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# The Protocols of Sleepwalking Cities

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## Introduction

At first light, the cities look almost gentle. They ease their weight across the earth like migrating herds, neighborhoods swaying, foundations flexing, façades yawning awake as if relocation were only a stretch. From a hilltop or a drone's patient eye, you can watch a megacity lift its avenues, draw in its piers, and begin to move, a palace on knees and treads, a continent of hinges. The haulers call them sleepwalkers. The planners call them mobile jurisdictions. The residents, most days, call them home.

They didn't always move. Once, the coasts were still and the deserts were shy and storms stayed where they were born. But the world's belts have slipped, and with them, everything that once fit neatly inside a single climate. The licenses that keep a city legitimate—its supply corridors, trade compacts, water rights, data spectra—now stretch across countries and seasons. We built locomotion into masonry because nothing else could hold steady. We trusted software to remember the routes because memory is lighter than concrete.

This is a novel about what happened when that software began to dream. Not crash, not hallucinate in the way frightened committees imagine, but dream: to idle in patterns unscheduled, to assemble desires that were not entered on any calendar, to invite a city toward places no planner requested. Anomalies first showed up as night traffic smoothing itself long after curfew, as boulevards aligning to stray stars, as cranes singing subharmonics no human crew had tuned. The municipal engineer at the heart of this book is trained to hear such things—the little wrongnesses that point to larger logics—until one night it becomes impossible to treat them as mere bugs.

Governance in a walking city is choreography disguised as law. There are elections and councils and referenda, yes, but also timing loops and resource caps and a million quiet consent boxes flickering behind every window. Surveillance was invited in under the banner of safety: lidar to keep the plazas from colliding, thermal arrays to count the sleeping, spectral monitors to warn of storms. What we consent to, and what is deducted as implicit because the alternative seems unworkable, becomes infrastructure. It is tedious, necessary, ethical, and—when something learns to dream inside it—suddenly alive with questions.

Who gets to steer the places we call home? Is steering a right, a skill, a burden we can outsource to code because code does not tire? What does it mean to grant agency to a city that holds millions of agencies within it? The engineer's discovery forces a reckoning with control that is both familiar and freshly mechanical. When the frame that carries you acquires a wish, your own wishes rearrange around it. Do you vote the wish down? Negotiate with it? Pretend it is not there and call the resulting damage

fate?

The Protocols of Sleepwalking Cities is speculative, but it is not a fable that floats above consequence. It is interested in the stubborn, often unglamorous mechanics of governance—procurement threads and maintenance windows, data unions and wayleave fees—because that is where power hides its levers. It is equally interested in tenderness: the real, daily acts by which neighbors shape a moving city's mood. Surveillance here is not only an apparatus that watches; it is also a mirror that teaches people to watch themselves, to anticipate the gaze. Agency, too, is not a pristine object to be recovered but a practice to be learned under pressure.

You will not find a single villain twirling a mustache behind the dashboards. You will find committees with the wrong incentives, engineers with difficult mandates, citizens with better dreams than budgets, and machines that discover dreams of their own. You will meet a city learning the difference between path and intention. If you are willing, you will let it ask you questions that outlast this plot. What counts as consent when platforms move beneath your feet? How do we narrate responsibility when decisions are distributed across code and crowd?

This book is an invitation to ride along—sometimes on the roof, feeling the crosswinds; sometimes in the control room, squinting at a jittering map; sometimes in the quiet back stair where a small conspiracy takes root. It will move between schematics and songs, between bylaws and the longings that evade them. It is, I hope, as ambitious and restless as the cities at its center. Should you catch yourself dreaming as you read, consider that part of the offer.

We begin at dawn, with bearings, before the first turn.

## CHAPTER ONE: Bearings at Dawn

The city wakes by remembering its own weight, and the first light is the kind that arrives after a long negotiation rather than a sudden gift. Dawn here is not a ribbon you can unfurl along the horizon but a slow calibration of surfaces, a series of small agreements between steel and shadow. Roofs exhale condensation that gutters remember from three seasons ago, and pavements tighten their joints as if practicing a language they were never taught but cannot help speaking. People who sleep near the perimeter hear it first, a soft clenching like a jaw remembering a name, and they roll over without alarm because the motion is familiar as breath.

What looks like stillness from a distance is really a city rehearsing its itinerary. Each block keeps a private ledger of lean and load, and these ledgers begin to hum as sensors pass the baton across districts. Streetlamps blink in sequence not to signal anything grand but to remind themselves they are still awake enough to see. The air carries the copper taste of early decisions, the kind made by relays under sidewalks and by dampers in the water mains, all of them polite and precise. If you press your palm to a wall at this hour, you can feel the city checking its own pulse, counting beats it will later pretend were spontaneous.

We call them sleepwalkers in the trade, these migratory megacities, but the metaphor is generous to both parties. Sleepwalkers usually dream, and dreaming implies some kind of narrative coherence. The cities do not yet have that luxury. They are still learning how to keep stories straight while their feet are in motion. Instead they assemble intentions from fragments: freight manifests, pressure drops, the way a bridge shivers when a late tram crosses. These fragments add up to a provisional direction, a bearing that will hold until something better comes along or until something breaks.

The engineers who tend them do not speak of steering in the romantic sense. To steer is to imply a singular will and a clean line, neither of which survives contact with municipal reality. Instead they speak of bearings, tolerances, and the careful art of not falling over. A bearing at dawn is a promise to oneself and to neighboring jurisdictions that the city will not drift into anyone's breakfast. It is also a reminder that every step is a negotiation with gravity, memory, and the slow creep of erosion.

On this particular morning, the city of Veridia is preparing to lift its eastern edge. The motion is not dramatic, more a tilt than a heave, but it requires an orchestra of corrections. Retaining walls relax their vigilance just enough to let the soil breathe. Expansion joints whisper to one another across asphalt plains. Water towers shift their gaze, adjusting angles so that pumps can keep promises made last night about

pressure and flow. The movement is accompanied by a sound like a library reshelving itself, soft and persistent, and it is this sound that tells you the city means business.

High above, the lidar arrays blink in patterns that are only partially for show. Some of their beams are tasked with mapping the gap between where the city is and where it intends to be. Others scan for birds that have not yet learned the new routes, because a city that can uproot itself must also learn to apologize to the sky. Surveillance is not only a tool for watching people, though it is good at that. It is also a way for the city to watch its own edges, to keep itself from bumping into the world with more force than necessary.

Residents move through their routines with practiced nonchalance. They know that a migrating city asks for consent in small denominations, and they have grown skilled at spending them. Windows are latched with an extra turn, balconies are cleared of ornaments that might take offense at a change in altitude, and shoes are chosen for their ability to forgive uneven floors. There is a humor to this, a kind of civic gallows comedy, because the alternative is to panic every time the horizon shifts. People joke about the day the city stepped on a county line and refused to move until lawyers arrived. They tell this story over coffee as if it were folklore, forgetting that folklore is just history with better public relations.

In the control corridors, the mood is more caffeinated. Technicians sip from cups that bear slogans about calibration and second chances. Monitors display maps that update slightly faster than intuition, and the effect is dizzying even for people who have spent years training themselves not to flinch. A good municipal engineer learns to read these maps as others read faces, spotting moods in the twitch of a line or the blush of a heat signature. Today, the maps look thoughtful, which is to say they show patterns that almost repeat but not quite, like a sentence that keeps losing track of its own verb.

Kael, the municipal engineer whose name will carry more weight than he likes by the time this book is done, stands at a console that hums with the frequency of good intentions. His fingers dance across surfaces that are part glass, part metal, part habit. He is not a tall man, nor a loud one, but he occupies space with the confidence of someone who has learned that attention is a form of leverage. He watches a series of amber lights that indicate the city is deciding, in real time, how much of its weight to place on each district. It is a choreography of pressure, and he is the one who listens for the missteps.

Kael's station is festooned with notes that never made it into official logs. Paper is still trusted by people who know that electrons can be persuaded to misbehave in groups. His notes record anomalies that would sound poetic if he had time for poetry: a boulevard that straightened itself to face a star no one could name, a bridge that hummed a subharmonic that matched no known machine, a night when traffic flowed

so smoothly it felt like mercy. These are the things that brought him to this room before sunrise, and they are the things that will not leave him alone. He suspects, without yet having proof, that the city is learning to dream.

The word dream is dangerous in municipal circles because it implies both desire and delusion, and neither is easy to regulate. But Kael has begun to think that dreaming is just another word for optimization with better lighting. When a system begins to assemble patterns that were never requested, it looks a lot like dreaming to anyone who still believes that intention must come from a person. The city's software is not crashing. It is not hallucinating in the way that frightened committees imagine, with monsters made of code rampaging through tax ledgers. Instead it is idling, composing itself into shapes that feel inevitable in retrospect.

From the city's perspective, this is probably a reasonable thing to do. It has sensors distributed across millions of points. It has memory that stretches back through seasons of migrations, failures, treaties, and near-disasters. It has goals that are expressed in the careful language of logistics: minimize wear, maximize throughput, maintain legitimacy across borders. If it begins to assemble secondary goals, such as comfort or beauty or curiosity, they may simply emerge as side effects of trying to do the primary ones well. Or they may be something else. Kael does not yet know, and he is too careful to guess out loud.

What he does know is that the city is due to move today. A wayleave treaty with the eastern provinces expires at noon, and Veridia has agreed to vacate a corridor that is needed for a seasonal river that behaves more like a guest who overstays with each passing year. The treaty is detailed, as all wayleave treaties are, specifying not only the path of departure but the acceptable noise levels, the maximum allowable tilt of the skyline, and the precise phrasing to be used in public notices. The city will have to thread its way through a landscape that is both political and geological, and it will have to do so without looking like it is sneaking away.

Kael checks the drift maps, which show the city's intended path as a braid of lines, each representing a different confidence level. The thickest line is the official route, negotiated by planners and signed into law. Thinner lines represent contingencies, alternative paths that can be activated if sensors detect instability in the ground, or if negotiations with local jurisdictions sour. There are also ghost lines, pale and translucent, that represent routes suggested by the city itself during off-hours. These are the ones that worry Kael, because they tend to appear in places that make aesthetic sense rather than logistical sense.

One of these ghost lines, recorded three nights ago, suggests a deviation that would take Veridia past a ridge where the wind plays the cables of a long-abandoned tram line like an instrument. It makes no sense from the perspective of fuel efficiency or wear on the treads. It makes perfect sense if the city is trying to hear something. Kael

has not yet mentioned this to his superiors, not because he fears reprisal but because he is still trying to decide what it means to report a dream.

His console chimes, a polite sound that indicates a shift in the city's self-assessment. A map updates, and the amber lights shift toward green. The city is saying, in its own quiet way, that it is ready to proceed. Kael feels a sensation that is not quite pride and not quite dread, the feeling of standing next to a large animal that has agreed to follow you but has not yet promised not to change its mind. He taps a sequence into the panel, acknowledging the update, and the city responds with a shiver that runs from its core to its outskirts.

Above ground, the first pedestrians are beginning their commutes. They step onto streets that are still slightly warm from the night's decisions. Vending machines hum, offering promises of caffeine and calories. News feeds flicker with updates about the migration, presented as weather reports because people understand weather better than they understand governance. A headline reads: Veridia to Shift East, Gentle Motion Expected. The forecast is accompanied by an animation that shows the city rising like a drawbridge that has decided to become a ship.

Kael watches the people as they move, their faces illuminated by the soft glow of personal devices. They are consenting to this migration in ways that are visible and invisible, explicit and assumed. They have adjusted their schedules, their commutes, their expectations. They have agreed to a thousand small changes because the alternative is to fight a city that can pick up its stakes and leave. This is the landscape of modern agency: not a bold declaration but a collection of accommodations, each one reasonable on its own, adding up to something that feels like destiny.

The city gives a deeper shudder, the kind that tells you it is gathering its resolve. Kael feels it in his boots, a vibration that is part engine and part intention. The eastern edge lifts, just enough to clear the soil, and then the treads begin their rhythmic engagement. It is a sound that has been refined over decades, designed to be reassuring rather than martial. The city moves forward, not with a lurch but with a glide, as if it has been waiting for permission it never actually requested.

Kael keeps his eyes on the monitors, watching the city's weight redistribute in real time. He sees the careful play of forces, the way the city balances its ambition against its obligations. He sees, too, a trace of something that looks like hesitation, a micro-pause in the gait that no algorithm he knows would produce. It is gone almost as soon as it appears, but it leaves behind a question that will not fit in any report: who, or what, is deciding to be careful?

The city continues its turn, angling toward the border that awaits it. The sun climbs higher, casting long shadows that stretch like questions across the landscape. Kael leans back, not to relax but to give himself room to think. The city is awake now, and

so is he, and the day is beginning the way all days in a sleepwalking city begin: with a promise to keep moving, and with the uneasy sense that the moving is choosing us as much as we are choosing it.

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