failing here. It felt only like being alive, in Prague, in this year, with a daughter who would not speak

and had just told him the truest thing he knew, and the border to the west going dark in a way the papers were beginning not quite to name, and the river running on past the dead man's frost-feathered windows, indifferent and enormous, three districts off and falling away toward a sea that neither he nor the girl drawing it would ever in their lives go down to see.

30. Coda: The Cold Draught

THE TRIAL WAS IN MAY AND IT WAS SHORT, because there was nothing in it to argue. Victor Reszke had signed his confession in March, before a magistrate, in the true part of it and only the true part, and a man who has confessed to a magistrate in his own hand gives a court very little to do but its arithmetic. Hron gave his evidence on a Tuesday morning, in his good coat, in the flat dry voice he kept for courts, and was finished before noon. He told them the key and the veronal and the wire and the bolt and the two staircases, in that order, the way a man reads off a timetable, and the room listened the way a room listens to a thing it has already understood and only wants confirmed. He did not tell them about the table. There had been no column for it on the form, and there was none in the courtroom either, and he had not expected one. The defence, a clever young advocate Schüick had found and paid for out of an estate that was not Victor's, tried for a moment to make the locked door into a mystery and was put down by Hron's drawing of a grille and a length of waxed line, which the jury could hold in their hands. After that it went the way water goes downhill. The sentence was read in June. Victor stood to hear it with the spent clear look he had

worn since the square under the lamp, the look of a man after a long fever, and he did not weep this time, having done his weeping early and used it up. He was taken away to begin the long years. He had inherited, in the end, the contents of an ash-tray, and now not even that.

The flat was let by the autumn — Hron heard it from Ottilie at the Café Slavia, who heard everything — to a family from Brno, a man in insurance with a wife and three loud children, who had the walls repapered and the close-hung etchings taken down and sold, and who knew nothing of the bath at the end of the hall except that the landlord had put in a new door, a plain one, with a plain new bolt. Hannah Reszke had gone to Vienna and then, it was said, further. Rose Wertheimer had found a position with another house, cataloguing other men's beautiful things. Rabbi Brod kept the guest-ledger, which Hron had returned to him in March and never asked after again. The city closed over the case the way the river closes over a dropped stone, with a ring or two and then the ordinary current, and by the warm end of the spring there was almost no one left who thought about Simon Reszke at all, except the man who had caught the man who killed him, and who thought about him still, in the particular way of a detective, which is not grief and is not memory but is something nearer to a debt that has been mostly, but not entirely, paid.

He walked the embankment on an evening in late May when the case was a season behind him and the trial a week ahead. He had not meant to. He had been at the Mánes building on another matter, a clean dull matter of a forged letter, and the evening was the kind of soft Prague evening that comes after a wet spring, the light going long and gold up the river toward Hradčany, the castle laid out against it black and exact like something cut from paper, and he found that his feet had taken him north along the water without consulting him, past the National Theatre with its evening crowd already gathering under the lamps, past the Slavia's lit windows where the spoons were going in the saucers, up onto the Smetana Embankment, where he had stood in March below the dead man's windows with a barge coughing upstream and his knee aching and a phrase Agnes had not said.

The river that evening was not the colour of a coin left too long in a pocket. It was green, the particular heavy green it goes in the warm months, and Střelecký ostrov sat in it with its trees come fully into leaf and a band somewhere on it tuning up for a Sunday that was not yet Sunday, the brass notes carrying flat across the water and breaking apart before they reached the far bank. A tram came down the line — the seventeen, the embankment line, Procházka's line — with its bell and its lit windows and its evening people standing in it going home, and it crossed the points by the museum end with the long iron

complaint that trams make there and went on. The cobbles were dry. The brass of the embankment rail was warm where his hand fell on it, warm with the day's sun still in it, not the brass cold of the door handle in March that had gone into his palm like a coin. Everything was warmer. That was the difference the season made, and it made it everywhere, on the rail and the stone and the air, and Hron stood with his warm hand on the warm rail and felt the wrongness of it, that a thing could be solved and a man could be in prison and a season could simply turn and warm the stone where the cold had been, as though the cold had been nothing, as though it had not meant what it had meant.

Three storeys up, the windows were lit. Strangers' light — a yellow domestic light, not the dim shaded light of a man who kept old things in the dark to spare them. He could see, against it, the moving shadow of one of the loud children, and hear, very faintly, when the tram had gone, a wireless playing something with a dance band in it, a tune of the year, cheerful and forgettable, the kind of tune that would not be remembered by anyone in five years and would have offended Reszke past speech. The new tenants were at their supper. Above the river where a man had owned a thousand old and beautiful things and been drowned in his own bath for money he had already lost, a family from Brno was eating its supper to a dance band on the wireless, and that was right, Hron thought, that was the only right thing,

that was what the rooms were for. Rooms are not memorials. They are for the next supper. He had stood in enough of them to know it.

He did not look up at the windows for long. There is a discipline in not looking at a thing, and he had learned it over a career and over a private grief, and he turned his face back to the river and the warm rail and let the windows be the strangers' windows, which they were.

In his right coat pocket, where his hand was not, the coin lay.

He carried it now as a matter of habit, the way another man carries a worn medal or a button cut from a coat he no longer owns. He had taken it from the depot's odd-coin tin in March — signed for it, properly, a slip of paper, *one silver coin, evidentiary, Reszke*, so that it was on a form somewhere and his conscience was clear — and he had meant to do something with it. He had meant to give it to the numismatic man at the museum, who would have told him it was a thaler struck at Kutná Hora under Rudolf the Second, three hundred years out of currency, worth a collector's modest sum, and would have catalogued it and put it under glass with a little card, and that would have been the end of it, a coin in a case, explained. He had not given it to the museum man. He had meant to drop it in the river, here, off this rail, on some evening like this one, and be rid of the small cold weight of it; he had even taken it out once, on the bridge, and held it over the green water, and put it back. He had meant, at the least,

to spend it — to let it go into the ordinary circulation of heller and crown where a coin belongs, to buy a coffee with it at the Slavia and watch Otilie not notice it, and let it travel out into the city and be lost the way coins are lost, honestly, into a thousand pockets. He had done none of these things. The coin lived in his pocket. It had lived there since March, warming to his body and cooling when he hung the coat, and he took it out sometimes at his desk at Bartholomew Street, late, when Bouda had gone home, and turned it in the lamplight and looked at the worn profile of the dead emperor and the Latin worn nearly smooth around the rim, and put it away again, having proved nothing and disproved nothing, having only looked.

Because that was the thing about the coin. Every door it offered opened onto a wall with a draught beneath it. It could have been a coin Reszke gave the man as a tip — except Reszke had not gone down to any tram, had not left the flat alive after the guests, was drowned in his bath at two in the morning by his son. It could have been a coin a collector carried loose and spent in error — except Procházka, asked, was certain, had described the passenger to the line of his old-fashioned coat before he ever mentioned the coin, had connected the two himself, the quiet foreign-old man and the wrong silver in his palm, with no one leading him. It could have been a hoax, a thing dropped in a till to make a story — except no one had had cause to make the story before the story

made itself, three times, from three mouths that did not know each other, and a coin is a clumsy way to haunt a tram. Each explanation was a good explanation. Each was a door. He had walked through all of them, patiently, the way he walked through everything, and each had let him out the far side into the same cold corridor he could not get to the end of. He had failed to debunk it. He had done the rational work entirely and arrived, honestly, at the wall, and he had learned to stand at the wall without pretending it was a door.

Nothing happened, on the embankment, that evening.

That was worth knowing, and he knew it, standing there. Nothing happened. No coat-cut figure went up a stair that no one watched. No candle burned in a window that should have been dark. No coin turned colder in his pocket, no draught came off the river that was not the ordinary river-cool of evening, no bell rang that was not a tram's, no clock struck wrong. The band on the island found its tune and played it badly and a few people clapped. A woman went past him with a string bag and a loaf in it. A barge went down with the current this time, not against it, its engine the same cough as the March one, easier with the stream. The world declined, entirely, to perform. And Hron understood — had understood for some weeks now, but understood it again here, with his hand on the warm rail and the strangers' supper above him — that the declining was the whole of it, that this was how the thing would live

in him for the rest of his service: not as a haunting, which would at least have been a kind of company, a recurring face, a draught that came back so you could brace for it, but as a single cold fact that had happened once and would never happen again and could never be made not to have happened. A haunting you could get used to. A haunting was almost a comfort, being regular. This was worse, and truer. This was a thing that had drawn one breath in the world, at a cleared table by an unlit candle, written one line in a dead man's book in a hand like frost, and gone, and left three small residues and a son who could not sleep, and would not come again. There would be no second sighting to confirm or to dismiss. There would only be the memory of a draught, in a room he had stood in, under a door that had been broken open; and the memory of a draught is a thing you cannot show a magistrate, and cannot file, and cannot quite put down.

He named it to himself, then, privately and finally, the shape of the peace he would have to keep. He had caught the killer. That was true and complete and would hold in any court and any conscience: a man had murdered his father for money, by ordinary means, alone, and Hron had taken him by the patient reconstruction of an ordinary hour, the key and the tea and the wire and the two stairs, and the man would answer for it, and the city was that much cleaner for the answering. That was his work, and he had done it, and it was whole. And the other thing — the fourteen

faces and the fifteenth, the extra plate and the un-owned thumbprint, the wrong coin and the un-written name in the writing that aged like the rest of the page — the other thing was not his work, and never had been, and would not be solved, and he would carry it. He would do both. He had caught the killer and he had kept the question, and he saw now that he would go on doing both, the catching and the keeping, for whatever years of the service were left to him, that this was not a failure to be corrected but a condition to be borne, the way the ache above his knee was a condition, that flared in the damp and eased in the warm and never, in any weather, fully went. A man of the seam learns to live in the seam. He had spent his life in the gap between two tongues and two countries and two ways of being a Prague man; he could spend the rest of it in the gap between a thing solved and a thing unaccounted, and call that, if not peace, then the nearest honest thing to it that the work allowed.

The light was nearly gone off the castle. The river had darkened to a green you could no longer quite see was green. Down the embankment the lamps came on, one after another up the line of the water, the way they always did, a man somewhere throwing the switch, and the trams went on along the seventeen with their bells and their lit standing people, and across on the island the band packed up its stands and the few listeners drifted toward the bridge, and the city, which did not know that a man had been drowned three

storeys above this rail in March and did not know that someone no record could hold had sat at the head of his table and written his account in a hand like frost, went about, as it had gone about that first morning and would go about every morning after Hron was off the embankment for good, the ordinary indifferent enormous business of being awake.

He turned to go. His knee was easy in the warm evening and he was glad of that, small mercy, and he thought of Sunday and of Agnes and of the notebook with the fourteen small figures in it and the fifteenth thin one at the head and the careful letters under it, *the one who counts*, that she had drawn without being told a word, and that he had closed and carried home and put in a drawer and not looked at since, because some things you keep by not looking at them, the way you keep a coin by not spending it. He would read to her on Sunday. He would not show her the drawer.

He does not look up at the windows. He has learned not to. Somewhere above the river a frost-feathered pane catches the last of the light and lets it go, and a draught Hron cannot feel from the street moves, perhaps, under a door in a room that is no longer the dead man's; and Tobias Hron walks on along the Vltava with a three-hundred-year-old coin warm in his pocket and a fourteen-figure table and its fifteenth thin guest folded somewhere behind his ribs, and the Orloj, far off in the Old Town, begins to strike the hour for a

city that has never once, in a thousand years, finished closing its accounts.