

NOISE:77

A novel where Saturn weighs more than it should.

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The English translation is currently available for editorial and media review.

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Insufficient marks for plagiarism.

To Professor Toscano, who in middle school didn't believe I was capable of making up a story: "*Insufficient marks for plagiarism.*"

The story was mine.

And to Antonella, who did the opposite. She read the chaos, held it together and told me: "*Now close it,*" then "*Now polish it,*" and finally "*Now publish it.*"

Noise:77 is dedicated to both of them: to the one who doubted and to the one who was certain, while I, as always, much less so.

Author's Note

All the projects, scientific protocols and technological references described in this novel are based on real data, existing documents and genuinely developed technologies. The institutions, agencies and locations mentioned are authentic or inspired by structures that were effectively operational during the historical period of reference. The characters and events are products of imagination for narrative purposes.

If humanity were to become extinct, it will probably be due to a firmware error.

Note found among the early drafts of Noise:77

Prologue

The Last Remaining Bottle

2005, Moscow, USSR

Announced convergence in 70 years

The room was small, tidy. On the cabinet, a Panasonic VCR and a videotape with "USSR vs France – World Cup France" written by hand. A half-empty glass of vodka, a cigarette stub in the ashtray.

The man stared at the screen without moving. His slight squint made it hard to tell whether he was really watching the television or the window beside it, behind the heavy curtains. A disturbing detail, giving the impression he saw more than he showed. His face betrayed neither fear nor surprise.

The television blared at high volume to drown out the sound of gunfire in the street. Moscow was burning. Since 1998 there has been no such international tension, the year when space-related news made governments quiver.

On TV, images scrolled past: buses set ablaze in the middle of the streets, iron barricades in Red Square, protesters screaming at soldiers.

The soldiers were shooting into the crowd, not into the air.

The headlines scrolling beneath the news footage carried the latest statements from the Secretary General of the Central Committee of the Communist Party on the state of emergency across the country. The Red Army charged; the crowd fell.

A faint knock at the door.

Victor did not move at once.

He took his time, then went to open it.

«May I come in?» asked the tall man on the threshold.

«You're late, but come in.»

The other nodded, set a bottle wrapped in newspaper on the table.

«Remember? We used to drink it at the camp in Leningrad.»

«These days I can barely remember where I put my glasses,» said Victor with a weary smile.

«Moscow is burning,» said the man, still in his overcoat, looking out the window.

«I'm not worried. I presume I'll be dead before I see it reduced to ashes,» he replied, sardonic.

«Did you hear what they're saying on television? As of today: martial law and a curfew at nine.»

«Yes, I heard. Just like old days, I would say.»

The other smiled.

They sat down facing each other.

They looked like two old friends meeting again after years, but the words were too precise to be casual.

A silence long enough to embarrass them both.

The tall man refilled the glasses.

«What shall we drink to, Kovalev?» asked Victor.

«To what remains,» replied the tall man.

Victor drank. Only he did.

The vodka barely burned, then left a metallic taste on the tongue.

He leaned back against the chair, looked him in the eyes.

«How long?» he asked, voice steady.

«Not long,» replied Kovalev.

«I see. I didn't think they'd send you.»

«Nor did I think I'd have to come to you.»

«Did they at least explain the why?»

«They say certain things must not survive.»

«And do you believe them?»

«You don't need to believe. You just need to obey.»

Victor rose, looked out the window. The lights of the ambulances and the police reflected on the glass like trapped stars.

«I don't blame you, you know,» said Victor softly, «in the end, each of us needs something.»

Victor went back to the table, set down the now empty glass and smiled for the last time.

«It's a good vodka,» he said.

«And probably the last one left,» said the tall man before heading toward the exit without adding anything.

No more words were needed.

Stones Don't Lie

*1972, Simferopol, Crimea. Nauchnij Astrophysical Observatory
Announced convergence in 103 years*

Simferopol was not a city: it was a warehouse. Two hundred and fifty thousand people crammed between prefabricated concrete apartment blocks, wide streets designed for the traffic of an era that would never arrive, shops with shelves perpetually empty and the smell of boiled cabbage soaked into the walls. They called it "the gateway to Crimea," but it was only the place where you changed trains.

The Nauchnij Astrophysical Observatory stood thirty kilometres away, up in the hills. A complex of white domes and barracks, thrown up in haste during the '50s, with most of the construction still unfinished. Every evening at seven, the green buses of the Academy of Sciences carried researchers from the city to the site. The road, full of potholes, was an ice tunnel in winter.

Ivan got off the bus at eight. The sky was already black. His shift began when the others ended: the last, always. He pulled on his worn coat, tightened his tie right to the knot, and crossed the frosty courtyard. The air smelled of cold metal.

Inside the dome, the smell changed: oil, rust and damp. The large 2.6-metre reflector telescope looked like a weary animal, bent under its own weight.

Ivan took the photographic plates, loaded them onto the trolley, bent over the reticle. He was not the first or the last to photograph asteroids, but he was the only one who stared at those dots as though they concealed a secret.

The technician shot him a tired glance.

«Still on about the rocks?»

Ivan did not reply. He counted the exposure minutes under his breath. Fifteen. Then twenty. The plates darkened slowly, granules of light and noise.

In the darkroom the smell of acid stung his throat. The stars appeared thin, the asteroid streaks cutting across the field. He was not looking for a single object — he was looking for a collective drift. He noted numbers, small displacements. "The gaps are widening," he wrote. Then crossed it out and rewrote: "They appear to be widening." He had no right to certainty. Not in his first year as an intern.

Ivan joined the queue at the computation office.

When his turn came, the technician said, without even looking up:

«You're last.»

Ivan clenched his jaw.

«I booked yesterday. My name is on the register.»

The technician shrugged, with a half-smile that had nothing cordial about it.

«You're last all the same.»

He waited hours. In the end the cards came back folded, reading error. The technician handed them back with a weary gesture.

«The machine's giving me a reading error. Redo them for tomorrow.»

Ivan did not reply. He tucked the sheets into his notebook and left. In the corridor, the noticeboard with portraits of the director and the professors glittered with medals and vacant stares. Below it, a sign warned: **IT IS STRICTLY FORBIDDEN TO MAINTAIN CORRESPONDENCE WITH FOREIGN INSTITUTIONS WITHOUT AUTHORISATION.**

The shame of the capital letters hit him like a stale smell. He pretended not to have read it.

At six in the morning the canteen opened. Ivan took a tray with watery soup, hard bread, lukewarm tea. He sat at the back, alone. Two colleagues noticed him.

One laughed, still chewing.

«Still on about the rocks, eh?»

Ivan did not raise his head.

«Stones don't lie.»

The other joined in, with a dirty smirk.

«But you do.»

He did not reply. He went back to the dome and continued observing until the sky turned milky and the seeing degraded. In the observatory's jargon this meant that the atmosphere had grown too turbulent: air currents, in constant motion, distorted the

light rays coming from the stars. Instead of remaining point-like, they began to tremble, to swell, to blur. In those conditions, every measurement became useless.

The laboratory was hot to the point of stupor, radiators that scalded and dry air, jackets and ties obligatory even with sweat-soaked sleeves. Going outside was a slap in the face: November cut the skin, the wind carried frost and coal dust.

At eight he caught the return bus. Nobody spoke. Heads rested against icy windows, eyes fixed on nothing. The people of Crimea had nothing to say to one another.

Ivan got off at Simferopol. He passed Gastronom No. 4, the cooperative grocery with wide shelves and few products. He bought what was there: black bread, two floury potatoes, a tin of preserves without a label, kefir. The cashier did not look him in the face.

«Next.»

His block of flats was a grey concrete slab. Dirty stairwells, feeble light bulbs, the smell of damp. The radiators gurgled without giving out heat. The flat was small, one room and a kitchen. At the windows the frozen condensation dripped slowly. The corners were stained with black mould.

Ivan put the shopping on the table, opened the tin with a knife, dipped the bread in the liquid and ate in silence. He did not turn on the radio, did not put on music. Just the noise of the radiator coughing.

He sat at the large notebook. He had no computer output, but he had his input notes: annotated coordinates, ephemerides, scrawled formulas. It was enough to do and redo the calculations by hand, with the stubbornness of someone who has nothing else in his life.

He drew a clean line: Jupiter–Saturn. The formulas always gave him back the same truth: if the ratio slips, the resonances enter the band. It did not take much, just time. A blade moving slowly.

He went through the calculations one last time, his eyes burning.

"It can't be true. I must have made a mistake somewhere. I'll check again tonight."

He put down the pen, passed a hand over his face. It was ten in the morning. He snapped the notebook shut, pulled down the shutters and lay back with his eyes wide open. Sleep did not come.

He woke with a start. By now it was late afternoon. He sipped his coffee that tasted nothing of coffee, his stomach growling emptily. His gaze fell on his morning notes. A brief phrase, written in haste, stared back at him like a warning:

"If this thing starts, nobody will stop it."

At seven the green bus took him back up toward the hills. The seats were worn through, the foam rubber seeping out of cuts in the fabric. The air smelled of diesel. Outside, dirty snow piled at the road's margins, frozen rubbish, stray dogs rummaging through bags.

At the computation office, the BESM-6 muttered behind frosted glass. The technician looked him over with his usual boredom.

«Back again, Ukrainian?»

Ivan did not lower his eyes.

«Working tonight?» — certain that his irony would go unnoticed.

He fed the punched cards through the slot. The reader began hammering: tac tac tac, the holes swallowed one by one. Half an hour of droning, then the printer started spitting out paper: a dense printout of columns, aligned rows, zero errors. Ivan seized the sheets as though they were alive.

He shut himself in the dome, switched on the lamp with the crooked neck and spread the printouts on the table. Pen in hand, he traced back through the formulas in the margins. Row by row, the manual calculations matched. The variations were truly there. It was not a whim, not an impression. Each verification tightened his stomach.

It was nearly five-thirty in the morning when it began to get light outside; he climbed the stairs with the printouts pressed to his chest. Professor Sokolov's office smelled of old paper and tobacco. A portrait of Brezhnev kept watch over the room; piles of folders blocked every line of escape.

Ivan walked in without knocking.

«Professor, I need to show you something.»

Sokolov raised his head. Thick glasses, hair smoothed down with excessive care, exhaustion dressed up as authority.

«Still on about your dots, Ivan? I've read your reports. Moscow doesn't want dots. Moscow wants Venus, wants the Moon. Things that can be seen, photographed, that end up in the papers.»

Ivan tried to open his mouth, but Sokolov cut the air with his hand.

«Don't waste my time. I will never take to the Central Committee a folder full of figures that mean nothing to anyone.»

He handed back the sheets without really looking at them.

«Go back to the dome. And next time choose something that counts.»

The neon lights in the corridor flickered as Ivan came down the stairs with the printouts in his hand. He went back to the dark of the dome, let himself fall onto the chair. He rested the sheets on the table, stared at them without reading. His heart was beating fast. His head, empty.

Maybe they were right. Maybe he was the idiot, the one wasting time on dots. A stubborn Ukrainian doctoral student presuming to explain the sky to the Russian professors. He passed a hand over his burning eyes. For a moment he thought about tearing it all up and throwing it in the bin. He did not. He stayed still, with a thought that scratched: "Maybe the telescope is not wrong. Maybe I am wrong."

End of shift, bus back to Simferopol. Every pothole was a punch to the back; through the little window, windowless sheds, courtyards full of scrap, crooked lamp posts.

He got off at the crossroads by the block of flats. Back to the grocery. He took what he found: half a kilo of the usual bread, a small tin of fish in brine, two apples, a bottle of kefir. The cashier rang up the prices with a smile.

«Next.»

At home the radiator was coughing out lukewarm air. Ivan put the shopping on the table. His eye fell on the calendar: his father's birthday.

He went down to the phone booth in the entrance hall of the block. Coins. A crackling line. A long wait, then his father's hoarse voice.

«Dad?»

«Vanya?» replied his father, calling him by that nickname he loved so much.

«Yes, Dad, it's me. Many happy returns.»

«Ah... yes, today. Thanks. How's it going?»

«Work. You?»

A muffled cough.

«Getting by. The harvest was thin, but the plan for Moscow is still the same. They say we have to hand over more. We've sold half the hens.» — He gave a joyless little chuckle. — «The land breaks your back, but at least it doesn't freeze you like the nights with your... machines.»

A brief silence.

«Mum?»

«She's here. Do you want to talk to her?»

«Yes, Dad, put her on, I want to say hello.»

«Grazhina, come here, it's Vanya.»

Sound of footsteps, the phone handed over, then a hard, tired voice.

«Vanya.»

«Mum... how are you?»

«How do you think I am? Your father breaks his back and you waste time with books. You can't eat books.»

Ivan clenched his teeth.

«They're not just books.»

«For us they are. We don't even know what work you do. Your father says you watch the stars. Stars don't give bread.»

Silence. His mother's voice grew colder.

«Good luck with your stars.»

The sound of the receiver being set down on the little table slipped into his ear. His father's voice came back, faint but gentle.

«Don't take it to heart, Ivan. Your mother talks like this because she doesn't understand. I... I don't understand everything either, but I understand you're trying. Hold on.»

Ivan lowered his voice.

«Dad, are you all right?»

«Me? Of course. — Another cough, longer. — It's just the cold. Don't worry.»

The line slid into a hiss. Ivan was left with the warm receiver against his cheek, his palm sweaty. It was not just the fatigue of the fields consuming his father. Something else was taking his breath away. And his mother... his mother was driving the guilt into his stomach with every word.

He climbed the stairs, a light bulb flickering at every landing. In the kitchen, on the table, a two-day-old newspaper. He opened it out of habit. A headline caught his eye: "International Conference on Astrophysics in Oslo." Names, themes, sessions. In there were people who would have understood the numbers. Or would at least have looked at them.

Impossible. Too young, no funding, no publication that counted for Moscow. They would not even have let him in as a listener.

He stared at the title until the letters danced. Then an idea forced its way through, crooked but solid: not to go as a scholar but to go as a technical observer. Request authorisation not to present dots, but to study Western calculation systems, processing methods, procedures.

«It's useful for the laboratory, it's useful for the USSR, we need to know the enemy,» he said aloud.

A bitter smile pulled one side of his mouth. It was not the truth, but it was a valid reason. Perhaps the only one.

He sat down. He pulled out a headed sheet of paper, still blank.

He stayed like that, pen suspended, while the radiator gurgled into the void. Then he lowered the nib and began to invent.

Ivan had spent hours honing that request. "Technical mission, observation of calculation procedures ." The words sounded slippery even to him. But it was the only route: transforming his dots into a pretext, dressing them in patriotic utility.

At nine, as soon as he arrived at the observatory, he went straight to Professor Sokolov's office. It was not office-hours, but then with him there never were.

Sokolov was bent over a report, his pen scratching on the sheet.

Ivan gave a light cough.

«Professor... may I?»

Sokolov raised his eyes slowly, already irritated.

«Come in, Ivan. But quickly, I have no time.»

Ivan placed the sheet on the desk.

«It's a technical mission proposal. To Oslo. There's going to be an international conference. I thought it might be useful to send an observer.»

Sokolov raised an eyebrow, without touching the sheet.

«Oslo? And you, yes you, do you want to go to Oslo?»

Ivan sat down without being invited.

«Not to speak, obviously. I have no credentials. But to observe the calculation systems. The Westerners have new procedures, fast machines. Knowing them would allow us to... get ahead of them.»

Sokolov lit a cigarette.

«Get ahead of them? Us? With what, Ivan? With your dots?»

Ivan remained impassive.

«Dots or not, our computations are slow. The printouts come back full of errors. The BESMs aren't enough. If I could study their procedures, perhaps adapt them... it would be an advantage.»

Sokolov blew smoke toward the ceiling.

«An advantage for whom? For you?»

Ivan tilted his head, a thread of irony in his voice.

«For the USSR, obviously. I don't count for anything.»

Sokolov stared at him for a long time.

«Do you know what they'd say in Moscow if they read this paper? That a doctoral student wants to take a trip to the West on the Party's back. Are you kidding me?»

Ivan rested his elbows on the table.

«Professor, I'm not interested in the West. I'm not interested in Oslo. What interests me is that our calculations should be less blind. They have machines that see further. Without realizing it, there's a chance we're always looking in the wrong direction.»

Silence. The ember of the cigarette lit up Sokolov's taut face for a moment. Then he spoke, slowly.

«Always good with words, Ivan. But Moscow doesn't like words. Moscow likes results. Moscow likes Venus, the Moon. Not sheets full of figures that only you think are important.»

Ivan looked at him steadily.

«Professor, if nobody goes to look, we will always be behind. And behind there is no glory.»

Sokolov lowered his gaze onto the sheet. He turned it between his fingers, once only.

«I'll read it. I'm not promising anything.»

Ivan got up.

«I'm not expecting promises.»

He made to leave. Sokolov's voice stopped him halfway out the door.

«Ivan. Don't think intelligence will save you. It's useless here. Here, you just have to obey.»

Ivan did not reply. He left and closed the door softly. In the empty corridor he smiled, barely, crookedly. He did not know whether from anger or defiance.

Two days later, in the laboratory all the technicians were already at work. Two colleagues looked him over with an amused air.

«So it's true, Ivan,» said one, bent over the punched cards, «you asked to go to Oslo?»

Ivan sat down calmly, opened his notebook.

«I just wanted a bit of fresh air. In here you all smell too much.»

The other laughed.

«Don't be ridiculous. They'll never send you. Too young, zero publications. And besides, you're Ukrainian.»

«And above all,» the first one added, «why should they ever waste funds on you? Trips abroad are for professors with medals on their chests. Certainly not for doctoral students.»

Ivan ran his fingers over the formulas, without raising his eyes.

«Right, better Venus. More romantic. At least that way you write poems instead of reports.»

They laughed. They could not tell if it was a dig or a sincere comment. But with Ivan you could never tell.

One of the colleagues shook his head.

«You've gambled your career, Ivan. If Moscow thinks you want to sneak yourself off with a bogus mission, you're finished.»

Ivan bowed his head, biting the inside of his cheek. Maybe they were right. Maybe he had made a colossal blunder. Dots nobody wanted to see, a trip he would never have got. Perhaps he really should have given up on the asteroids and aligned himself with the race for Venus. At least there would have been a certain future.

The shift passed slowly. At seven in the morning they were still there, sitting among stacks of printouts and darkened plates. The air reeked of smoke.

The bell of the telephone mounted on the wall broke the silence. One of the colleagues picked up the receiver, turned toward Ivan with wide eyes.

«It's for you.»

Ivan stiffened.

«Who is it?»

«The professor. He wants you to go to him at once.»

His heart was beating hard, but his face remained still. He already knew what he would be told, that his request had never even been forwarded to Moscow. Perhaps he was digging his own grave single-handed.

He got up in silence, tucked the notebook under his arm. He crossed the door without turning round.

The corridor was long and dark. Every step weighed more than the last.

The Silence in the Fjords

1972, Drammen, Norway

Announced convergence in 103 years

Anders Nilsen was sixty years old. He lived in a red wooden house just outside Drammen, with a sloping roof and green shutters that in winter stayed almost always closed against the wind. From the porch you could see the fjord, a ribbon of dark water winding between birches and black rocks. On clear days, the low sun bounced off the water like polished metal; on snowy days, everything dissolved into an opaque mist.

His life, on the surface, was happy. A present wife, two adult daughters who came to visit with the grandchildren on Sundays, a well-tended garden when the season allowed. The woodpile was always full, the fridge stocked, the kitchen radio broadcast news from all over the world. Nothing was truly lacking. But Anders knew that that prosperity was no longer a reward for him: it was only the backdrop to his slow retreat.

Every morning he got up early, more out of habit than will. He pulled on a thick woollen sweater and went down to the kitchen to make himself a black coffee that no longer tasted the way it once had. Sometimes he would open the newspaper and sit staring at the pages without really reading them. The news about North Sea oil, the new extraction platforms, the wealth that was changing the face of Norway interested him only halfway. He realised that his generation was making room for a different country, more secure, more modern. A country that no longer needed him.

In the '50s he had been among the first in Norway to work on valve computers. He had watched transistors replace relays, had written the first programs in Fortran when his colleagues still called them "instructions for accountants". He had always had one obsession: to use machines not just to perform calculations, but to *simulate behaviours*. "A system that learns to redefine its own rules", he wrote in his notebooks, when nobody understood him. They laughed at him, called him a visionary. He kept writing code.

His family doctor had suggested some strategies for managing the anxiety, but nothing had ever seemed to be enough. Social anxiety had become as much a part of

his daily routine as coffee or the newspaper: those sudden voids before speaking, the knot in the throat that paralysed him before an audience, the fear of being judged for every hesitation. Colleagues who had once sought him out for advice now greeted him with a quick nod in the corridors, without stopping. Internal conferences were held without him; seminars no longer listed him among the speakers.

Sometimes, out of nostalgia, he would return to the university. He wandered among the lecture halls at a slow pace, breathing in the familiar smell of chalk, paper and tobacco. Once, entering the common room, he had overheard two assistants laughing under their breath. — Nilsen and his codes... — he had heard clearly, before one of the two noticed him. The silence had fallen without warning, and Anders had gone to sit at the back, pretending not to have heard. He drank a coffee he could not get down and left without saying goodbye. That echo followed him home, more painful than any diagnosis.

Because there was a diagnosis, truly, even if nobody knew it. A condition that had slipped inside him without asking permission: the terror of others' judgement, the paralysis in public interactions. He recognised the symptoms all too well, and did not deceive himself: the time he had left to face certain challenges was not infinite. But that awareness, paradoxically, gave him a kind of secret freedom. He had nothing left to prove, and this made him less vulnerable than his colleagues supposed.

His family, by contrast, treated him with genuine affection. His wife, a practical and quiet woman, continued to tend the house and garden with the same steadiness as always. His daughters came on weekends, the grandchildren running up and down through the rooms laughing. During their visits, Anders found a calm that allowed him to forget, at least for a few hours, the anxiety and the void that accompanied him. Sometimes he told made-up stories by the fireplace, and the children listened open-mouthed. None of them imagined the void that awaited him when the house fell silent.

One February afternoon, opening the post box, he found an envelope bearing the stamp of the University of Oslo. His heart gave a leap he had not felt in years. Inside, an official letter: they were inviting him as a speaker at the international conference in Oslo, scheduled for a few weeks hence. He had been chosen to open a session dedicated to the physics of materials and complex systems, the field that had made him known in the decades past.

He sat down at once in the kitchen, the letter trembling between his hands. He read those lines three times over, until the ink seemed to move beneath his eyes. It was not clear whether this was a belated recognition or an act of courtesy. But, in the end,

it did not matter. That invitation brought his name back to the centre, at least for a day.

The letter had remained on the kitchen table. Anders had left it there, half open, between the morning newspaper and a cup of coffee by now cold. He had not thought about it while going out for his daily walk toward the village. A lapse of memory, or perhaps an unconscious gesture: leaving it exposed, as though it were a burden to rid himself of.

When he came back home, his wife was sitting at the table. The white envelope in front of her, her hands resting on its edges, as though to hold it still. She had no need to read it again. She had already read it enough times to understand everything.

«What is this about?» she asked, without raising her eyes.

Anders stopped on the threshold, his shoulders still cold from the wind. He did not even try to feign surprise.

«It's an invitation,» he said softly. «A conference, in Oslo.»

She lifted the letter and gave it the faintest shake.

«A conference where you should be speaking. In front of everyone.»

Her voice was not hard, but it carried a weight that Anders felt in his bones. He took a few steps and sat down facing her.

«It's nothing special. A brief intervention.»

His wife looked at him with clear, tired eyes.

«You have no idea how much it could hurt you. — Her voice dropped again. — Do you remember the last time? Your hands were shaking, Anders. You couldn't even read your notes. Everyone saw it. Everyone commented. Do you really want to offer them another spectacle?»

The words hit him harder than the memory. He passed a hand over his face, as though to erase the scene that resurfaced on its own: the crowded lecture hall, his voice failing, the sheets slipping from his hands. A man seizing up with no one able to support him.

He lowered his gaze.

«You're right,» he murmured. «I won't go.»

She moved closer to him, brushed his cheek with one hand, as though to comfort him. She whispered:

«You are an exhausted man.»

Anders lowered his gaze. It was not an insult. It was the truth.

The silence that followed was worse than the words. She folded the letter with care, slipped it back in the envelope and left it on the table, as one does with a useless object. Then she got up and began to clear the table, without adding anything more.

Anders stayed sitting a little longer, his hands clasped in front of him. Then he got up and shut himself in the study.

The familiar smell of old paper, dry wood and tobacco not entirely faded welcomed him. The shelves were full of notebooks, folders, binders. He picked up at random a worn dossier, full of graphs and pencil-drawn curves. He leafed through it slowly: diagrams of logic networks, numbers, formulas annotated in graphite that was beginning to fade. Diagrams that had once had immediate meaning and now seemed written by another man.

In there, among papers and dust, lay a typewritten dossier with the title "B37TA". It was not a working program, just the embryo of an "adaptive architecture", a system capable of redefining its own rules rather than following them blindly. That program did not yet have the ability to think, but it already had the structure to learn.

He tried reading a passage aloud. His voice trembled, got stuck halfway through a sentence. He found it ridiculous even to himself. He let himself sink into the armchair, legs heavy, his gaze fixed on the table.

The desire to withdraw, to shut himself away inside himself and let the fear consume him, took him by the throat. It would have been easier than facing a room full of colleagues ready to judge him.

He massaged his temples, trying to chase away the images that kept flooding back: the bright lecture hall, the students' stares, the murmuring, the low voices that would not stop even when he tried to speak. He felt the shame rising until it became nausea.

And yet, as he turned that old folder over in his hands, something inside him held fast. It was not pride. It was not hope. It was simply the need not to disappear entirely, to leave at least a mark. Even if small, even if useless.

He closed the notebook, set it down with a slow gesture and got up. He knew he would not have the strength to present himself as a speaker at the conference. But he did not want to let his absence be read as indifference or contempt either. He had to at least explain.

He would have to speak in person with the colleague who had invited him. At the university, where he had spent his whole life and which now watched him like a stranger.

He put on his coat, took his hat and paused for a moment in front of the entrance mirror. His reflection was that of a tired man, with a hollow face and reddened eyes. He looked at it in silence, without moving a muscle.

Then he opened the door.

The old Volvo 144 shuddered to a halt at the entrance to the University of Oslo car park. The olive-green bodywork, once polished, bore scratches and rust spots along the edges. Anders sat a few seconds at the wheel, his hand resting on the dashboard as one does with an old friend. The car was past it, but it was enough for him: it had never left him on foot, never judged him even when he left it always dirty.

He switched off the engine and got out. The February air was sharp, heavy with snow and petrol fumes. The main entrance of the university seemed enormous to him, larger than he remembered. Every time he crossed that threshold, time seemed to cancel itself out, and he became again the uncertain student who dreamed of changing the world with numbers.

The corridors, though, were no longer his. Some students walked past without greeting him, bent over their books. An assistant he had known for years, a certain Johansen, glanced at him with a polite smile and immediately looked away. Two younger colleagues were talking in low voices near a coffee machine; when he passed, their voices broke off abruptly. Anders felt the weight of those curious stares. He had no need of many words — his silence over the last few years spoke for him.

He arrived in front of Professor Henrik Lund's office. He knocked, and the voice from within invited him to enter.

Henrik welcomed him with a broad smile.

«Anders! What a pleasure to see you. — He held out his hand. — I was wondering whether you'd accepted.»

Anders barely shook it. He sat down in front of him, still in his coat. He did not want to waste time.

«Henrik, I've come only to tell you I won't be taking part in the conference.»

Lund's smile faded.

«I don't understand. It's the opportunity you've been waiting for for years. An international stage, a first-rate audience. You could bring your name back to the centre of the debate.»

Anders lowered his gaze. He could not tell him the truth, could not admit that the mere idea of a full lecture hall made him shake. So he took the colder path.

«I don't share the scientific direction you've been following. I don't recognise myself in that approach, and I don't want to be associated with it.»

Lund stared at him for a moment, as though weighing how sincere he was. Then he shook his head.

«Always so rigid, Anders. — His voice grew calmer. — But let me tell you one thing: science is never a straight line. It's an infinite dialogue between those who think they are right and those who never stop doubting. Without your doubts, we would never have built certainties.»

Anders remained silent. Inside him the battle was fierce: one part wanted to believe him, the other screamed that he had never held a stage, that it would be a failure again in front of everyone.

«You think you're protecting your dignity by keeping silent,» Lund continued, «but that's precisely how you're consuming it. Your research on adaptive systems is not a memory — it's a milestone. Some colleagues may laugh at you, but time doesn't laugh. Time preserves.»

Anders raised his eyes for a moment. Those words wounded him and comforted him at the same time. Lund's philosophy was clear: it doesn't matter who carries the weight of knowledge, it matters that the knowledge remains. But for him it was not enough.

He got up, gripping his hat between his hands.

«Thank you, Henrik. Truly. But I won't be there. And I ask a favour: don't contact me again about these things.»

Lund sighed, leaned back in his chair.

«It's a loss, Anders. Not just for us, but for you too.»

Anders gave a barely perceptible nod, then turned and left.

The corridor was empty. Only his footsteps echoed, sharp as a hammer.

When he got back to his Volvo, the bodywork reflected the grey afternoon light weakly. He stopped a moment, his hands in his pockets, and felt the conflict rising inside him. He had chosen silence, once again. Perhaps it was his only defence, perhaps his punishment.

He climbed in, started the engine and left the university behind.

Look Over There

*1972, Simferopol, Crimea. Nauchnij Astrophysical Observatory
Announced convergence in 103 years*

The director's office was bare, ordered to the point of excess. A wide desk, the calendar with deadlines clearly marked, a table lamp casting cold light onto stacks of folders. The man behind the desk barely raised his eyes when Ivan came in.

«Sit down, Petrov.»

Ivan obeyed. The chair creaked beneath him, and for a few seconds nothing could be heard but the rustling of papers the director was leafing through. Then the voice came, dry as the crack of a whip.

«I've read your request. — He lifted the sheet between two fingers, as though it were a dirty object. — The Oslo conference. — A pause. — I have to be honest with you: it's ridiculous.»

Ivan did not reply.

«Do you really think someone out there needs you? — The director let the sheet drop onto the desk. — Here we have plates to catalogue, registers to fill out, observations to check. This is the work the Soviet Union has entrusted to you. Don't chase fantasies.»

«It's not a fantasy, Comrade Director,» Ivan murmured, keeping his voice low.

The director skewered him with a look. «How dare you contradict me? I am speaking to you clearly: I am advising you on discipline, not on international ambition. You want to put yourself at the centre? You are being offensive, Petrov. Not only toward me, but toward everyone who works with discipline and does not presume to step outside their role.»

Ivan breathed in slowly. It was pointless to hit back. He got up, ready to leave.

«Fine,» he said only. «I understand.»

He already had his hand on the handle when the director's voice stopped him.

«Wait. — There was a shadow of satisfaction in his expression. — Don't be so quick to turn on your heels and go back to your desk.»

Ivan turned slowly.

«Moscow has decided differently. — The director weighed out the words with bitter relish. — Your request has been accepted. You will leave for Oslo.»

For an instant time stood still. Ivan let nothing show, but felt his heart speed up.

«Don't get your hopes up, though,» the other continued, leaning forward over the desk. «This changes nothing about what you are. You're not a great scientist — you're just a functionary who's had a stroke of luck. From today I'll be watching you. If you put a foot wrong, if you give even the impression of failing to respect the rules, you will be punished. — His face stiffened into a sneer. — Even if it means making you clean the ground-floor lavatories.»

Ivan stood still, motionless. Then, calmly, he said:

«I have always served with discipline.»

«We shall see, Petrov, we shall see. — The director drummed his fingers on the desk. — In the meantime, enjoy the trip. — He paused deliberately long, letting the words weigh like lead. — Bon voyage.»

Ivan barely pressed his lips into a thin smile.

«I thank you, Comrade Director. Mother Russia knows how to surprise her sons with rare gifts.»

The director nodded. Ivan opened the door and left.

The corridor was deserted, his steps echoing dryly on the floor. Only when the door closed behind him did the director grasp the double meaning of that phrase. He stiffened, his face darkened by a flash of fury.

Ivan, meanwhile, was walking down the corridor at a brisk pace without turning round, with a bitter smile that nobody could see.

The following morning, after his shift at the observatory, Ivan sat down at the table at home with the folder of Oslo speakers' abstracts. He went through the names, underlining them with a pencil. All distinguished scholars, many of them compromised with politics. Nobody who seemed suited to receive his calculations.

He feared not having time, at the Oslo conference, to approach the right colleagues.

It would have been risky: a single misplaced word could have aroused suspicion.

He would have to first understand whom to speak to, and perhaps give a discreet advance signal of what he wanted to talk about.

Then he stopped: *Dr. Gertrud Wierdis, MIT*. The abstract spoke of computational models applied to the orbital dynamics of the outer planets. Few lines, but sharp.

Ivan pulled out the folder where he kept the publications and correspondence of colleagues from beyond the Iron Curtain.

He remembered her style well: rigorous, free of frills, attentive to details others overlooked. *If anyone can understand, it's her*, he thought.

He took a blank sheet. He copied out the title of the abstract and wrote the formula of Kepler's Third Law. It was the standard equation every astronomer used to calculate the time a planet takes to make one complete orbit around the Sun. Normally, for academic examples, Earth's data were used.

Ivan, instead, entered Saturn's specific variables: its mass, its mean distance from the Sun, and the period of 29.5.

He worked out the calculation. The final result was unequivocal.

For a censor, it was pure mathematics. But for Gertrud Wierdis, that number would have been a beacon. Why calculate Saturn's orbit specifically in a generic note? That 29.5 was not a simple number; it was the rhythm of Saturn's time. It represented the years the giant takes to make a single orbit around the Sun. To write it meant naming the planet without speaking its name. It was a finger pointed toward the origin of the problem.

Then he wrote: *Interesting approach, but did you consider this calculation?*

It would be a precise signal: "*look over there*".

Methodological Note

This novel is also grounded in scientific literature and public mission archives. With regard to Saturn, the internal structure, gravitational field and constraints on ring mass derive primarily from the radio and gravitational measurements of the Cassini mission and their analysis in peer-reviewed papers. The section on the rings draws on works discussing the main hypotheses of origin and evolution, from "catastrophic" reconstructions (fragmentation or mass loss of a large satellite) to more recent estimates on age and mass balance.

For impacts and orbital deflections, the passages on "windows" and resonant returns are based on studies of NEO dynamics, useful for converting a chaotic problem into calculable probabilities. The DART mission is cited as a contemporary reference for the feasibility of deflection via kinetic impact. The sections on permafrost and bio-extraction draw inspiration from studies on permafrost warming and methane production in sub-permafrost environments, used here as a plausible framework for local energy processes.

Finally, the chapters on signal analysis, entropy and AI systems invoke classical concepts (information theory) and modern techniques (generative models). Where the story introduces procedures, algorithms or protocols, it does so in narrative form: the foundations are real, but the operational organisation and certain details have been adapted for internal consistency and narrative pace, without any claim to being a manual.