THE MINISTRY OF LATER



A philosophical tale of parallel realities
and the lives we manifest

ORION SAINT

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A work of fiction

CONTENTS

1	The Notice	1
2	The Woman Below Ground	5
3	The Man With the Pear Tree	9
4	A Shelf Above the Sink	12
5	The Other Kitchen	16
6	The Chapel During Office Hours	19
7	The Work That Had to Be Done	23
8	The Hours Nobody Counted	27
9	The Author of the Form	31
10	The Corridor of Related Lives	35
11	The Woman Who Lived	39
12	The Cost of Leaving on Time	44
13	At Six	48
14	The Pear Tree	52
15	The Room He Had Not Used	55
16	The Following Monday	61

CHAPTER 1

The Notice

The letter arrived on a day Elias had decided did not count.

There was work to finish, a bill to dispute, and a stain on the kitchen ceiling that had begun to resemble a small defeated country. Once these matters were settled, he would think about what he wanted. He had used this arrangement for years. It remained popular despite producing no visible results.

The envelope was cream. His name appeared behind a transparent window, correctly spelled, which made the contents harder to dismiss.

NOTICE OF PERSONAL REVIEW

Your application to begin living remains incomplete.

Please attend the Ministry of Later within seventy-two hours. Bring identification and evidence that your outstanding obligations have been satisfied.

If you cannot attend, continuation may be granted automatically.

Elias read the final sentence twice. Continuation sounded reassuring. It usually did.

He was fifty-four. He worked in the Ministry's Reconciliation Office, where he resolved discrepancies between what citizens had intended to do and what they reported having done. A man who intended to visit his brother every summer but visited once in eleven years might request that the single visit be reclassified as continuous intention. Elias could approve this if the appropriate boxes had been completed.

Before joining the Ministry, he had repaired things in hotels and apartment buildings. He knew how a loose fitting

sounded through a wall, and which patch of new paint meant someone had stopped looking for a leak. At weekends he still looked after four flats for people who generally called while he was eating. The money helped. So did the fact that a door, once repaired, usually closed without requesting clarification.

There were paintings in his wardrobe and stories in a notebook used mostly for measurements. He had stopped mentioning them when people asked what he did. It made the answer shorter.

The Ministry occupied most of a stone building near the station. Its basement held the Office of Temporary Arrangements. That office had been there since the war.

Elias had never received a personal notice.

He put it beside the kettle and checked his phone. A message from his daughter had arrived the previous evening.

Friday. Six o'clock. The studio will actually be open this time. There will be cheap wine and things you must not pick up.

Beneath it, a second message.

I'd like you there, Dad.

He began to type Of course. Then he remembered a review meeting that might run late and replaced it with I'll try.

He watched the words for a moment. They looked small and reasonable. They would fit almost anywhere.

He deleted them without sending anything.

On the windowsill stood a green cup Anna had bought from a market because the handle was crooked. Everything else on the stall had been identical. That had offended her. She had handed the seller his money as though funding a resistance movement.

Three years after her death, Elias still avoided the cup. He washed it when dust became visible. He considered this maintenance.

He drank from a white one instead.

As he put it down, he saw two green cups reflected in the dark window. He turned to check. There was only one on the sill. When he looked back, the second reflection had disappeared.

He blamed the light. Light was available and unlikely to complain.

At the station, an advertisement showed a woman leaning from the balcony of a hotel. Below her was a sentence in enormous letters.

YOU HAVE EARNED THIS.

The woman had no tools, no shopping, no one pulling at her sleeve. Elias wondered where the photograph had put her mother.

The train arrived on time. He boarded with everyone else and spent the journey answering messages whose urgency had survived the night remarkably well.

At the Ministry, his supervisor was standing beside the lift. Voss wore suits in shades so close to one another that he appeared to change gradually over the seasons.

“Your quarterly figures,” Voss said.

“On your desk by noon.”

“They were due yesterday.”

“The revised categories came yesterday.”

“Yes. An unfortunate overlap.”

Elias took the notice from his coat. Voss read it without touching it.

“Personal Review,” he said. “Lower ground floor.”

“I didn't know we had one.”

“Most people don't need to.”

“What happens there?”

Voss adjusted the cuff beneath his watch.

“They establish whether you wish to continue.”

“Continue what?”

“Your present arrangement.”

The lift opened. Several employees stepped out wearing the attentive expressions of people who had already begun the meeting inside their heads.

Voss went in. Elias remained in the lobby.

“Noon,” Voss reminded him.

The doors closed before Elias could explain that noon had never been in doubt. He had always known how to get to noon.

CHAPTER 2

The Woman Below Ground

There were no clocks in Personal Review. Elias noticed this at once, then noticed how frequently he looked for one.

A gray door stood at the end of the corridor. RELATED LIVES was written above the handle. As he passed it, he heard a man laugh in a voice close enough to his own that he stopped. He had not heard himself laugh like that for years.

The door was locked.

A woman sat behind a desk with a cup of tea and a peeled orange. A strip of skin lay beside her papers in one long coil. Her nameplate said SERA, which was either friendly or incomplete.

“You work upstairs,” she said.

“Twenty-seven years.”

“Then you know how to sit down.”

He sat.

She opened a folder. It was thinner than he expected. He had thought a life, however unexceptional, would involve more paper.

“What did you bring?”

“Identification.” He placed his card on the desk. “I don't understand the other requirement.”

“Evidence that your obligations have been satisfied.”

“They haven't.”

“I see.”

She wrote something.

“I don't think anyone's have,” he said.

“People bring very optimistic documents.”

On the desk between them was a small brass bell. Its handle had been repaired with black tape. Elias recognized

the repair. The Ministry had a department for purchasing replacements and no budget for replacements.

“What exactly am I applying for?”

Sera slid a blank form across the desk.

CERTIFICATE OF COMPLETION

I confirm that all necessary work has been performed, all dependent persons are secure, all foreseeable difficulties have been resolved, and no further preparation is required before I begin the life intended for me.

There was a space for a signature.

“Who can sign that?”

“Quite a lot of people. The difficulty is believing them.”

Elias pushed it back.

“This must be a mistake.”

“You may renew your deferral. It takes a moment.”

“And if I don't?”

“You can request an unconditional release at the hearing on Friday. Six o'clock.”

“That's outside working hours.”

“It concerns your personal time.”

For the first time, he thought she might be making fun of him. Her face supplied no evidence.

“What does the release do?”

“It closes the application.”

“And then?”

“Then we stop holding it open.”

He looked around. The shelves were full of folders, each with a cream label. Some had faded to the color of old teeth. A plant stood near a vent, leaning toward air that was no substitute for light.

“Do you ever get outside?” he asked.

“At lunch. Sometimes.”

The answer made her less mysterious. He was faintly disappointed.

Sera took three sheets from his folder.

“These are the reasons for deferral currently attached to your name. Read them at home. Cross out any that no longer apply.”

He glanced at the first.

When the house is finished.

On the second, the handwriting changed.

When Mara is older.

On the third were two words.

After this.

Elias knew precisely when he had written those. The hospital had a vending machine that returned every second coin. He had written on the back of a parking receipt while waiting for a doctor whose name he later forgot.

“Where did you get these?”

“You submitted them.”

“I don't remember submitting the last one.”

“You put it in an envelope with your leave request.”

Of course he had. There had been so much paper that year. It had been possible to enclose almost anything by mistake.

“These are ordinary responsibilities,” he said.

“Some are.”

“My wife was ill.”

Sera left the papers where they were.

“I am asking whether you still want these conditions. I am not asking you to defend loving your wife.”

He looked down. His hand had tightened around the edge of the chair.

Upstairs, a pipe knocked in the wall. Someone was running water. An entirely ordinary life was taking place one floor above this one.

“I need to get back,” he said.

Sera returned his identification.

“You can bring someone to the hearing. People sometimes find that useful.”

“A representative?”

“Someone who knows you.”

At the door he turned.

“What happens if I don't come on Friday?”

“Your file stays as it is.”

She separated an orange segment with her thumbnail.

“That is what the notice means by continuation.”

CHAPTER 3

The Man With the Pear Tree

At noon, Elias handed Voss the quarterly figures. The totals balanced. He had always found this reassuring until he noticed that balancing did not require either column to describe anything true.

He had a sandwich at his desk. At one, he went downstairs to collect the coat he had left in Personal Review.

An elderly man sat in the waiting area with a walking stick across his knees. Beside him stood a paper bag from a garden center. Thin branches emerged from the top.

“Is that a tree?” Elias asked.

“It has applied to become one.”

The man moved his stick to make room, although there were five empty chairs.

“Pear,” he added. “My wife wanted one.”

“Does she garden?”

“She did.”

Elias sat down.

The man's name was Len. His wife had died in February. They had moved into their house forty-one years earlier. For the first ten, the garden needed drainage. Then the children needed space to play. Then he had considered putting in a greenhouse. Then his knees had become unreliable, which had encouraged the idea of selling.

“We were always about to leave,” Len said. “No point planting a tree in a place you're about to leave.”

The bag made a soft crackling sound as he adjusted it.

“Are you selling now?”

“No. She liked the house.”

Behind the closed office door, someone laughed once and stopped.

“What are you here for?” Elias asked.

“I keep thinking I ought to know whether I'll see it fruit.”

He said this with mild embarrassment, as though asking about an inappropriate discount.

“You want them to tell you?”

“They seem to know a great deal.”

Elias looked at the ceiling tiles. He had once spent three meetings discussing whether unresolved intentions should be counted from the date they were formed or the date they were officially acknowledged. They had resolved it by creating two dates.

“They don't know that,” he said.

Len studied him.

“You sound certain.”

“I work here.”

This appeared to settle the matter. Len reached for his walking stick.

“In that case, I should catch the two-ten.”

He stood with effort. Elias offered to carry the tree to the street. They passed a poster advising visitors to prepare for a meaningful future by organizing their present concerns. Somebody had drawn a chair beneath the word future. The person sitting in it had become a skeleton.

Outside, Len rested while a traffic light changed.

“Were you happy?” Elias asked, then wished he hadn't. It was an enormous question to put to a stranger holding a bus pass.

Len considered it without offense.

“Some afternoons. We argued about the bathroom for twenty years. She took an unreasonable position on tiles.”

“What did you do?”

“Bought the tiles.”

The light changed again.

“The bathroom's lovely,” Len said.

Elias helped him to the stop. He could see the station clock from there. His lunch break had ended six minutes earlier.

“I'll come and help plant it,” he heard himself say.

Len looked at him with the serious expression the offer deserved.

“When?”

The word exposed how little Elias had meant. He had meant kindness. He had meant that he would like to be the sort of person who came to help plant a tree.

“Saturday morning. Ten.”

Len took a pencil from his jacket and wrote an address on the garden center receipt.

“There's a clay layer,” he said. “You should know that before becoming generous.”

Back at his desk, Elias entered the appointment in his calendar. The system asked whether he wanted a reminder.

He selected yes.

Then he answered Mara.

I'll be there Friday at six. Do you need anything before then?

Her reply came while he was still holding the phone.

The shelf over the sink is coming off. Tomorrow evening?

He wrote that he could come.

It was a smaller answer than the one he had imagined offering her. There was a place in it for a screwdriver.