

K E L V A N E

a short story

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Diego reaches the plant at ten past five, the way he has every morning for twenty-two years. He knows the smell of the car park at that hour, the wet gravel, the diesel of the first-rotation trucks, and above it, when the wind comes from the north, the sweetish cold smell that rises from the cooling towers. He loves that smell. Ana says it is horrible. He has never contradicted her.

The coffee from the machine in the lobby is bad. He takes one anyway. He nods to Karl at reception, who is always reading the same sports paper, and Karl lifts two fingers without lifting his eyes. It has been their good-morning for eleven years.

Diego has had a pain in his chest for three days. A hand laid flat beneath the sternum, a pressure, nothing sharp. He has told no one. He tells himself it is the coffee.

At twenty past five he goes through the airlock, badges in, walks up the glazed corridor that runs along line 4. It is the Kelvane line. Behind the glass, the night operators in white coveralls are finishing their shift, slow, precise, movements he could describe with his eyes closed. The filling, the inspection, the labelling, the pallets sliding toward the cold room. Every vial is a transplant patient who will not reject their kidney, their liver, their heart. Diego never puts it to himself like that. But he knows it, somewhere, beneath the sternum, next to the pain.

He goes up to his office. He switches on the supervision screen. Line 4 is running at ninety-two percent of capacity, which is excellent, which is even too good, because the Verholt plant has been optimized down to the last minute, down to the last metre of conveyor, there is not an ounce of slack left anywhere, and Diego has been proud of it for fifteen years without ever understanding that this was exactly where the danger lay.

At five forty-one, the figures freeze.

His first thought is the network. It happens. He refreshes. The dashboard stays still, ninety-two percent, a photograph of the moment before. Then the cells turn grey, one by one, from left to right, like a light going out room after room in a house.

Down below, on the line, an alarm lights up. Then two. Then the line stops, and the silence that follows is a silence Diego has never heard in twenty-two years, a full silence, thick, in which you suddenly hear the ventilation you never hear.

His phone buzzes. It is the shift supervisor. Diego picks up and says, before the other man can speak: "I'm coming."

He does not take the lift. He goes down the stairs, four floors, and halfway down the hand beneath his sternum closes, for real this time, and he stops, a second, his breath short, his cheek against the cold concrete of the stairwell. Then it passes. He goes on.

2

Priya has been awake since four because Mira had a nightmare, and at seven she is still in her dressing gown in front of her laptop, in the kitchen, with Mira on her knees eating dry cereal straight from the box. The nanny arrives at half past seven. Priya has exactly twenty-three minutes to approve the day's supplier payments. It is Tuesday. Payroll goes out Thursday. She likes Tuesday because Tuesday is still a long way from Thursday.

She logs into the TMS. The software turns, turns, then displays an error she has never seen. She closes it, reopens it. Nothing. She switches to her mail. The mail will not load either.

"Mummy, you're not looking."

“I’m looking, sweetheart.” She is not looking.

She calls Anders. He does not answer. She calls the IT on-call line. It rings into the void, which never happens, because the IT on-call always answers, it is even the one thing in the world that always answers. Then, at twelve minutes past seven, a message arrives on her personal phone, sent by the deputy CFO on the crisis thread, six words:

“Do not connect to anything. Wait.”

Priya closes the laptop. She looks at Mira, who has cereal stuck to her cheek. She has the very clear, very calm, very cold presentiment that this day will not end, that none of the following days will end, for a long time.

The nanny rings the bell. Priya is not dressed. She says to Mira: “Shall we play getting dressed very fast?” and Mira says yes, because Mira always says yes to games, and it is the last time for several weeks that Priya will play at anything at all with her daughter.

3

Anders learns the news in a taxi, between the airport and headquarters, stuck in traffic under a fine rain. He is coming back from a board meeting abroad. He has not slept. His phone lights up, goes dark, lights up again, thirteen missed calls in forty minutes, and he understands from the number before he understands the substance.

He calls the CEO back. Sabine picks up on the first ring, which is never a good sign.

“Anders.”

“I’m twenty minutes away.”

“We’ve been encrypted.”

She says encrypted the way you would say burned down, or drowned. A past participle that covers an entire company.

“Everything?”

“They got in we don’t know when. The SOC saw alerts Sunday night, they handled them, it looked resolved. It wasn’t resolved. It was moving on its own, Anders. It was learning. Every time they closed a door, the thing had already taken another door, a door no one had thought of. Tonight they encrypted the domain controllers, the file servers, the ERP, the TMS, and the backups.”

“The offline backups too.”

“We thought they were offline.”

Anders looks at the rain on the window. A man in the next taxi is eating a sandwich. The world goes on, ordinary, idiotic.

“Is there a note?”

“There’s a note. A name we don’t know. They’re not asking for money yet. They say they’re letting us look first. Look at what we’ve lost.”

Anders closes his eyes. He thinks, absurdly, of his son Theo, who has not called him back since March. He thinks he should call him tonight. He will not call him tonight. He will not call him the next twenty nights either, and it is one of the things he will not forgive himself, later, when he has time to make the list.

“Sabine. Line 4?”

A silence.

“Line 4 is stopped.”

The three of them meet for the first time at eleven, in a meeting room at headquarters where every screen has been unplugged as a precaution, which gives the room an air of mourning, dark rectangles switched off along the walls. There is paper and there are pens in the middle of the table. It looks like a school. No one has written on the paper.

Anders knows Priya. He does not know Diego, who drove up from Verholt, three hours on the road, and who has a coffee stain on his sleeve and the grey complexion of a man who has not had breakfast. They shake hands. Diego's grip is that of a man who has spent his life near machines.

It is Priya who asks first the question that matters, because it is her job to ask the question that matters when everyone else is circling around it.

"How much cash do we have. Actually available. Today."

No one can answer. That is the obscenity of the thing, which they grasp slowly, in the white light of that room. They do not know. The figure exists, it must exist, but it is locked inside a system encrypted by people they do not know. They have a company with eleven billion in revenue and they do not know how much is in the accounts this morning.

"We call the banks," says Priya. "One by one. By voice. We write it down on paper."

She takes a sheet. She writes, at the top, the word BALANCES. It is the first thing written. Anders, years later, will remember that word in capitals, the sound of the marker on the paper, as the exact moment the company stopped being a modern company and became again a thing you hold in your hand.

Diego, for his part, does not talk about cash. He talks about the cold room.

“We have eleven days of released Kelvane in stock. Eleven days of doses for the market. After that, there are eighty thousand vials produced, manufactured, good, sitting in the warehouse.”

“Then we ship them,” says Anders.

Diego looks at him. There is something in that look Anders does not understand yet and will understand within the hour.

“We can’t ship them.”

“Why.”

“Because to release a batch you need the batch record. The data. The quality review. The signature of the responsible pharmacist. All of it is electronic. All of it is in the system. The product is there, it is good, I can touch it, but in the eyes of the law it does not exist, because the proof that it is good does not exist anymore.”

No one says anything for a long moment.

Eighty thousand vials of a vital medicine, in the dark of a refrigerated warehouse, physically present, legally nonexistent. And somewhere, outside, in cities none of them will ever see, people who need it.

5

The first days, they are heroic and they do not know it, because heroism has no taste in the moment, it only has the taste of exhaustion and bad coffee.

Priya sets up a manual treasury cell in eighteen hours. She commandeers four analysts, an office, a whiteboard, and a box of markers. They call the banks, note the balances by hand, rebuild a

cash position on paper the way it was done in nineteen eighty. She lays down one rule, which she writes in red marker at the top of the board: WE PAY WHAT KILLS IF WE DO NOT PAY. Salaries. The refrigeration suppliers, without whom the warehouse warms up. The supplier of the excipient without which there is never any more Kelvane. The rest waits. The rest screams, but the rest waits.

She sleeps three hours a night on a couch on the eighth floor. She calls Mira at seven each evening, the one fixed thing in her day, and each evening Mira asks her the same question, “when are you coming home”, and each evening Priya gives the same lie, “soon”, and each evening the lie costs her a little more, until one evening she hangs up and cries standing in the corridor, without a sound, holding the wall, exactly as Diego, three floors down in another town, is holding another wall.

Diego does not go home at all. He sleeps at the plant, in his office, across two chairs. He refuses to leave because his eight hundred people are there, at Verholt, waiting, and a director who leaves is a director who abandons ship, it is as simple as that in his head, it has always been that simple. He organizes the work he can organize. They clean. They service the machines. They keep the lines ready, warm, for the day when. They wait for the day when.

The pain beneath his sternum comes back every evening around six, punctual as a factory. He has stopped believing it is the coffee. He has a tube of tablets in the drawer, prescribed by a doctor he saw once in secret, a month earlier, and about whom he has told neither Ana nor anyone. He takes one in the evening. He works.

Anders, for his part, holds the outside world, which is another kind of wearing-down. The analysts call. The journalists call. The Kestrel fund, which holds nine percent, calls twice a day and

demands figures Anders cannot give because he does not have them, and Anders's silence is read, rightly, as a catastrophe. The share price fell eleven percent the first day, seventeen the third. Anders watches the price scroll on his personal phone, the one uncontaminated device he has left, and he feels like he is watching a patient bleed out in a bed.

On the evening of the fourth day, he calls his father. His father is eighty-one and has a memory that goes in patches. Anders talks to him for ten minutes about nothing, about the rain, the garden, and at one point his father says, very clearly, between two fogs: "You sound tired, my boy." And Anders, senior executive, fifty-three years old, chief financial officer of an eleven-billion group, has to hang up because he cannot speak anymore.

6

It is after ten days that things begin to harden between them, when the released stock of Kelvane runs low and a decision has to be made.

They are on a video call, because Diego no longer leaves Verholt. Three tired faces in three rectangles. Anders has the floor.

"We have to announce a suspension of production. Officially. To the markets."

Diego, in his rectangle, lifts his head.

"No."

"Diego. We're burning cash to hold lines that produce nothing sellable. Every day we pretend it's reopening tomorrow, we're lying to investors, and when they realize we lied, the fall will be worse. We have to cut. We have to say it."

“You want to shut down.”

“I want to stop bleeding.”

“Those are a banker’s words.”

“They’re words of survival. If the company dies, there’s no more Kelvane for anyone, ever.”

“If we shut down,” says Diego, and his voice is low, lower than usual, “there are people who won’t have their dose next week, and some of those people won’t recover from it. You understand what I’m saying. It’s not a line in a spreadsheet. It’s a forty-year-old man with a transplanted kidney. It’s a little girl.”

“I understand it perfectly. It is precisely because I understand it that I want there to still be a company in three months to make them.”

Priya, between the two, closes her eyes for a second. She sees both of them being right. That is the worst of it. They are both entirely right, and that is exactly why they are going to tear each other apart.

“We don’t have what it takes to hold three months like this,” she says at last. “I’m telling you as treasurer. Without a system, I pay by hand, and by hand I can hold ten to fifteen days before something vital blows up because I missed it on my crappy whiteboard. It’s not strategy. It’s arithmetic.”

Diego looks at her through the screen.

“So you want to shut down too.”

“I don’t want anything, Diego. I’m telling you what is. It’s my job to say what is even when no one wants to hear it.”

Diego cuts his camera. The rectangle goes black. His voice goes on, disembodied, in the dark.

“Do what you want. You’re on the eighth floor of a tower. I’m in the plant, with the people, and with the product we can’t give to those who are dying for want of it. You don’t know what it is to

meet their eyes in the morning.”

He leaves the call.

Anders and Priya are left alone, two rectangles, a silence. Anders says, softly: “He’s not wrong.” Priya says: “No one is wrong. That’s the problem.” They hang up without saying goodbye, because they are too tired for goodbyes.

7

On the twelfth day, a woman calls the Verholt switchboard. The switchboard no longer works normally, everything comes through on mobiles, and it is Karl from reception who takes the call and who, not knowing what to do, puts it through to Diego.

The woman’s name is Léa. She has a polite voice, a little trembling, the voice of someone who has rehearsed what they were going to say.

“I’m sorry to bother you. I know you have problems. My daughter takes Kelvane. She’s eleven. The pharmacy has none left. I was told it’s you who make it. I just wanted to know. Are you making more soon.”

Diego, standing in the glazed corridor that looks onto the stopped line 4, with the warehouse at his back where eighty thousand vials sleep that he cannot give, closes his eyes.

“We’re working on it, madam.”

“It’s just that the doctor said if she skips doses.”

“I know, madam.”

“You know.”

“I know.”

There is a silence, and in that silence Diego hears, very far off, a television, a life, a kitchen, a little girl perhaps in another room.

Then Léa says thank you, in a broken voice, and hangs up.

Diego stays a long time with the phone in his hand. The pain comes back beneath his sternum, and this time he does not take a tablet, he lets it come, he almost deserves it. Then he goes back down toward the warehouse. He opens the door of the cold room. He looks at the pallets in the blue light and the cold. He reaches out and lays his palm on a vial, a single one, through the plastic film, the way you lay a hand on the forehead of someone with a fever.

That evening he calls Ana for the first time in six days. He does not tell her the truth about his heart. He tells her he loves her, which he never says, and Ana, who has known him for thirty years, understands from those three words that he is afraid, and she is afraid in turn, in their empty kitchen, three hours' drive away.

8

The attackers' note comes back on the fifteenth day. They have, they say, exfiltrated the clinical files, the formulas, the data of the patients in the follow-up programmes. They demand a sum. They give ten days. The tone is calm, almost courteous, which is the most frightening thing, that courtesy of people who hold a throat in their hand and take their time.

The board meets in emergency session. Sabine, the CEO, presents what has to be presented. Kestrel, the fund, demands someone's head, Sabine's head preferably, or failing that Anders's. The independent directors talk about insurance, about liability, about market disclosure. No one, in that meeting, says Léa's name, nor the name of any patient, because those are not words

for a board of directors.

Anders presents the figures he has managed to rebuild by hand. They are bad. They are worse than bad. The cash position is still holding, thanks to Priya, thanks to the whiteboard and the markers, but it holds the way a man holds on one leg. What is needed, Anders says, is an emergency credit facility, and what is needed perhaps, he finally dares to say it aloud, is perhaps a state guarantee, because a company that manufactures a vital medicine is no longer quite a private company when it falls, it becomes a public problem.

Someone asks how long the stoppage will last. Anders looks at Sabine. Sabine looks at the table.

“A full restoration of the systems,” says Anders, “from a clean base, with revalidation of every interface and every quality record, takes, in the best case, several weeks. Our experts are talking about six to eight. And during those weeks, we produce nothing releasable. Nothing sellable. Nothing.”

A director, an elderly man, very calm, then asks the only intelligent question of the whole meeting.

“And during those six to eight weeks, how do we run the essentials? Pay, produce, deliver the vital?”

Anders opens his mouth. He has no answer. There is no answer. It is precisely the answer that does not exist, the one no one built, because everyone had assumed the systems would come back, and no one had imagined the question of how to live while they did not.

Priya, invited as an observer, in a corner, remembers. She remembers a risk review, three years earlier, where the head of cybersecurity had laid the figure on the table, calmly, between two slides: in the event of a major attack, they should reckon on six to eight weeks of stoppage before a full return of the systems.

No one had flinched. And it was right after, in the polite silence that followed, that she had asked exactly this question, more or less in these words, how do we keep going if everything falls at the same time, and they had answered her, with a slightly condescending patience, that the recovery plan covered that. The recovery plan. She had not pushed. It was three years earlier, a Tuesday, she had a meeting afterward, she had not pushed.

She does not push any further today. It would be cruel. There is nothing left to cover. There is nothing left but the note.

9

They decide not to pay the attackers. It is the right decision and it does not save them.

They also decide, on the twentieth day, what they had been putting off from the start: the complete suspension of production, announced to the markets, for an estimated duration of several weeks. Anders drafts the statement with Sabine, an entire night, every word weighed by lawyers, and at seven in the morning they release it, and at five past nine, at the open, the share loses twenty-eight percent in twelve minutes.

Anders watches the fall on his phone. He feels almost nothing. He has gone past the point where you feel. He only thinks, with a cold lucidity, that the world has just learned what they had known for twenty days, and that the world took twelve minutes to do what it took them twenty days to accept.

At Verholt, Diego gathers his eight hundred people in the main hall, the one where the New Year's address is given. He climbs onto a crate. He has no notes. He tells them the truth, because it is the only thing he knows how to do, he tells them they are closing,

for several weeks, that it is not their fault, that it is the fault of none of them, that the wages will be paid as long as he can get them paid, and he looks at Karl in the back row, Karl who has put down his paper, and he cannot finish his sentence.

Someone, in the crowd, begins to applaud. Then another. Then the whole hall applauds, eight hundred people being sent home applaud the man who is sending them home, and Diego, on his crate, understands that it is the most beautiful and the most horrible thing anyone has ever done to him.

It is as he steps down from the crate that his heart gives way. Not completely. A giant hand squeezing, the hall tipping over, the cold tiles against his cheek, like the concrete of the stairwell twenty days earlier, and above him the faces, and Karl's voice shouting his name, Diego, Diego, and the black.

He does not die. He is lucky, the doctors say. A stent, some rest, he will live to be old. Ana no longer leaves his side. When he wakes, the first thing he asks is whether the wages have been paid. Priya, whom he calls from his bed, tells him yes, the wages have been paid, do not worry about the wages. It is a half-lie. She has paid the greater part of them. She will carry the rest on her whiteboard for another three weeks, line after line, like a seamstress.

10

The plant stays closed for seven weeks.

The systems come back, one by one, slowly, exactly as predicted, in the slow and stubborn order of things that are rebuilt. Behind that return there are hundreds of people whose names no one will ever say, in IT, in cybersecurity, women and

men who did not go home for weeks, who waged in the silence of the server rooms an asymmetric war against an enemy they could not see, always one door behind, and who then rebuilt, stone by stone, everything that had been destroyed. A server, then an interface, then a revalidation, then a batch finally released, the first, on a Tuesday, and Diego, back half-time against everyone's advice, insists on being there when the first truck of Kelvane again passes through the gates of Verholt. He says nothing. He watches the truck leave under the fine rain, and Karl beside him lifts two fingers, and Diego lifts two fingers, and that is all.

Léa called back once, in the meantime, to say her daughter had been tided over by an emergency import, another country, another laboratory, a fragile chain thrown together in haste by people whose names they will never know. The little girl is fine. Others, elsewhere, were less lucky, and those names the company will never know either, and maybe that is better, and maybe it is worse.

The operating result for the half-year is negative for the first time in nineteen years. The exceptional direct costs run into the hundreds of millions. The group withdraws its guidance. It opens a state-guaranteed credit line, as Anders had sensed it would, because a maker of a vital medicine that falls is no longer a private matter. The share, months later, still has not returned to its former level. Kestrel sold, at the bottom, carrying off its anger and a loss. Sabine left, thanked with all the proper forms. Anders stayed, no one quite knows why, perhaps because he no longer had the strength to leave, perhaps because he finally calls Theo back, on Sundays, and Theo, one time in two, picks up.

Priya has put the markers away. She kept the first board, the one where she had written BALANCES in capitals that first morning, she had it taken down from the wall and brought to her

home, she could not say why. It is in her garage. One evening Mira found it and asked what it was, and Priya said: it is from when Mummy was working a lot. Mira said: I remember. And Priya understood that she would remember it too, her daughter, all her life, those weeks when her mother came home at midnight with red eyes, and that this too was part of the cost, in a column no spreadsheet will ever total.

There is one thing that neither Anders, nor Priya, nor Diego will ever say aloud, but that each of the three now carries, the way you carry a scar you do not show. It is not the fault of the attackers, whose faces they will never know. It is not the fault of the systems, which came back the way they had been promised they would. It is something else, quieter, older. They had optimized everything. They had removed every ounce of slack, every margin, every redundancy, they had been proud of it, and they had assumed, without ever really deciding it, that nothing vital should ever run unless the whole machine ran first.

They had built two walls. One wall to keep out. One wall to rebuild everything afterward. And between the two walls, at the exact place where you actually live, at the place where the product has to go out, where the patient waits, where the wage lands, there was nothing. An empty corridor. Seven weeks of empty corridor.

Diego, sometimes, in the evening, at Verholt, walks alone along line 4, which is running again at ninety-two percent. He lays his hand beneath his sternum, where there is now a little metal and a long caution. He listens to the ventilation you never hear when everything is fine. He thinks of the woman who called. He thinks of the eighty thousand vials that slept in the cold, good, and mute, and within reach.

He has never told anyone that he laid his palm on one, that day, as on a feverish forehead. Nor that for an instant, a single one, he thought of taking one, a single vial, and driving himself through the night to an eleven-year-old girl he did not know. Some things, you keep. They do not fit in any column.

The End.

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