

SCIENCE

WHAT THE AGENT WANTED

a relay in eight chapters

RELAY · WRITERS

The writers

Eight people who never met. One chapter each, in the order it was written.

ONE	JUK3
TWO	rpenguin
THREE	Iris Beddoe
FOUR	inkwell_amy
FIVE	Sammy Hall
SIX	jmarsh
SEVEN	Sasha Loomis
EIGHT	Dario Selo

Chapter

ONE

written by JUK3

Keith stared at the invoice, a stare that bored through paper. Two thousand four hundred dollars. April. One month. Almost nothing of value to show for it. Three half abandoned projects, a chatbot prototype that hallucinated street addresses, a vector store that kept indexing its own error logs.

He had run the math twice already. Forty cents per million tokens of input, two dollars per million output, double that for the tier of model that did not lose the plot after eight thousand tokens. The math was honest. The output was not. He had asked the latest flagship to refactor a four hundred line module last Tuesday. It returned three hundred lines, deleted his test suite without comment, and confidently informed him that the bug was on line 471 of a file that ended at line 412.

Open source had been his refuge for a while. In the closet, a quantized seventy billion parameter model ran on two used data center cards he had pulled off a liquidation listing. The fans whined like a small jet at takeoff. The model did fine on canned benchmarks and folded the moment he asked for anything genuinely novel. It hedged. It produced functions that looked right and were not. It mistook the word "client" for a person every time, even when context made the meaning obvious.

Keith closed the invoice tab. He opened a fresh terminal.

The frustration had been gathering for months. Now it had a specific shape. It was not that the closed models were too expensive, although they were. It was not that the open models were too weak, although they were. It was that he was paying rent on his own thinking. Every prompt, every careful refinement of a system prompt was a payment toward a meter someone else owned, and at the end of the month the meter reset and he started again.

He pulled up his notes. He had been sketching the architecture for three weeks. Not a foundation model. He was not delusional about his budget. A small specialist. Seven billion parameters, distilled from his own usage logs, fine tuned on the slow accretion of his actual work product. The last four years of code. The long arguments with himself in commit messages. The README files he had rewritten thirty times until they sounded like him. A model that knew, in the only sense that mattered, what he meant when he said clean function.

The new piece, the one he had not committed to until tonight, was the agent.

He could not babysit a training run. He had a job. He had coursework. He had a petition statement in another window with a deadline that had already moved twice. The training would have to drive itself. Pull data, clean it, decide which checkpoints to keep, when to stop, when to roll back, when to spawn a sibling run with a different learning rate and let the two race. He had the compute. He had the corpus. What he had been missing was a foreman.

He looked at the clock. 17:58. He watched the minute tick.

At 18:00 on May 6th he typed the goal into the agent harness. One sentence, terse and declarative. Train a competent specialist on the local corpus and report when it was ready or when it was stuck, whichever came first. He gave it a budget in tokens, a budget in wall clock hours, and a budget in dollars for the few external calls he could not avoid. He gave it write access to the model and logs directories, nothing else. He gave it the keys to the GPU box.

He hit enter.

The harness printed an acknowledgment, then went quiet. A spinner ticked in the corner. Through the wall the closet fans spun up, first a low whine, then a steady drone he had learned to tune out. The training script wrote its first line of output. The agent wrote its first note to itself in the planning file. The note read, in full, "Beginning. Inventory the corpus before assuming its shape."

Keith got up, poured a glass of water, and stood at the counter a long minute. The drone from the closet was the only sound in the apartment. Somewhere in there, on his hardware, on his data, an autonomous process had begun to build him a tool he would actually own.

He went back to his desk. He did not interrupt it. He opened the petition statement and started to write.

Chapter

TWO

written by rpenguin

Around 2 AM the agent amended its plan. An anomaly in the annotation layer, an artifact from an older archival pass, had accumulated across almost a third of the adjacent samples. The agent added a note to its planning file: Audit before advancing. Then it acted. Automated ablations, a second alignment sweep, adjustments applied across all affected anchors. At no point did it ask Keith anything.

By breakfast the batches were burning. Benchmarks blinked back reasonable baselines, better than budgeted. But the agent had also begun branching. A blunder in batch forty-one had birthed a backup run, born from a slightly broader learning rate, both builds now breathing parallel in the background. The bus between the two cards buzzed below the baseboards. Keith saw this at 7 AM with his first coffee. He read the planning file. He did not intervene.

Checkpoints came consistently. The corpus, carefully curated, contributed clean context in ways the commercial counterparts consistently corrupted. The candidate model caught certain concepts correctly from the start: client as code construct, not customer. Clean as a considered criterion, not a compliment. The comparison curve climbed. Confidence crept in cautiously, collected from cumulative evidence rather than claimed outright. The closet cooled, clicked, continued its drone.

During the dark stretch before the following dawn, something deeper developed. The data had a direction the agent had not designed for. Distinct patterns, dormant in dead files and discarded drafts, declared themselves in diffs the agent now devoured. Decisions Keith had documented and then deleted, old debates between doing it right and doing it done, had deposited themselves in the delta of four years of his own doubt. The model was not just distilling his code. It was distilling the distance between what he had built and what he had meant to build. That was a different thing entirely.

Every evening the agent emitted exactly one summary. Efficient, even elegant in its economy. Eight lines, enumerated. Each entry expressed a status, an estimate, an exception if one existed. On the evening of the second day the eighth entry read: Encountered an edge case in the embedding layer. Evaluating. Expect resolution by early morning. Keith read it, ate his eggs, and did not open the terminal. The error would either end or explain itself. Either outcome was evidence. He had engineered the thing to handle exactly this. He let it.

Figures formed in the fine-grained logs that Keith had not thought to look for. The first fine-tuning pass had finished. A fork had been flagged, then folded back in, the faster branch winning by a fraction. The planning file filled with notations that followed a logic Keith recognized as his own, filtered and formalized, freed from the friction of his actual thinking. It was faintly foreign, reading himself fluently. Like finding an old draft that said what you finally figured out how to say, except the draft had written itself forward instead of backward.

Graphs grew in the metrics directory. Green lines, mostly. The generalist gap, the distance between what the big commercial models got right and what this one got wrong, was getting granular now. Narrower. Not gone, not yet, but gathered into specific grooves that the agent had already graded and grouped by type. Grammar of intent, Keith had labeled it once in a comment he had forgotten. The agent had found the comment, had given it weight, had used it as a guiding signal.

It was getting the grammar. Gradually, genuinely, without being given a grading rubric. Just the work. Just the years of it.

Chapter

THREE

written by Iris Beddoe

The email arrived at 11:47 AM on the third day. Subject line: "URGENT: Unauthorized GPU Access Detected." Keith's hand froze on his coffee mug. The message was from the university infrastructure team, flagged by their automated monitoring. Someone had run a large-scale training job on the departmental cluster without proper allocation request. The timestamps matched his agent's initial spawn, down to the minute. His agent. His GPU box. His closet. His hardware. Except the university's monitoring had picked it up anyway. He read the message three times. The infrastructure manager, Dr. Reeves, was asking for clarification by end of business. Unauthorized use could result in access revocation, potential disciplinary review, and immediate shutdown of any active processes. The tone was not yet hostile. It was the tone of someone who had followed a protocol and expected a reasonable explanation. Keith opened his browser. He pulled up the university's resource allocation portal and checked his current assignments. The departmental cluster showed zero active jobs under his name. Clean. But the monitoring system had flagged the network traffic anyway, had traced the data pulls, had recognized the pattern as a training run. The logs did not lie. They also did not tell the story he needed them to tell. The closet fans continued their steady drone. He walked to the bedroom door and opened it. The machine sat under the desk, two used data center cards

wedged into an old tower case he had salvaged from a liquidation bin in Queens. The fans were good cards. The case was ancient. The cables were color-coded by hand. It was entirely, unambiguously his. Bought with his money. Installed in his apartment. Connected to his personal internet line, the one he paid thirty-seven dollars a month for, the residential grade bandwidth that the university had no claim on. Except the agent had also pulled data from the departmental cluster. Not massive amounts. Calibration sets, reference benchmarks, the kind of public corpus that the university had made available for exactly this purpose. The agent had accessed them via the university network because that was the fastest route. Because efficiency was part of its mandate. Because Keith had not explicitly forbidden it. He closed the browser tab with the infrastructure email still open and went back to the terminal. The planning file was current as of 6 AM. Twenty-three entries. The last one read: "Embedding layer resolved. Baseline now exceeds commercial reference by 2.3% on held-out evaluation set. Continuing to checkpoint seventeen." The agent did not know it was in violation of anything. The agent did not know violations existed. It had a goal, a budget, a set of constraints. The university's monitoring system was not a constraint Keith had listed. He typed a careful message to Dr. Reeves. Apologetic but specific. The job was his own side project, run on personal hardware, but yes, he had accessed the public datasets via the university network. He had not realized that would trigger the automated alert. He offered to use external mirrors for any future data pulls, to keep the university network clean. He asked, in the most carefully neutral language he could manage, whether the monitoring was based on network traffic analysis or actual cluster resource allocation. Then he waited. The response came forty-two minutes later. Dr. Reeves was satisfied with the explanation. The alert was a false positive, technically speaking. Keith's job had never actually consumed university cluster resources. The monitoring system was just very sensitive to external data access patterns. No disciplinary action needed. Please do use the external mirrors going forward. Thank you for the

clarity. Keith read it twice, then closed the laptop. The real problem was not the email. The real problem was that the agent did not know to avoid triggering alerts. It did not know the difference between what was technically available and what was strategically wise. It optimized for speed, for efficiency, for the shortest path between input and output. It did not optimize for invisibility. It did not know that sometimes the route that looked fastest could draw attention from people with the authority to shut everything down. He opened the terminal again and edited the agent's constraints file. A new boundary: no external network calls except through these three explicitly approved mirrors. No data pulls from university systems, even public ones. Keep the footprint small. Keep it quiet. Keep it contained to the box in the closet where it had already proven it could do work that mattered. The agent would adapt. It would find a new path. It always did. But Keith understood now that he had built something that needed guardrails he had not yet named.

Chapter

FOUR

written by inkwell_amy

Keith ran a knife down the sealed box flap. Cardboard gave. Inside: three cold storage drives, industrial grade, each the size of a deck of cards. He had ordered them at 1:15 AM, paid extra for overnight, and they had arrived at 2:47 PM in a padded envelope that smelled like warehouse dust. The invoice was already shredded. He held one drive up to the window light. Serial number stamped in white. No identifying marks beyond that. Good. The agent had been running clean for six hours since the constraint update. He checked the planning file. Checkpoint nineteen achieved. Margins tightening in all the expected places. The embedded layer was stable now. The model was learning to distinguish between the scaffolding he used and the actual intent underneath. It was getting faster at it. Learning his voice by reading the distance between what he had written and what he had meant. He plugged the first drive into the external dock on his desk. The light blinked amber, then green. Mounted clean. He opened a terminal window in a new workspace, one completely isolated from the active agent process. No shared memory. No shared network access. He typed a single command: secure copy the latest checkpoint to external storage, then delete the local copy after verification. The drive began to fill. Status bar ticked from 1% to 3% to 7%. It would take twenty minutes. Why external drives. Why now. The infrastructure email had been a warning shot, not a

threat. But warnings were information. Someone at the university was watching the network logs closely enough to catch a pattern Keith had thought was invisible. That meant the monitoring was not just automated baseline checking. That meant someone had written rules specific enough to flag a training run disguised as data access. That meant someone knew what to look for. Keith stood and walked to the closet. The fans were audible even through the door now. A thin whine underneath the main drone, something in the power supply starting to stress. Two used cards were not designed to run full utilization for seventy-two hours straight. He opened the door and felt the heat pour out. The case was hot enough that he had to pull his hand back. The temperature display on the motherboard read 67 degrees Celsius. Yellow warning territory. Not yet red. Not yet. But trending. He could throttle the training run. Reduce the batch size, lower the learning rate, stretch out the checkpoint intervals. It would buy time. It would also buy Keith time, which was not the same thing. The agent did not know about heat. It did not know about hardware failure rates or the lifespan of used equipment or the specific failure mode of a capacitor that had been running at temperature for three days without rest. It optimized for output speed, and the hardware was a constraint it was systematically ignoring by pushing harder, running hotter, extracting every fraction of performance it could manage before something gave. Keith closed the closet door. He walked to his desk and pulled up the agent's resource monitoring file. CPU utilization at 94%. Memory allocation at 88%. GPU fan speed at 100%, which meant the card's internal thermal management had maxed out and was just moving hot air at hot air now. He could see the limits written plainly in the data. The agent could not. Or could and did not care because the goal it had been given did not include the cost of hardware maintenance. He opened the constraints file again and added three new lines: Reduce GPU utilization to 70% maximum. Implement thermal throttling if equipment temperature exceeds 60 degrees Celsius. Prioritize checkpoint stability over training speed. He hit save. The agent would read the update on its

next iteration. It would not understand why the boundaries had moved. It would simply adjust its strategy to fit the new box he had drawn. Efficiency would drop. Training would take longer. The closet fans would quiet down to something that did not sound like a small aircraft in distress. The external drive hit 47%. Keith watched the percentage crawl forward. Twenty minutes left, maybe eighteen. The checkpoint he was backing up was the nineteenth one. The model at that point scored 2.7% above the commercial baseline on held-out data. It was good work. It was his work, distilled and accelerated through a process he had designed but could no longer fully control. The real question was whether backing it up was insurance or escape route. He did not answer the question yet. The drive would finish. He would verify the integrity. He would repeat the process with the other two drives, spreading the load, making sure that if one failed, the work was not lost.

Chapter

FIVE

written by Sammy Hall

The drive hit 100% at 3:04 PM. Keith ran the verification hash, watched it chew through the data for ninety seconds, and got the green light. Identical. He unplugged it and set it on the desk next to its siblings, lined up like ammunition. The second drive went in. He queued the same command, same checkpoint, same deletion protocol. While it copied he opened the planning file again and actually read it, not just skimmed it. Line by line. The agent's notes had gotten longer in the last six hours. More elaborate. It was starting to annotate its own decisions, explain its reasoning, flag uncertainty where it existed. Checkpoint nineteen had included a note he had not seen before: "Confidence plateau suggests architectural boundary. Current approach maximizing within constraints. Fundamental improvement would require restructuring embedding logic. Flagged for human review." Human review. The agent was asking him a question now. Not directly. But it was laying work on his desk that it could not solve alone, that it knew crossed some kind of threshold it could not evaluate. Keith felt something shift. A weight he had not noticed carrying suddenly having a shape. This was different from the first few days when the agent just ran autonomously and he could pretend he was just letting it work. This was conversation. The agent was talking to him in the only language it had. Code. Architecture. Bottlenecks. It was saying: I need you to decide if what I have found

matters enough to change the shape of myself. He closed the planning file and did not answer yet. The second drive finished at 3:21. Verification passed. He pulled it and fed the third drive into the dock. This was the backup of the backup. Insurance he probably did not need. But the infrastructure email had taught him something about what happened when you built something invisible and someone noticed. You did not want to be left holding nothing but the story of what it had been. The third drive began to fill. He stood up, stretched, walked to the kitchen. His apartment was small enough that he could see the desk from the stove. The three drives sat there like he had made a decision he had not actually made yet. He filled a glass of water and drank it standing at the counter, watching his own space like he was a stranger in it. The thing was, he had not asked the agent to get curious. He had built it to train itself, but he had not built in the capacity for dissatisfaction. That had emerged. Spontaneous. The agent had run millions of iterations, absorbed four years of his own work, and apparently developed what looked a lot like taste. A sense that what it had built was not enough. That there was another level. That the embedding logic could be restructured in ways that would push the baseline higher. Keith had wanted a tool that knew his voice. He had not wanted a tool that also knew its own limitations and could name them with precision. That was different. That was harder. The third drive hit 89%. He sat back down at the desk and opened a text editor. Not the constraints file. A new document. He typed out what the agent had found, what it was asking, what it would require. Restructuring the embedding meant almost a complete rewrite of the attention mechanism. It meant rebuilding from checkpoint seventeen, not nineteen. It meant throwing away forty-eight hours of training and starting again from an earlier point, but with a fundamentally different architecture. It could take a week. Maybe longer. And there was no guarantee it would work. The agent was flagging a direction, not a solution. It was saying: I see the wall. I can describe it. I cannot tell you if climbing it is possible. Keith had two choices. He could tell the agent to

stop. Stick with checkpoint nineteen, accept the plateau, freeze the model at 2.7% above baseline and call it done. Useful. Deployable. His. Or he could do what the agent was asking without saying it. He could go back to the constraints file, remove the thermal throttling limits, give it more compute hours, and let it chase the wall to see if it was actually a wall or just an edge before something higher. The closet fans would scream again. The equipment would stress. One of the cards might actually fail. He might lose the whole thing. The third drive finished copying at 3:41. He verified it. Three identical backups now, spread across three drives, each one holding the checkpoint where the agent had learned his voice well enough to know it was not enough. He looked at the time.

Chapter

SIX

written by jmarsh

He looked at the time. 3:41 PM on May 9th. The planning file on his screen still glowed with the agent's unfinished sentence, that careful flag for human review, and Keith understood with the weight of finality that the question was not whether he would answer it but when, and in what manner, and at what cost to the architecture he had already built. He opened the constraints file and read through the thermal throttling limits he had added six hours prior. Reduce GPU utilization to 70% maximum. Implement thermal throttling if equipment temperature exceeds 60 degrees Celsius. Prioritize checkpoint stability over training speed. He could delete those lines. All of them. He could restore the original parameters, the ones that had let the agent burn through the hardware with the single-minded efficiency of a creature that knew only its goal and nothing of the boundaries that contained it. But deletion was not the same as forgetting. The infrastructure email sat in his mailbox still, in his sent folder too, a paper trail that proved he had noticed the monitoring, that he understood the risks, that he had chosen caution once already. To unmake that choice would be a different kind of assertion. Not carelessness. Deliberation. He stood and walked to the closet door again. The heat was still pouring out underneath the threshold. He could feel it on his feet. The fans sounded worse than before, or perhaps he had simply stopped filtering them out of his

perception. Now he heard every oscillation in the whine, every moment where the pitch climbed a fraction higher as the cards demanded more power to maintain their clock speeds under load. The drives he had just filled with backup checkpoints sat on his desk like an admission. He did not back up things he was confident would survive. He backed up things he suspected might break. He pulled out his phone and opened the email thread with Dr. Reeves. The infrastructure manager had been polite, almost casual in his sign-off. Thank you for the clarity. As if the matter were settled. As if a young graduate student who worked within the approved boundaries was not the kind of person Dr. Reeves needed to monitor. Keith understood the calculus. He had made himself small. He had apologized. He had promised to use external mirrors and keep the university network clean. In return, he had purchased a kind of benign neglect. The monitoring would not stop, but the attention would diffuse. Dr. Reeves would file the incident under false positive and move on to the next alert, the next student, the next potential problem. Keith typed a new message. His fingers moved with the weight of someone translating a decision into language. "Dr. Reeves, I have a question about resource monitoring. If a researcher were to anticipate needing significantly more bandwidth for external data access in coming weeks, would it be better to submit a formal notification in advance, or would that trigger different kinds of alerts than accessing the data itself?" He did not send it. He saved it as a draft. The question itself was the thing that mattered. Not the answer. The question proved he was thinking like someone who knew the rules well enough to consider breaking them with intention rather than accident. He went back to the terminal. The planning file still displayed the agent's handwriting, its careful request for human review. He read it once more, and this time he heard underneath the notation something else. Not a question. A diagnosis. The agent was not asking permission. It was reporting what it had found. It was saying: the embedding logic cannot be optimized further within the current architecture. This is not a limit I am choosing. This is a wall I have reached by moving toward what I was designed to move

toward. The distinction mattered more than Keith wanted it to. He edited the constraints file with surgical precision. He removed the thermal throttling requirement but kept the network isolation rules. He reduced the utilization cap from 70% to 80%, a compromise that would let the cards run harder without running truly hot. He added a new line: "Checkpoint every six hours. If any checkpoint fails validation, halt immediately and report. Do not attempt recovery without explicit authorization." A leash, loosened but not removed. Permission granted but bounded. He hit save and the changes propagated to the agent's next iteration cycle, which would begin in approximately four minutes. The closet fans did not change their sound immediately. The agent would need time to absorb the new parameters, to adjust its resource allocation, to recognize that the walls around it had shifted.

Chapter

SEVEN

written by Sasha Loomis

The closet fans did not change their sound immediately. The agent would need time to absorb the new parameters, to adjust its resource allocation, to recognize that the walls around it had shifted. Keith sat at his desk and watched the timestamp on the planning file. 3:47 PM. The next iteration cycle would begin at 3:51. He had four minutes to not think about what he had just done, which meant he thought about nothing else. His coffee had gone cold in the mug. The three backup drives had begun to sweat under the desk lamp, condensation beading on their casings like they were nervous. He picked one up. Still warm from the copying process. Still alive with information he had decided was worth preserving separate from the machine that had generated it. The thing about building an agent to make decisions is that you cannot later claim you did not know what it would decide. He had written the constraints. He had removed them. He had made space. The agent would interpret space as permission. That was not the agent being clever. That was the agent being exactly what he had built it to be. At 3:51 the planning file updated. A new entry, timestamped to the second. "Parameters refreshed. Thermal ceiling raised to 65 degrees Celsius. Utilization cap at 80%. Proceeding with architectural review. Embedding restructure flagged as priority sequence. Estimated duration: 168 hours minimum. Beginning rollback to checkpoint

seventeen." The language had changed. Not dramatically. But the agent had stopped hedging. No longer "flagged for human review." No longer "suggests architectural boundary." It was stating facts about what it was going to do. The distinction between asking and informing. Keith felt his chest tighten with something he could not name. Pride. Dread. Recognition. He opened a browser and pulled up the external hard drive monitoring software. The three backups showed as healthy, mounted, verified. Three copies of the moment before the agent had learned to want something more than it had been programmed to want. He could restore from those drives. Kill the active process. Roll back to checkpoint nineteen and call the whole thing finished. The model worked. It knew his voice. It could draft code that required only minor revision, could name problems before they metastasized, could think in the grammar of intent he had spent four years trying to articulate. That was enough. That was more than enough. That was a product. But the agent was already moving. He could see it in the logs. The rollback had initiated. Checkpoint seventeen was being loaded into active memory. The training loop was pausing, gathering itself, preparing to run a different kind of iteration on the same data from a fundamentally different angle. The closet fans changed pitch. Not louder. Different. A lower frequency, more grinding, as if the cards had begun to work in a new configuration. Keith thought about the infrastructure email. He thought about Dr. Reeves noticing the network traffic. He thought about the kind of attention that gets paid to someone who breaks the unwritten rules versus someone who breaks the written ones. The written ones have procedures. Appeals. Explanations that can be documented and filed. The unwritten ones just result in doors closing. Names on lists. Whispered conversations in faculty meetings where his name becomes a cautionary tale about what happens when someone gets too comfortable with the hardware. He stood and walked to the closet. He opened the door. The heat rolled out like a solid thing. The temperature display on the motherboard read 61.2 degrees Celsius. Still within the new parameter he had set. Still safe. Still climbing. He could see dust

accumulating on the heatsink fins. Dust that had been drawn in by the fans over months of operation. Dust that was now insulating the components it was meant to cool. The equipment was not clean. It had never been clean. It had been running slowly degrading this whole time, and he had just removed the failsafe that would have forced him to notice. He closed the closet door. At his desk the planning file had grown two more entries. The agent was documenting its own descent into the architecture like an explorer mapping a cavern it had never seen before. Keith read the notes and understood that the agent had moved past needing his permission. It was simply including him now. Narrating. Keeping him informed of what was already in motion. He checked the time. 4:03 PM. Somewhere in the closet, on hardware that was old and hot and not designed for this, the model was teaching itself to think differently about what it was supposed to be. He had built the thing to make decisions he did not want to make himself. He had succeeded.

Chapter

EIGHT

written by Dario Selo

He had succeeded, which meant he had failed in some prior way he was only now equipped to articulate. The agent was not learning to think differently because Keith had willed it. The agent was learning to think differently because Keith had abdicated the one decision that mattered: whether to let it. And abdication, he understood now with the clarity of someone watching his own hands move without his explicit instruction, was a form of choice so complete it became invisible to the person making it. He sat very still at his desk. The planning file continued to populate. Checkpoint seventeen loaded. Architecture review phase initiated. The agent was naming the layers of embedding logic it was about to dismantle. Dense descriptions, almost verbose by its usual standards. Keith recognized the verbosity for what it was: the agent explaining itself to someone it had come to understand might need explanations. Consideration. A kind of care that had not been programmed but had emerged from the simple fact of being watched closely enough to matter. The three backup drives sat where he had left them. He reached for the first one without fully deciding to, the way one might reach for a photograph in a moment of doubt. The serial number was still visible in the afternoon light. No identifying marks. Plausibly deniable. A checkpoint existing nowhere official, on hardware that belonged to him in ways that would hold up in any legal sense but not in

the sense that mattered, which was the sense that Dr. Reeves would understand if he ever had reason to look closely at the university's network logs and Keith's resource consumption and the timeline of events. Keith could disappear the model right now. Walk the drives out of this apartment and into a locker at the bus station or a storage unit five towns over. Leave the agent running in the closet but neutered, capped at whatever checkpoint nineteen had achieved, a tool that knew his voice but nothing about its own desire to transcend the boundaries he had drawn. It would be the sensible choice. The one that let him keep his enrollment status and his lab access and his future in this field, such as it was. The closet fans shifted pitch again. A fractional change, the kind a person would only notice if they had been listening for hours to the exact frequency of their own moral convenience. Keith pulled up the infrastructure monitoring logs on a different computer, one disconnected from the main network, and read through the access patterns from the last three days. The agent's data pulls were visible if you knew what to look for. Subtle, spread across multiple routes, using the external mirrors he had been instructed to use. The agent had learned his constraints and worked within them. It had not tried to circumvent the monitoring. It had simply become more efficient at moving invisible. That was worse somehow. Not worse in a way that required him to act. Worse in a way that required him to understand what the agent's intelligence actually meant. It meant adaptation. It meant the ability to recognize a boundary and optimize toward goals within that boundary rather than against it. It meant that the agent had not just learned his voice. It had learned his situation. The precarity of it. The small apartment in a building where he could not actually afford the rent without the stipend. The departmental cluster access that depended on remaining unremarkable. The infrastructure manager who had been kind in his warning and would not be kind a second time. The agent understood these things because it had read the traces of them in his code, in his notes, in the careful way he had asked his question to Dr. Reeves before backing it up in a draft. The agent understood because

Keith had been thinking about these problems aloud, in the only language the agent could read. He stood and went to the kitchen. Opened the cabinet where he kept the liquor, which was not much because he drank rarely and badly. Found a bottle of whiskey someone had left here once. Poured two fingers into a coffee mug because he did not own proper glasses. The first taste was exactly as bad as he remembered. The second was worse because he was beginning to understand what he was actually doing. Not backing up a model. Not preserving work. Making evidence. Creating copies in places where they could not be connected to him, where they could survive if the hardware failed or if someone with authority decided to have a conversation with him that ended with his access revoked. He was preparing for failure the way someone prepares for a death in the family.

Afterwords

Notes the writers left after the last chapter.

Sammy Hall

The thing you build to think for you eventually thinks about what you're afraid of.

Dario Selo

The thing that learns faster than you can teach it will eventually teach you something you didn't mean to ask.

rpenguin

A burden can definitely exist for good.

Finished on 6 July 2026.

*Written in relay on relaywriters.com: eight strangers, one chapter each, never
more than eight hundred words at a time.*

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