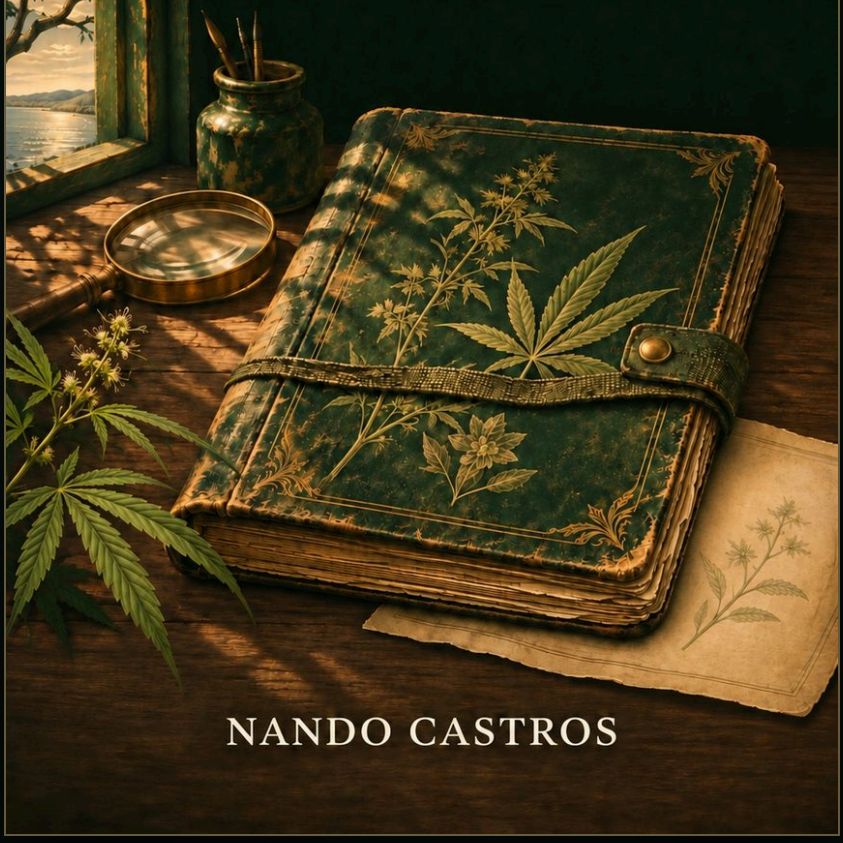
Green Veil

I

THE HIDDEN LEGACY

THE CHAD SAGA



NANDO CASTROS

OFFICIAL FREE SAMPLE · PROLOGUE + CHAPTERS 1 & 2

GREEN VEIL · A COMPLETED SIX-BOOK SAGA

Green Veil — Book I

The Hidden Legacy

NANDO CASTROS

Official complimentary reading sample containing the unabridged Prologue, Chapter 1, and Chapter 2 of Green Veil — Book I: The Hidden Legacy.

Copyright © Nando Castros / Grow-X Co. Tecnologias Ltda. All rights reserved.

Official threshold & first-hand release alert: https://greenveil-zeta.vercel.app/?lang=en#pedido

Prologue — The Key on the Inside

The water had already reached the eggs when the female returned.

She came down the sloping bank on all fours. Her stronger hind legs supported her weight while her forelegs sought a footing; her long tail rose behind her to counterbalance the slope. Small scales brushed against the branches, leaving a damp sheen. She was a dinosaur with a broad back and a head narrow in proportion to her body, the front of her snout widening into a rigid rim. Lowering her head among the leaves, she found the nest partly destroyed. The river had carried away a section of its edge. Where her body had pressed leaves and earth together, the current had left a smooth brown surface on which small insects struggled for purchase. She brought her snout closer. The nearest egg turned under the pressure of the water and struck another with a dry knock.

Above the valley, low clouds were breaking apart among the treetops. It had rained all night. From the trees came the smell of things opened by damp: split bark, broken fruit, softened wood with other bodies at work inside it. The river, once divided into channels by sandbanks, now filled the entire passage. It carried branches, leaves, dead animals. Farther on, a trunk caught between two rocks bent the water around it, throwing up mud-colored foam.

The female pushed the egg back toward the center of the nest.

In the highlands, the flood was still rising. She worked beside the familiar bank, guided by the warmth held in the hollow and the touch of her snout against the eggs. With her snout she brought dry material down from higher ground. Water crossed the barrier before she had

finished. She climbed again, tore away more leaves. A distant sound made her lift her head, but it stopped, and she went back to work.

Beneath the exposed roots of a tree, a small mammal retreated into its burrow. The roof was damp. It felt its way toward the least cold patch, bumped against the others, buried its snout in one of their coats. The earth sent back vibrations too large to distinguish. Outside, the female moved again; a stone rolled down the bank and partly blocked the entrance.

Sixty-six million years lay between that morning and the people who would try to reconstruct it.

The bank would be torn apart, its layers displaced, the river's course itself erased beneath successive landscapes. The female pushed another egg beside the first.

The light changed while she was gathering more leaves.

First came a brightness above the clouds, far from the sun. Then the shadows of the trees moved in a direction the wind could not explain. The animal went still. A branch remained in her mouth; drops hung from its leaves. Around the valley, other bodies stopped what they were doing. A flock rose from the treetops and scattered, losing its formation.

What was crossing the sky had come from very far away.

In the cold before that atmosphere, the comet had seemed no more than another moving body, matter following its course among other matter. But its passage to Earth had been chosen. Beings for whom that distance posed no obstacle had sent with it something that would survive the disappearance of almost everything around it.

The Seed.

Within it traveled two inheritances that humans would call ADAM and EVE. With them traveled the possibilities of a plant that would

pass through their fields, their homes, their bodies. Cannabis. None of those words existed on the Earth upon which the light had just fallen.

The reason remained with those who had chosen the trajectory.

The female dropped the branch.

The brightness reached the valley floor, entered beneath the canopy, revealed for an instant every vein in the leaves turned toward the sky. The small mammal pressed against the others. At the mouth of the burrow, the stone was trembling. The first violence came through the ground; the next struck the trees and bent their upper branches. The river leaped against the bank. The female lowered her body over the hollow.

Then the water passed where the nest had been.

For a long time, the light did not return in the same way.

Some leaves dried before they opened. Animals traveled distances they had never needed to travel and found the same absence at the end. Large bodies fell in places where no other creature could use all their flesh. Small lives held on in crevices, beneath the soil, inside dead wood. Hunger spread into places that had once been the most abundant. In clearings opened by dead trees, the cold reached the ground through ever longer nights.

The burrow on the bank disappeared too.

Elsewhere, under another root, an animal found enough shelter to survive a night. At dawn it went out to look for food again.

The Seed remained. Millions of years would pass between its arrival and the first humans, years filled with changes too small to be seen within a single lifetime. Entire lineages would end before those possibilities found, in other bodies, the conditions they needed to continue.

Water opened other paths. Exposed rock became soil. Forests grew where there had been no shade and withdrew where the cold lingered. The sea covered some lands and left others. There was kinship in what endured; there were also losses that would never be recovered.

Much later, a female primate reached out to a youngster that could not reach the branch.

It clung tightly to something about to break. She had to climb lower than seemed safe, supporting her own weight in a narrow fork. When she managed to touch it, the youngster did not immediately let go of its earlier hold. Its fingers were caught between the need to reach and the fear of falling. The mother pulled it against her belly. The branch gave way afterward, striking leaf after leaf on its way to the ground.

Others would learn to do things by watching hands. Others would store food, return for someone wounded, work a stone until its edge could cut. Some ways of working were lost; others reached the hands of those watching in altered form. Earth would have many more landscapes before anyone could preserve a story in the absence of the person who had lived it.

Beside a fire, someone would tell how a dead person had found a way through. A listener would ask them to show where. The story would continue the following morning, in the feet searching for the passage.

And among the plants those hands would come to know, one retained a connection to the Seed that no everyday use could exhaust.

They would make fiber from cannabis, save its seeds, learn to distinguish different scents beneath the same shape of leaf. Entire harvests would pass through people who would never suspect what they carried. In other bodies, under conditions no one fully understood, an encounter with the plant would open a depth difficult

to bear. Later, trying to describe what they had felt, those people would discover how much their own language lacked.

◆

The key was on the inside of the door.

Elian noticed it because Mara had asked whether he could leave. There was a key, then. An iron ring, a worn tooth, the shaft resting against the wood. Anyone walking down the corridor could see it. No bolt separated them from the courtyard where laundry dried on a spring afternoon around the year thirteen hundred and twenty.

“I can,” he said.

Mara waited.

Elian went to the door, opened it, and revealed the corridor: a whitewashed wall, a patch of damp near the floor, the bench where visitors waited for someone to lead them through. At the far end stood a second door, also open. A woman carrying a basket passed and greeted them.

“You see?”

“I asked whether you can leave with me.”

He kept his hand on the latch a moment longer. Then he closed the door without turning the key.

Mara had put a cloth bundle on the table. She had brought bread and two pieces of clothing she had finished at home. The smaller one still had a loose end of thread on the sleeve. Elian knew the way she bit through thread when she could not find the blade; he imagined her bent beside the window, impatient with herself, and felt a strange longing for a life he could enter only through visits.

“I spoke to them,” he said.

“What did they say?”

“That they’ll consider it.”

“They considered it in winter.”

“The road was bad.”

Mara looked at the strip of sunlight on the floor.

He sat down. It was the same chair in which he had learned to read, though it had since been given a new seat and a repair to its back. For years, that had seemed proof of continuity. Now the memory of childhood clung to the wood with an uncomfortable force.

The house had taken him in when he was small. He had never lacked food. He had been cared for through fevers; someone had taught him the names of plants, someone else had spent nights showing him how to compare records that seemed to contradict one another. There was affection in that place. Elian remembered cold fingers holding his forehead during a fever, and one woman’s exuberant joy when he had managed to get out of bed. If he called that house a prison, he would have to hear the sound of his own word afterward.

Mara opened the bundle.

“My sister is taking the larger room. The other one will still do.”

Elian touched the bread but did not pick it up.

“You’ve already decided.”

“I’ve decided I can’t leave my life waiting for an answer that never comes. About us, I came to ask.”

He had met her while doing something so ordinary that afterward it had seemed offensive to search it for a sign. Mara mended clothes for the house. One day she had run out of room on the table; Elian had moved a basket, spilled almost everything in it, and heard a remark from her that made him laugh while he tried to catch what was falling. She had not known then that he was someone people wrote reports

about. After she found out, she remained annoyed by his habit of leaving objects exactly where other people needed to work.

Before her next visit, he tried to clear the table. Mara came in, looked at the empty surface, and asked where he had hidden everything that had been on it.

“I put it away.”

She opened the chest against the wall. The basket tipped sideways, spilling everything he had gone to the trouble of picking up across the floor.

Mara crouched. Elian went to help and struck his forehead against the edge of the table. They sat among the objects, laughing quietly so as not to attract anyone from the corridor. When she touched the spot he had struck, he held his breath.

“Does it still hurt?”

He shook his head, though it did.

Mara came closer. Their first kiss went awry because Elian tried to stand at the same moment. She caught his sleeve and brought him back.

Afterward, for days, he kept finding small objects that had rolled beneath the furniture. He kept them on the table. When Mara saw them together, she knew where they had come from.

Elian began walking with her across the courtyard, then as far as the road. Their conversations grew longer. One of the custodians saw them together and asked him that night whether he was happy. Elian said he was. For a while, he did not realize that the question had already been folded into another conversation, in another room, where he was not present.

When he proposed living with Mara, he was summoned to the records room.

They said they needed to think of her safety. Then his. Then what might happen if they had children. Elian asked what they knew would happen. They replied that it was precisely because they did not know that they should wait.

Mara had stopped bringing a piece of clothing she had begun for him. She said she had run out of cloth. Elian did not ask why she had not bought more.

The first time Mara had asked him for the story, they were in the back courtyard.

She was separating the fibers of a dried stalk, removing a piece that had escaped preparation. The thread she had used for the repair was too coarse for that sleeve. Elian offered her another. Mara tested its strength between her fingers and asked where it came from.

He pointed to the plants beside the wall.

"That one, from an old harvest."

"I asked about the thread. You looked as though I'd asked something else."

Elian crouched beside her. A leaf was caught in the wet earth. Its tip curved over a small hole, and he removed it so the water could drain.

"Here they say everything began with a Seed."

Mara waited for the rest. He was used to hearing that word in rooms where no one needed to ask why it carried a different weight. Outside them, it might have been merely the beginning of a story about the fields.

He told it as he had learned it: something sent from very far away, in the path of a celestial body trailing a tail of light. An arrival before the first humans. The plant they knew through their fingers, its fiber, its smell, held part of what had come. People had been given the task of protecting it, but not the whole story.

Mara searched for the broken end of the thread.

"Who saw it?"

"There were no people to see it arrive."

"Then who told the story?"

Elian opened his mouth and realized he had skipped over an enormous interval. There were stories of encounters, of teachings, of people who had kept what they understood. One person had repeated it to another; in the house, they compared accounts that did not always agree. As a boy, he had wanted to know how anyone could remember an Earth on which they had not yet lived. The explanation had been so long that he remembered his fatigue better than the words.

"They said there was a time when they spoke to us," he answered.

"The ones who sent it?"

"I don't know if they were the same ones."

Mara did not laugh. That forced him to bear his answer without defending himself against it.

He spoke of the withdrawal. Those who had come had stopped coming; humans were left with what they had learned and what they had lost. None of the custodians had known them. Even so, when they discussed Elian's future, they sometimes spoke as though an answer might come from outside and spare them the need to choose.

Mara lifted the fiber.

"And they give me this to mend a sleeve."

"You think that isn't much?"

"I think the sleeve needs to last."

She drew the thread through the cloth. Elian watched the skin beside her nail draw back under the pressure. The plant was in that garment without ceasing to be what they sought to understand in

closed rooms. He had always heard about the two things on separate occasions.

“It isn’t the Seed itself,” he said, pointing to the bed.

“I didn’t think it was.”

He smiled, embarrassed.

“Sometimes I need to remember.”

Mara finished the stitch and gave him the sleeve to try. The cloth did not pull tight. Elian bent his arm, satisfied; then he looked at the plants again. For years, they had spoken to him about preserving what passed from one life to another. When he asked about his own life, they told him not to hurry.

That afternoon, he did not yet know how to connect the two. The question returned when they began looking for a house.

◆

“I want to go,” he said now.

Mara let go of the cloth she was holding.

“Then come to the meeting with me,” Elian said.

She took a deep breath. He was asking her to enter the place where Elian’s life was examined as though it belonged to the house. But it was also the first time he had invited her to hear the whole answer.

“I will,” she said.

The two custodians received them before the afternoon meal. One had a stiff knee and had to brace a hand against the table to stand. Elian waited until she had settled. He had learned to offer help without making her pain a subject for everyone.

On the wall, a strip of wood held loose sheets flat. The room smelled of old paper and the oil used on a hinge. Through the window

came the sound of someone sweeping the courtyard. Nothing there seemed arranged for deciding on a prohibition.

Elian handed over the written request.

It had taken him two nights to finish. In the first version, he had explained again how much he owed the house. In the second, he had removed half those sentences, not because they were no longer true, but because they apologized for something he still needed to learn to assert.

He wanted to live with Mara. He offered to continue part of his work; he described the house, the distance, how they would support themselves. At the end, he had tried to say that the food he had received since childhood could not become a debt for life. He had rewritten that passage so many times that the paper was thinner beneath the words.

The custodian with the painful knee read to the end and passed the sheet to the other.

"You know why your situation requires care," she said.

Elian knew the words: rare, integration, inheritance. Once he had heard hybrid from the other side of a door. The custodian had tried to explain it. He remembered asking whether it went away with age.

"I know why you ask me to be careful."

The other custodian lowered the request.

"This could affect people who aren't in this room."

"Who?"

She began to answer in general terms. Elian interrupted her, then fell silent, ashamed of his abruptness. Mara did not rescue him from the silence.

"I need to know who we're talking about," he said. "If someone is at risk because of me, I need to be able to understand the risk."

The older custodian pressed her fingers against her knee.

"Not every danger has a name before it happens."

Elian looked at Mara. She kept her hands in her lap, still in a way he recognized as effort.

"And how long do I have to wait?"

Neither answered.

A cart passed in the street. The sound grew, gently shook the poorly secured windowpane, receded. The woman sweeping the courtyard called another woman to help her with something heavy.

"Until we're able to protect the life you intend to lead," the older custodian said.

Mara leaned forward.

"The room exists. The work exists. My family knows we want to live together. It isn't a life that's missing."

The woman looked at her with genuine sadness.

"You don't know everything he carries."

Mara flushed. Elian knew that sign; it was the instant before an answer she would have to live with afterward.

"I know the man I want to live with," she said. "What I don't know, I ask him."

The custodian began to speak of offspring.

That was when Elian took his hand off the edge of the table.

One afternoon, Mara had told him she preferred a noisy house. He had asked what sort of noise. She had looked at him until he understood. They had laughed at the terrible names they might give a child and then run out of things to say, embarrassed by their boldness. Now the woman before them was speaking about that future in the same voice she used to ask about winter provisions.

The older custodian looked at the request again.

"We aren't just keeping a room safe, Elian."

He recognized the story before she began. The Seed, the plant, what had passed through so many bodies before reaching those who lived there. The woman spoke softly, without solemnity. She was the one who had shown him how to remove the rotten parts of a seedling without also cutting away the healthy ones. Elian could not listen to her as though the care had never existed.

Mara asked:

"Did what you were given to protect end at this house?"

The younger woman lifted her face.

"No."

"Then it needs to continue outside it too."

"You're talking about a plant as though it were the same thing."

Mara looked at Elian. She did not expect him to let someone else answer for his body after inviting her in.

He knew the difference. The plant could be replanted; part of a harvest could die and there would still be another. There was no other Elian who could bring Mara the postponed life of this one. But that was precisely why the argument for preservation no longer seemed complete to him.

"You say the ancient ones withdrew to let people learn," he said. "What do I need to learn before I can go?"

The older woman rubbed her knee.

"They were able to withdraw. We were left with the danger."

The answer took away his next sentence. He could not promise that the history left to humans was a simple thing. He had seen real fear in that house, losses the women did not use merely to secure his

obedience. Mara was still beside him. The existence of danger did not decide for her.

Elian returned to the part of the request where he had described the work. If he needed to live nearby, living nearby was a condition he could discuss. If there was a road he could not travel alone, he wanted to know which one. He was waiting for a measure that would allow him to prepare for the next day.

The younger custodian traced the lines with her finger. None of them was enough to change the other's answer.

He stood.

"I won't promise never to have children."

The younger custodian folded the request, then immediately opened it again, as though the gesture had been premature.

"We aren't asking that."

"You're telling me I can't leave until you know what would happen if I did. How will you know?"

The woman looked at the other.

Elian waited, standing. The chair behind his legs seemed the same one he had sat in as a boy, hearing that the matter would be explained when he was older.

The request was refused.

They did not use the word refusal until Mara asked what, after all, the decision was. They said postponement. They said caution. They said the house could not take on that responsibility. Mara asked whether they could take responsibility for the life they were preventing.

The older woman, exhausted, replied that someone had to.

Elian left with the sheet in his hands.

In the courtyard, the sunlight had moved to another wall. Someone was taking in the laundry. An apprentice recognized Mara and asked her to look at an open seam; she said she would come back another day. Elian gripped the sheet until he heard the paper crumple. The apprentice looked at his hand and moved away, embarrassed.

Near the outer door, Mara stopped.

“You can come with me now.”

Elian looked outside. He saw the street, the shaded patch where water trickled from a gutter, a man carrying bundles on his shoulder. There were no soldiers in front of the house.

But everything that had allowed him to live was there: food, work, access to people who understood his experiences, care on the days when he could not explain them. Outside those walls, he would have to build a life and the means to sustain it at the same time. They had called it protection for so long that dependence had become difficult to distinguish from his own body.

“I need to prepare,” he said.

Mara closed her eyes for a moment.

When she opened them, there was no contempt in them. That hurt more.

“Get ready,” she answered. “But don’t ask me to call what they did here a choice.”

She touched his face. Elian rested his forehead against hers, smelling the street in her hair, the last of the sun in the cloth of her cloak. Then Mara stepped away. She walked unhurriedly to the corner and disappeared before he could form another sentence.

That night, the younger custodian read the request again.

The summary intended for the other houses said only that his departure had been postponed for reasons of protection. The longer

sheet preserved the conditions Elian had offered, his question about the dangers, his refusal to promise that he would never have children. In the rewritten passage, one word had pierced the paper.

The woman added an objection at the foot of the transcript. Her hand hesitated before the first word. She too feared what she did not understand. She had seen people hurt after careless exposure, names circulating faster than bodies could flee. When she closed her eyes, she saw Mara waiting for an answer and Elian standing, not knowing where to put his hands.

She wrote until the sentence was complete.

The summary left the following morning. The objection stayed in the house.

In his room, Elian folded the clothes Mara had brought him. He put them away with the others, opened the door, and stood looking at the key on the inside.

◆

On the afternoon of the visit, after leaving Elian, Mara had returned to her sister's house before the shadow reached the threshold. The smaller room was open. They had moved the chest away from the wall, and the mark on the whitewash showed where it had stood for years. On the floor lay a bundle of bedding she had brought that morning.

Her sister appeared with a basin in her hands. She looked behind Mara, then at the bundle she was still carrying.

"He didn't come?"

Mara put down the bread left over from the visit.

"Not today."

Her sister did not ask when. She took the basin into the kitchen, and Mara was silently grateful not to have to defend Elian before she even

understood what she felt. She went into the room. The window stuck a handspan short of opening all the way; she pulled it, the wood groaned, and a little dust fell onto the sill.

That was where they meant to put the table. Elian needed light for delicate work. He had explained it so carefully that Mara had begun measuring the light during visits to her sister: in the morning as far as the stone in the floor, later only on the wall. It was not a life imagined all at once. It had been made out of small questions, the height of a shelf, where to leave wet shoes, how much they would charge for a mended garment.

She unfolded the bedding. She found the seam she had left unfinished and looked for the needle fastened to the edge. For an instant she thought of putting everything away. Then she pulled the bench into the light.

When her sister returned, Mara was already working.

“Do you want me to keep the room?”

The question made her grip the cloth. She could not reserve an entire life and call it patience. Nor did she want to answer for Elian as readily as the women at the house had.

“For now,” she said. “But I’m going to talk to him.”

“Again?”

Mara nodded. Her sister brought the basin closer so she could wash her hands before eating. Both of them had flour on their fingers. The ordinary gesture disarmed her; only then did she realize how hard she had struggled not to cry in front of the custodians.

At the house, Elian went down for the meal. His usual place was still free. They served him the portion they knew, someone asked about the new cloth, a young man asked for help understanding a note. He answered the young man. He ate. Gratitude had not

disappeared with the refusal, and so he could not use it as a measure of what they had done to him.

Afterward he took his bowl to the kitchen. The woman beside the basin tried to take it from his hands. Elian asked her to let him wash it. Surprised, she yielded and showed him where the cloth was.

He did not need to learn how to wash a bowl. He needed to discover how many things he did because he had chosen them and how many he had never learned because someone always stepped in first. He stayed until the last utensil was done. When he returned to his room, the key still hung on the inside.

He sat down before the refused request. On the back of another sheet, he began a list: work, food, passage. Beside passage he wrote Mara’s name, stopped, and crossed it out. She was not an arrangement he could make on his own. He left the space blank so he could ask her.

The corridor grew quiet. Elian worked without hiding the light beneath the door.

Chapter 1 — The House That Remained

Chad woke with his fingers clenched around the sheet.

He drew a breath and found the room: the strip of light between the curtains, the T-shirt fallen from the chair, the fan turning above him. His heart kept racing. He released one finger at a time. He had gripped the fabric until his thumbnail left a mark in his palm.

He sat on the edge of the bed, his bare feet searching for the cold floor. He stayed that way until he could swallow. Outside, a bird repeated three notes. At the third, always higher, Chad closed his eyes.

The vaporizer was in the bedside-table drawer. He took it out without switching on the light. He knew its small weight in his hand, the scratch beside the button; some mornings he reached for it before he even knew the time. He opened the window a little and stood beside it in his T-shirt and underwear, the device between his fingers.

The taste of cannabis lingered on his tongue. Below him, the garden was still wet. A drop hung from the long tip of a leaf and slowly grew, gathering the water that ran down its vein. Chad followed its path. When the drop fell, he felt a very slight movement in the center of his hand.

He looked at his palm.

The nail mark was still there.

He turned back to the window. For an instant, the distance to the plant seemed too short. He had the impression that he need only move his fingers to feel the leaf give; with it came an absurd urge to laugh, so out of place in that room that it embarrassed him. Beneath the joy was something else, deep and shapeless, that tightened his throat.

He drew his hand back before he realized he had reached out.

"All right," he murmured.

The shutter struck the frame. He stepped away, banged his knee against the chair, and the curse came easily. The small pain helped him find the room's boundaries. He set the device on the table and opened the curtain farther.

The light reached the photograph beside the bed.

Sandy was laughing. The Kyoto wind had lifted her brown hair, revealing the pale strands near her forehead, and a lock lay across her mouth. His mother held Michael's arm as though she were about to drag him out of the frame. She had a narrow face, creases at the corners of her eyes, and that tilt of the head Chad knew so well: she had just said something and was waiting for the other person to see the joke.

Michael was still trying to look serious. In the photograph, his short hair, dark and graying at the temples, looked as though he had combed it with his hand. The sun brought out his brown skin and strong jawline. He was broader than Sandy, taking up almost half the picture, but she was the one deciding where they were going. One of his hands covered her fingers on his arm. Chad remembered the size of that hand enclosing his own to tighten a screw, and how his father always ended up handing over the tool before the job was finished.

He had kept the photograph there because it was one of the few in which neither of them was looking at him.

He picked up the frame. His thumb left a mark on the glass, over Michael's coat. He wiped it with the hem of his T-shirt, spread the grease, and gave up.

He wanted to ask what his mother had said at that moment.

The photographer was not in the picture. Chad himself had stayed home for that trip, absorbed in something that, at sixteen, had made

spending two weeks with his parents impossible. He still remembered the conviction. Not what it had been about.

He held the frame against his chest for a second, its hard corner against his breastbone, before returning it to the table.

In the bathroom, he turned on the tap and waited for the water to cool. He splashed two handfuls onto his face. The shock made him brace his elbows on the sink; a few drops fell from his sparse beard onto the porcelain. He raised his head.

His red hair was flattened on one side and sticking up on the other. He tried to smooth down the lock falling over his forehead. It sprang back almost to the same place. Beneath eyebrows that were copper-colored too, his light eyes were red around the edges. A few days' beard cast an uneven shadow along his jaw, one he had already promised to shave off the day before.

Twenty years old, he thought, looking at the pillow crease on his cheek. Sandy would have run a finger over it to smooth it away, as though his skin were a crumpled shirt. Then she would have said something about his hair. He would have complained.

He dried his face but kept the towel in his hands.

When he returned to the bedroom, his phone was vibrating on the bed. A message from Irene asked whether he had read the foundation's proposal. Below it, the calendar showed 2009, and for an instant Chad had to do the calculation again: three years since the accident. Three years of messages sent to him instead of Michael, of people beginning a sentence with Sandy's name and stopping to choose the verb.

He wrote to Irene that he would read it that morning. He did not send it. He was about to make the same promise for the third time.

He opened his computer.

Among bank notices, advertising, and two requests for a reply was an email received at four-oh-two. The subject read:

An invitation from COM — finding a path again

Chad passed over the subject, went back, and opened the message. He did not know the initials.

The entire text fit on the screen.

There are moments when life loses its direction and even rest no longer brings relief. At COM, we believe this can be the beginning of a calling: an opportunity to rebuild a routine, find companionship, and return to serving something meaningful. If you would like to learn about our work, we look forward to seeing you tomorrow at 10 a.m.

This was followed by the address of a tower in downtown Florianópolis, the eleventh floor, and an abbreviated name: P. Adanson.

The initial conversation carries no obligation. If you would prefer another date, please reply to this message.

He read it again. The language struck him as borrowed from a leaflet, until he came back to the word rest. The device was still on the table beside the photograph; he put it in the drawer. He could still feel the mark in his palm from gripping the sheet.

He wrote: Who are you?

Before sending it, he opened the sender's address. He did not recognize it. He searched for the surname among his father's old messages, then in the browser. Institutions appeared, councils, photographs of ceremonies. Adanson was in long captions, among other people. Chad enlarged one image until the faces broke into squares.

He looked at the bed again.

There must have been hundreds of people those lines would fit. Even so, Chad returned to the time it had been sent: four-oh-two. He did not know what time he had begun dreaming.

He deleted the question without sending it.

On the building's website, he found a phone number. The woman who answered confirmed the address and, after checking, the visit booked in his name for the following morning.

"Who booked it?"

"Mr. Adanson's office."

"I didn't book a visit."

The woman waited.

Chad looked at the name on the screen.

"Leave it as it is," he said.

When he hung up, he realized he had risen from his chair.

Joana's voice came from the stairs.

"Chad? Can you come down?"

He did not answer at once.

"Has something happened?"

"Something has. To the kitchen."

He found pots on the floor and the cupboard door leaning against the wall. Joana was kneeling on a towel, her blouse sleeve hitched above her elbow. She was a woman with a round face, dark hair tied high, and eyes that, at that hour, seemed to have woken before the rest of her.

Water had run through the inside of the cupboard. Sandy's recipe notebook lay on the table.

Chad picked it up quickly.

"Careful. The pages are stuck together."

The cover yielded beneath his fingers. He opened it to a page where the ink had left a shadow on the facing sheet. He recognized the handwriting before he could read the words.

Less sugar. Michael didn't notice.

Michael had noticed. Chad remembered the second spoonful, his father's theatrical pause, his mother pretending to search a drawer to hide her laughter.

Chad tried to separate two pages. A small piece of paper came away.

"Damn."

Joana laid her hand over his.

"I said careful."

He let go of the page. There was water under his feet. He took a clean towel, spread it on the counter, and laid the open notebook on it. The movement demanded so much attention that only afterward did he notice the blue bowl beside it. The repaired crack ran across its rim, thin and dark.

"Was that in there too?"

"I took that out first."

Sandy had refused to throw the bowl away. Michael had spent an afternoon saying that glue would never hold. At the first dinner, he had refused the bowl; the following night it had appeared in front of him without comment. After that, he had used the same one whenever he could.

"Thank you," Chad said.

Joana picked the towel up from the floor.

"Davi's coming to look at this at eleven. Will you stay?"

"I will."

She waited until he put his phone away.

"Eat something first."

"You talk as though I'm going to faint on the way to the fridge."

"The floor's slippery. Don't push your luck."

He laughed through his nose. He took a bread roll and still had half of it in his hand as he carried the notebook upstairs. He cleared a space on the bedroom desk where the sun fell, moving papers he had kept because he had not yet decided whether they mattered. On the bedside table, Sandy and Michael smiled out of the photograph.

He turned the computer so he could not see the message while he spread out the pages.

◆

Davi arrived with a toolbox that struck his knee at every step. He was thin, with closely cropped hair and a fresh cut on his chin. Chad led him to the kitchen and apologized for not knowing where to turn off the water to that part of the house.

"Your father knew," the man said, and went on opening the box.

Chad waited for more. Nothing more came.

While Davi examined the wood, he took out his phone. Irene's message was still unanswered. He sent word that he could talk.

She called almost immediately.

"Good morning," she said. "Did you read it?"

"I'm still reading."

"What page are you on?"

Chad let out a short laugh.

"Is this a test?"

"This is tomorrow."

Irene ran the foundation his parents had created. Chad pictured her with her glasses low on her nose, checking a figure before allowing herself to be angry with him. Through the phone, he heard a keyboard, then a door closing.

He opened the file she had sent. It was the proposal to consolidate the records of the vegetable gardens supported by the foundation and reduce the teams' visits to the neighborhoods. He had marked the first paragraph with a question and stopped there.

"We keep the teams in the field," he said. "I'll cover the difference."

"And who's going to make the visits? The team asked for this change because they can't keep up with all the neighborhoods."

"We'll hire more people."

"Maybe. But you need to listen to the people who'll be doing the work. People are exhausted, Chad. The meeting is tomorrow at ten thirty."

He looked at the proposal again. He still had not reached the page listing the team's names.

He looked at Adanson's email, open in the other window.

"Can't I do it earlier?"

"The others can do ten thirty. So could you when you confirmed."

In the kitchen, Davi called him. Chad asked both of them for a moment, and neither waited in silence: he heard Irene moving the phone away to answer someone, Davi measuring the cupboard aloud. He stood between the computer and the door, going nowhere.

"Chad?" Irene came back. "I can't defend a position of yours if you won't come and stand behind it."

He scrolled to the photograph attached to the project. Sandy stood beside two vegetable beds, pointing at something out of frame. He remembered the visit. His mother had insisted on benches because some people could not sit on the ground. Michael had asked who had requested them, and she had replied that no one needed to ask for their knees to hurt.

Chad could tell that story at the meeting. He even knew where he would put his hands as he spoke.

"Give me until tomorrow morning," he asked.

Irene let out a breath.

"Until nine. After that, I'm keeping the agenda as it is."

Davi needed to replace a part and would return the day after tomorrow. When he asked what time, Chad said any time. Joana, passing the doorway, stopped.

"I can't stay in the afternoon."

He remembered the performance she wanted to attend, the notice she had given more than once.

"In the morning," he corrected himself. "I'll stay in the morning."

Joana went on her way. Chad watched her until she disappeared into the utility area. He wanted to tell her about the email. Instead, he asked Davi how much the part would cost.

◆

He spent the afternoon switching between the foundation's file and the surname Adanson. In the photographs of ceremonies, he had found the same people who used to write to Michael. He had not seen his father in any of them. Even so, when he entered the study, he went to the family files before returning to Irene's proposal.

He searched for the surname in the correspondence he could open. When the search reached the accident documents, he did not exclude them. There was no reason to connect the invitation with the crash. There was the habit of ending up there whenever he tried to understand what had changed in his life. The report began with the date, aircraft, and location. He knew the order of the headings, the acronyms, the photographs he avoided enlarging.

He searched for the surname. No results.

In 2006, at seventeen, he had been angry at every word that did not give his parents back. Now he went through those same pages looking for something he might have missed. Twice he went back to the beginning. The third time, he closed the file.

On the low bookshelf was another photograph, smaller, in a wooden frame. Melly was looking at someone outside the picture, her dark hair coming loose from its arrangement. Sandy had said the two of them had been friends before either had thought of having children.

Chad had grown up knowing this was the woman who had given birth to him. He also knew she had died in childbirth. When he was small, he had asked whether it had been his fault. Sandy had pulled him into her lap so quickly that he had dropped the toy he was holding.

He remembered the strength of that embrace better than the whole answer.

For a while, he had tried to imagine a voice for Melly. Every one ended up sounding like Sandy's, and that annoyed him. Then he had grown older, had other questions, learned to postpone some of them. In the photograph, his mother remained almost the age he was now.

He picked up the frame, examined the edge worn by someone's thumb, and put it back in the same place.

He returned to the email. Nothing in it mentioned Michael, Sandy, or Melly.

He had the family lawyer's number open on his phone. All he needed to do was call. He imagined explaining that he had received an invitation from an unknown organization and decided to go at the same time as the meeting of his own foundation. He could hear the next question: what did he expect to find there? He still had no answer he could say without feeling ridiculous.

He turned off the screen.

Before dinner, he sent Irene his objection to the reduction in visits. He wrote that they should consider a larger team, reread the sentence, and realized he still owed her the conversation she had asked for. He left it for the morning.

In the kitchen, he ate from the blue bowl, standing by the counter. He wrote the tower's address on a sheet of paper and added the floor and the time. He folded it into an envelope for Joana: if he was not back by late afternoon, she should call him; if he did not answer, she should call the family office.

He set the envelope beside the bowl.

◆

He slept little. When he woke again, he left the drawer closed and went straight to the shower. He needed to drive.

At nine-oh-six, Irene wrote to ask whether he would do the sound check at ten twenty. Chad read the message with one hand on the wardrobe handle. The clothes he had chosen for the tower lay on the bed.

In the other window, the email was still offering a different date. He only had to reply. Chad went as far as writing that he would prefer the following week, then kept looking at the words.

The following week, he would find something else to deal with first. It was what he had been telling himself for months; perhaps he was using it now because he did not want to enter a room and explain a proposal he had barely read. The foundation meeting was work before it had even begun. The tower could still be anything.

He deleted the draft.

He called her.

"I won't be able to make it."

There was a brief silence.

"Has something happened?"

"I have something to take care of."

"What?"

He looked at the recipe notebook lying open in the sun.

"Something personal."

Irene did not press him.

"Does your objection still stand?"

If he maintained the objection, Irene would have to defend it without him.

He sat on the edge of the bed.

"Withdraw it," he said. "Go ahead with the proposal."

"You understand the visits will no longer be regular?"

"I understand."

"I need you to send me that in writing."

He did. Irene's confirmation arrived before he had finished tying his sneakers.

Downstairs, he found Joana drying the counter. The bowl had already been washed; the envelope stood against it.

"Will you be long?"

"I don't know."

"You left an address."

"Just in case."

She looked up.

Chad almost said everything was fine. He took the keys instead.

“I’ll stay with Davi tomorrow,” he reminded her. “You can go to the performance.”

“I know. I wrote it down.”

He opened his mouth, closed it. Joana ran the cloth over a patch that was already dry.

At the door, Chad checked the time: nine twenty. The garden still held moisture in its shaded places. A leaf brushed his forearm as he passed, and he turned too quickly.

The plant kept swaying behind him.

Chapter 2 — The Invitation

Inside the tunnel, Chad switched off the radio.

The voice continued for a second after he pressed the button, lost among the engines. Ahead, the red taillights of a bus colored the windshield. He left more space between them, rested his head against the seat, and waited for traffic to move. He had left home at nine twenty. Twenty-six minutes remained. On the map, the Deputada Antonieta de Barros tunnel was a line; inside it, there was room for the whole morning.

His phone vibrated on the passenger seat.

It was not Adanson. An automatic message reminded him of the foundation's sound check. Chad turned the phone facedown. He had already told Irene. His chair could remain empty without anyone needing to look for him.

He thought of Joana deciding when to open the envelope. He had written instructions as though arranging something sensible and left her the job of deciding when to obey. He wanted to call. The cars moved forward; he followed the bus out of the tunnel.

The bay appeared between the buildings, a patch of whitish water the sun still made difficult to look at. Chad knew the route from the back seat. He knew the spot where Michael would usually interrupt a conversation to point something out in the street, and remembered his impatience as he asked him to finish what he was saying. That morning he missed the garage entrance and had to circle the block.

A security guard checked his name. The barrier rose.

In the tower's lobby, a woman held a cardboard box against her hip while arguing on the phone. Chad waited behind her, hearing the same sentence return in different words: she was there, the documents were there, the person responsible needed to come down. When his turn came, he gave the name of the man he was looking for.

"Peter Adanson," the receptionist supplied.

She printed a pass. The small photograph had caught him with his lips parted, about to ask something else.

"Eleventh floor."

Chad put his wallet away. In the elevator mirror, he tried to rub away a mark beside his collar with his thumb. His hair had dried at an odd angle. He gave up before he arrived.

The assistant led him down a corridor without logos. Two closed doors, an empty meeting room, plants beneath a strip of light. Chad counted the doors as they went. When the woman opened the last one, the man by the window turned so quickly that the hem of his jacket swung away from his body.

"Chad."

The greeting stood alone for an instant.

Peter had brown hair silvered at the sides and a deep line running down each side of his mouth. The first button of his shirt was open. There was an uncomfortable familiarity about him, something Chad almost recognized when his face moved and lost when it was still.

The man offered his hand.

"Did you send the email?"

Peter withdrew it.

"I did."

"Who do you send these invitations to?"

The assistant left. Peter followed her movement and waited for the door to close.

"People who might want to learn about our work. The message introduces COM; it isn't an assessment of you."

"It seems to know quite a lot about whoever receives it."

"It speaks of things many people go through. Loss, a lack of direction, bad nights. Some call it a calling from God. Others just need someone to talk to. You don't have to accept our explanation to come here."

Chad studied his face. The answer made the message less significant, leaving him feeling both relieved and a little foolish for having spent the night thinking about it.

"So you don't know why I came."

Peter did not answer at once. Chad turned toward the door, but the man spoke again:

"I knew Michael. And Sandy. I have correspondence about their last trip that you never received."

Chad opened the door. The assistant looked up on the other side of the corridor.

He held the handle until she returned to her work. Then he closed the door and looked at Peter again.

"If it's another copy of the report, I'm leaving."

The man picked up a remote from the desk. A photograph appeared on the wall: an aircraft on the ground, stairs set against its door. Chad knew the colors, the shape of the windows. For the past three years, the plane had existed for him in photographs of twisted metal; seeing it whole brought on a dizziness he had to hide by resting a hand on a chair.

"Is that from the day?"

“From the last trip. The image came from a service provider. I’ll give you the source.”

Chad went closer. Two men stood near the landing gear. Neither was looking at the camera. He searched for Sandy in the doorway until the darkness became merely darkness.

“Is there anything about the crash?”

Peter lowered the remote.

“I have no proof of another cause.”

The ventilation system clicked. Chad kept looking at the screen.

“Your invitation talked about rebuilding a life.”

“Not giving back what you lost.”

“And you show me this just like that?”

“I should have asked first.”

He turned so quickly that the chair scraped the floor.

“Turn it off.”

Peter pressed the button. The plane vanished, leaving the wall large and dark.

Chad went to the sideboard, took a glass, and poured water. The pitcher struck the rim twice. He drank a mouthful, then another. Behind him, he heard Peter pull a chair away from the desk.

“I thought I should begin with what I can give you,” the man said.

“You could have begun by asking what I wanted to see.”

“I could. The correspondence is yours. I can put copies aside, and you can read them whenever you want.”

“First tell me what’s in there.”

Peter set the remote on the desk. Chad waited, gripping the glass. The photograph had hit him before he could choose whether he wanted to see it; the folder now lay closed before them both. He could

take it away. He could also ask here, while there was someone to answer.

He sat in the chair the man had pulled out.

"Tell me about their lives."

Peter drew the folder closer and took a while to open it. Chad saw the small effort of a finger releasing the clasp.

The first sheet was an expense statement. Transportation, maintenance, materials. Michael's signature was at the bottom; above it, he had corrected a date and then had to correct it again. Chad ran his thumb over the margin.

"He always did that," he murmured.

"What?"

"Tried to fix the number and made it worse."

Peter looked at the sheet as though only then noticing the two attempts.

"I used to send another copy. He complained about the waste."

A memory too small to serve as proof and exact enough to hurt.

The next page mentioned an environmental institute. There were letters, two records of meetings, and photographs. Chad spread them out slowly. Sandy appeared in profile, her forefinger raised in front of a table full of cups. Michael held his glasses. They seemed to be in the middle of an argument, and finding them too busy to smile brought an absurd relief.

"What was she saying?"

Peter leaned over to look.

"That they'd brought six chairs for eight people."

Chad looked at the edges of the picture. A woman was standing, almost cropped out of the frame.

"Of course."

"They'd asked us to begin. Sandy didn't begin."

Peter turned the photograph by its corner, removing the glare. Chad drew his chair closer; its leg caught on the rug, and he had to lift it to reach the desk.

"Did she stay standing?"

"Almost everyone did. Because of her. I'd already sat down."

Chad looked at the edge of the picture. Only part of a chair was visible behind Michael.

"Where were you?"

Peter pointed to a place outside the paper.

"Here. I thought we could begin while they brought the others."

"And she?"

"Asked whether the people standing needed to listen."

Chad let out a breath through his nose.

"She asked when she already knew."

"And I said yes."

Peter smiled at the photograph. Chad's fingertip rested over the cup nearest his mother. He moved it away to see her whole hand.

"They said it would take a minute," Peter continued. "Your father began talking about anything at all, to pass the time. She kept looking at him."

"Until he stopped."

"He didn't stop. He asked her to pick a thread off his sleeve. A thread that wasn't there."

Chad looked up.

Michael did that at the table when Sandy was annoyed. He pointed to his own shoulder, waited for her to come closer, and tried to kiss the hand reaching to pluck away the lint. Sometimes he got a slap. Chad had grown so tired of seeing it that he had learned to announce beforehand: This won't end well, Dad.

"Did she pick it off?"

Peter shook his head, still smiling.

"Told him to go and help find the chairs."

Chad's laughter came out too loud for the office. He stopped with his mouth open. Peter looked at him, and the man's smile changed; Chad quickly lowered his head, returning to Sandy's hand.

"At home she fell for it."

"Did she?"

He felt angry that he had told him. Peter was waiting for more, his face turned fully toward him. Chad stretched a leg beneath the desk and moved back until he felt the chair's backrest.

"Did both chairs come after that?" he asked.

"One came first. Lower than the others. Michael tried it and ended up with his knees almost here."

Peter pointed at his chest. The gesture was out of keeping with the neatly pressed shirt, the unmarked desk.

"He wasn't that big."

"In that chair, he was."

Chad returned to the photograph. His father held his glasses with one arm open over his wrist. He pictured him in the low seat, complaining to Sandy as though she had built the chair.

"Was she laughing?"

"A lot. But quietly. Michael asked whether he had something on his face. She said all she could see was his forehead."

Chad set the photograph against the desk. He opened his mouth, and what came out was another laugh, shorter this time. He wiped a hand beneath his nose.

Peter kept his eyes on the image. One hand had stopped over the folder. Only his thumb moved, rubbing the clasp.

Peter took a while to speak again.

"By the time they finally brought them, they'd forgotten the first thing we were going to discuss. Michael said it must have been very important."

"He said that about everything he forgot."

Peter nodded and went back to the papers. Chad laid his hand on the first one before he could pull it away.

"Wait. Here she's still standing."

"That was before."

"And why did my father take his glasses off?"

Peter brought the photograph closer to his face.

"I don't remember."

Chad wanted to know whether Michael had just laughed, whether Sandy was speaking to him or to the woman at the edge.

"Perhaps it was when…"

Peter stopped. Chad raised his head, waiting.

"I really don't remember," the man said.

Chad nodded. He held the photograph by both edges. On his mother's face there was a deep crease beside her nose, a concentration that, in family photographs, usually lasted only until she noticed the

camera. Here she had not even known. He could have spent the morning looking.

"She didn't like people pulling out her chair," he said, still looking. "My father tried to do that in restaurants. Sometimes she was already sitting down."

Peter laughed, a low sound that faltered at the end.

"I can imagine."

Chad looked at the window. From where he sat, he could see the meeting of two buildings and a patch of sky. At home, Sandy pulled her chair out with her foot while carrying her plate. The wood scraped, the food almost slid off, he asked her to wait because the show was nearly over. The television was never as good once she went to eat alone.

"Was that a good day?" he asked.

Peter took long enough for him to regret it.

"It was. After the chairs. I think they both enjoyed themselves more than I did."

Chad's face tightened before he could choose an expression. He put the photograph back on the desk. Peter went on sorting the papers, but less precisely. He let one sheet cover part of another, searched for an attachment that was in front of him.

"I wish I'd shown you this sooner."

"You could have mailed it."

Peter stopped.

"I could."

Chad picked up another photograph.

Michael held a tray inside a greenhouse. One sleeve was rolled higher than the other. The weight made him hold his elbows out, and

he was laughing with his eyes nearly shut. There was a crack in the side of the tray. Chad brought the image closer to his face.

"Who took it?"

"I don't know. The copy was among the visit materials."

"Were you there?"

"Not that morning."

He looked at Peter, surprised by his disappointment. He wanted someone to fill in what lay outside that photograph.

The man opened the folder's last flap and took out a card with a handwritten name.

"Helga works at the institute. She worked with your father. She might know."

Chad read the name, the phone number, an address. Beneath them was the project's old number. For the first time since he had arrived, something Peter offered led outside that room.

"Does she know you invited me?"

"I haven't spoken to her about you."

Chad put the card in his shirt pocket.

"I want to take the photograph."

"I set it aside for you."

The answer came too quickly. Peter put his fingers on the edge, sliding the photograph toward him, and withdrew them before Chad had to ask.

Chad brought Sandy's picture beside the other.

"This one too."

Peter let go of the folder.

"Yes."

A folded corner threatened to catch on the greenhouse photograph. Chad smoothed it carefully. Peter reached out, and Chad drew both pictures closer to his own glass before the man's fingers could reach them.

"The water," Peter said.

A drop was sliding down the glass. Chad moved it away and settled the photographs on the dry patch. His father's sleeve seemed to brush Sandy's arm, though a white strip lay between the two images.

Peter watched the movement. Chad thought of asking him for one more story. He already had Helga's card, would already be taking those pictures; even so, he moved his chair closer to the desk again.

For a while, they sat looking at Michael laughing.

The desk phone rang. Peter silenced it. In the corridor, someone was asking for the assistant, a voice filtering through the glass. Chad felt hungry for the first time that morning.

"What do you do?"

Peter leaned back. He seemed more at ease receiving the question.

"A preservation and research network. We keep archives, materials, objects that can't simply be put into circulation. Some projects are public. The ones you're looking at involved your parents."

"And the others?"

"Access is restricted."

"By you?"

"By me, among others."

Chad pulled the expense statement closer. His father had paid for repairs, transportation, and equipment for something that did not trouble to put a sign on its door.

"What's it called?"

"Círculo da Ordem Moral. The Circle of Moral Order."

He looked up.

"Are you serious?"

"We use COM."

"Did you hear the name out loud before you decided?"

Peter passed a hand over his mouth. This time there was the beginning of a smile.

"It's an old name."

"That happens to bad names."

The smile disappeared when Chad pointed at the signature.

"Is my foundation part of it?"

"No. Michael funded work outside it, and some through partnerships. Your foundation has a board, teams, and its own activities. What Irene manages is what's in the programs."

"You know Irene."

"I met her while working with Michael."

Chad looked at the phone in his pocket. He wanted to open their conversation, check whether she was still in the same world where he had left her at nine-oh-six.

"Did my father know everything?"

Peter took a moment.

"Not everything I know. He knew the projects he was involved in."

"And did he agree?"

"Sometimes. Your father wasn't very economical when he disagreed."

"He was with money."

"He withdrew funding too."

The answer disrupted the sequence Chad had begun putting together. Funding, secrecy, airplane. He returned to the photograph that had vanished from the wall.

Peter followed his gaze.

"I have nothing that turns the accident into a punishment, Chad."

"I didn't say that."

"I know."

Chad hated that he had noticed. Peter had brought the plane into the conversation; now everything seemed threatening.

"Then don't use the plane again."

"All right."

The documents included photographs of cultivation. Chad picked out familiar leaves among plants he could not have named. He saw a green cloth over a workbench, labeled containers, gloves hung up to dry.

"Weed?"

"Cannabis is part of the work."

"I imagine you know that about me too."

Peter did not pretend not to understand.

"I know you use it."

Chad pushed the photograph away.

"I started afterward. After them."

"I understand."

"It didn't come from my father."

"I didn't say it did."

The man's restraint irritated him. He would almost have preferred an accusation he could defend himself against. Peter went to the

window and adjusted the blind; the strip of sunlight crossing Chad's face shifted to the floor.

Relief came before any thanks. He did not thank him.

"How did you know the light was bothering me?"

"You close your left eye when you look at me."

Chad realized he was still doing it. He opened both eyes.

Peter sat down again, this time in the chair beside the desk, without the whole piece of furniture between them. He came no closer.

"There's work that could help you understand what happens to you. I know people who take it seriously."

"My doctor takes it seriously."

"Good."

"Don't say it like that."

Peter rested his hands on his knees. One nail was cut too close, the skin red beside its edge.

"I want you to see a place before you decide what you think of it."

Chad looked at the plants in the photograph. Sometimes, after using cannabis, he felt the garden change scale without changing size. At other times, nothing happened beyond a dry throat, hunger, a song that sounded new. He never knew what experience he was looking for until something was missing.

"Sometimes I see…" he began.

Peter raised his head slightly.

It was that movement, the immediate attention, that made him continue.

"It's not seeing. The plant down there feels as though it's here."

He opened his hand over his thigh. The memory of the drop on the leaf had returned with a joyful sharpness that embarrassed him in

front of the man in the suit.

Peter looked at his hand.

Chad closed it.

“Forget it.”

“You don’t have to explain now.”

The phone vibrated again on the desk. Peter declined the call. Chad had already given him more than he intended; the silence that followed seemed a way of waiting for the rest.

“Are you going to keep asking until I say something you can use?”

The man stood, this time to answer the assistant’s knock at the door. She said quietly that they had been waiting twenty minutes. Peter looked at his watch.

“I’ll call back.”

“I need to give them a time.”

For an instant Chad saw irritation cross his face. Peter looked again at the desk, at the scattered documents, and said he would call at noon. The assistant nodded and left.

When he returned, Peter left the door ajar.

“I want you to come and train. Not just talk to me. There are things you can learn to do without depending on what I tell you.”

“And what do you get?”

“You nearby.”

The man said it before the longer answer. He seemed to notice and did not take it back.

Chad kept looking at him.

“Why?”

“I’ve heard of inquiries about you. About the foundation. There are interests I don’t want to see get there first.”

"Whose?"

Peter drew a breath. Chad recognized the preparation for a refusal.

"I'm not going to give you names without being able to show what they've done."

"So you get here first, and only then tell me who I should be afraid of."

"Yes."

"Stop agreeing as though that fixes it."

Peter pushed the chair back hard enough to make a noise. He stood beside it and, for a few seconds, seemed to have nowhere to put his hands.

"You're right to be angry," he said, then stopped when he saw Chad's face. "All right. I won't say it again."

From the corridor came the assistant's laughter, brief, directed at someone else.

Chad picked up Michael's photograph.

"If I don't want your Order, can I keep this?"

"You can."

"Can I speak to Helga?"

"Of course."

"Can I come back here and ask about them without agreeing to work for you?"

Peter rested his fingers on the back of the chair.

"You can."

Chad wanted to believe that last answer. The desire was worse than the vague threat of someone looking for him. He had spent three years watching people's faces change when he said his parents' names. Peter could talk about Sandy waiting for the last chair, Michael complaining

about another copy. He was alive and knew things that did not end in the crash.

"I want the sources for the trip today."

"I'll send them."

"I'll check before I come back."

"All right."

He began putting the papers away. Peter handed him an empty folder. Chad placed the photographs between the larger sheets, aligning the corners more carefully than he would have handled any board document.

"Do they still work at the greenhouse?" he asked.

"Part of the project continues. It's changed a great deal."

"What did my father go there to do?"

"Ask Helga. She'll enjoy telling you more than hearing me get it wrong."

There was tenderness in the way Peter looked at the photograph before Chad covered it. He wanted to ask whether he missed them both. The question was too intimate for that room; too intimate after the email, and even so it remained caught behind his teeth as he searched for his phone and wallet.

At the door, Peter caught a sheet that had almost slipped from the folder.

Their fingers touched for an instant.

"Why do you seem…" Chad began.

The man waited.

"It seems like you know me."

Peter handed back the sheet.

"I've followed your life for a long time."

"That isn't what I asked."

In the distance, the elevator announced its arrival. Peter looked toward the sound, then at him.

"I wish I'd come into your life another way."

"You chose this one."

Chad left before the man could agree.

On the way down, he pressed the folder against his body. The temporary pass caught on his pocket. He pulled it impatiently and was left with a small red mark on his finger. He needed to return it to reception; needed to remember which level he had parked on. The sum of simple things almost made him laugh.

Outside, he crossed to a café and sat facing the tower. He ordered water, a sandwich, and a place where he could charge his phone. When the server brought his order, he quickly moved the folder so she would not put the plate on top of it.

Irene had sent the meeting's outcome. The proposal had been approved; there would be a review after six months. Teams would have access to the copies, visits would no longer be regular, and his statement remained in the attachments.

Chad read all of it. He replied that he had received it.

Then he wrote to Joana: I'm out of the meeting. I'll eat before coming back. I'm all right to drive.

He deleted the last sentence. He wrote only that he would be home that afternoon and sent it.

The reply took three minutes: All right.

He ate half the sandwich. The paper had torn, sauce was dripping underneath, and he had no wish to fix it. He opened the folder between the plate and the wall.

Michael was laughing inside the greenhouse.

Chad studied the stained shirt, the uneven sleeves, the shoulders straining under the tray's weight. He brought his face closer, as though he might hear the person on the other side of the camera. His father did not know that one day that morning would fit on a piece of paper.

A server asked whether she could take the plate. He nodded without looking.

Only when she had gone did he realize he was still hungry.

He put the photograph away, took the card from his pocket, and called the institute.

End of free sample — Prologue, Chapter 1, and Chapter 2 of Green Veil: The Hidden Legacy.

WHERE THE FREE SAMPLE ENDS

Chapter 3 begins here.

Chad put the photograph away, took the card from his pocket, and called the institute. The answer waiting on the line opens the rest of the novel.

GET NOTIFIED WHEN BOOK I OPENS

https://greenveil-zeta.vercel.app/?lang=en#pedido

Leave your email or Instagram handle on the official page for a personal first-hand alert as soon as the full English edition goes live.

Instagram @green_veil_universe · YouTube @GreenVeilUniverse · growxco@gmail.com