

THE INSTITUTION

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When the world is an asylum, who decides who is sane?

Dr Clara Verloren believes in the system – its order, its purpose, its promise of rehabilitation. As a psychologist at The Institution, a sprawling psychiatric prison on the edge of a dying city, her task is simple: to heal those who do not know what they've done. But the deeper she delves into her patients' files, the less sense any of it makes: a dizzying catalogue of diagnoses that contradict themselves, inmates and records that vanish without explanation, and the quiet collapse that surrounds her. Clara begins to suspect that the madness she treats might not be contained within the walls at all.

When the routines crumble and The Institution itself begins to unravel, Clara's faith in her work – and in her own mind – fractures. What is rehabilitation when there is no crime? What is sanity in a world that no longer knows what it means to be sane?

The Institution is an eerie existential novella about systems without meaning, faith without purpose, and the dissolution of identity in a society that mirrors its own asylum, an endless loop of control, decay, and release, where everything, and everyone, remains Not Otherwise Specified.

PART I: FRAGMENTATION

Chapter 1

Reality is perspective, no more than subjective experience, an ephemeral illusion. Those who believe in truth know only a truth, seldom true. Deluding themselves in the fragility of their sanity and the quiet deception of certainty. The thought comes to her not with urgency but with the quiet weight of something unresolved.

In the stillness, the soft, tranquilising haze from her second cigarette drifts through the car, slipping out through the inch of open window. She still has a little time. The unbearable, relentlessness of time menaces and surrounds. Inside there, in that place, time suffocates. It is endless, heavy, overwhelming and permanent. It progresses onwards, infinitely ticking forward towards a destination, a victory, an ending. Yet to arrive. The dial perpetually turns. They all know. It penetrates them, passes through them, inhales them. Breathing out their fragile minds. Endless time is all there is.

Outside that place, there in the mirror, behind her, time squeezes and pushes. It is chaotic, dissected, chopped into seconds, minutes, hours, segments, fragments, schedules. It races and harries and chases them to nowhere, to everywhere. It never leaves but it is always arriving somewhere more important than the last pressured moment. It is transient but overwhelming. The endless pursuit of an agenda never to be accomplished.

The silence is punctured by a buzz. Her watch vibrates with the notification:

2nd October/07:30 AUTHORISED EMPLOYER ANNOUNCEMENT – please be advised this is your 30-minute employment preparation notification. Your work duties are scheduled to commence at 08:00. Please make arrangements to ensure prompt attendance. (AEA1.Inst)

One final moment of temporary pleasure from the cigarette. Here in the limbo, the nowhere, the momentary existence and safety between in there and out there. Or is it the purgatory? She doesn't know. Here in Parking Zone 3a, she sits in her car. In this no-man's land, through the fogging windscreen, in front of her, it looms – waiting.

Some still call it the *Prison*, some the *Facility*; fewer still, the *Hospital*. After the closure of all prisons, the rebrand to *Rehabilitation Facilities* offered promise, promise undelivered. Now, somewhere between a detention centre and a psychiatric hospital, the inhabitants bend to the will of retraining and rehabilitation. Conform or resist, the final battle of will. To most, however, it is known simply as *The Institution*.

A long, narrow lane threads through the marshland, ending beneath a vast black-brick arch, a mute threshold between the world behind and what waits beyond. It stretches ahead to the gatehouse, the building's front quarter, where security is stationed, entry is controlled, and the upper floors house professionals of every kind. It rises like a solemn monolith against the heavy sky, its façade a cold art deco geometry of polished black granite and tarnished brass. Towering spires pierce upwards, flanked by angular buttresses etched with zig zag motifs and strange reliefs. Narrow vertical windows limit the day light and offer no glimpse inside. It is weaponised beauty, ornate and mercilessly precise.

Yet behind this fascia, this breathless creation, the remainder of the building is a modern appendage. It is vast and imposing. Its levels rise toward the sky and sink beneath the ground. It contrasts the stone and ornament and faded grandeur. Stretching into glass and steel, pale corridors and sealed doors, sterile and cold. Impossible to discern the length. Endless. A strange mix of architecture from different ages. Disguised as some kind of hospital or rehabilitation masquerade, each modern white clad rectangle, the size of a shipping container is stacked and stuck with brutal,

bureaucratic precision into a leviathan that defies time itself. Gulls circle high above, taunting the static construction with their freedom.

She checks her reflection in the rear-view mirror. Through it, behind her, out there, the world. The outside. Is it reality? Is it real? The coastal city, overcrowded, decaying beneath its own ambition. Humanity degraded. Society reduced. Extreme. Expensive. Vacuous. Amoral. Is it freedom? They don't talk. They don't connect. Each follows their own schedule, their own rules. They check notifications, update profiles, perform lives online, living somewhere between here and there. Screen time. Deadline. Lifeline. Choice is an illusion; the oligopoly decides. Technology exists to improve life, or so they say. Everything influenced, everything electric, neon, connected. Everyone performing in the vast, curated theatre of existence. The purposeless worship of self. Somehow it functions, just not for them. Spend. Spend. Spend. Ruthless. Efficient. Economic. As long as they're productive, they have a place. No time to talk. Another appointment. Another reminder. Time itself is breathless.

But here in the car in Parking Zone 3a, she isn't out there, manufactured. She isn't in the there, shrinking. In this this moment of nowhere-ness, she is free. Just for a moment, just for instant, just for a cigarette, perhaps two.

Twenty-eight minutes. A deep breath. She picks up the coffee-brown leather bag from next to her. It's scent as she opens it, leather, cigarette smoke, a hint of vanilla, yet the outer layer has absorbed the sterile chill of cinderblock rooms and disinfected corridors. Once firm, now softened by the fingers that have creased it. She takes out the ID badge and hangs the red lanyard round her neck like the condemned committing to their own noose; it is stamped with the words *Institution Staff*. The ID case is a cold hard plastic that smudges as she touches it. She polishes it, a little too effortfully, rubbing it, almost trying to erase her own photograph. She looks at the image, she doesn't recognise

her face. The sharp angular features. Dr Clara Verloren (Psychologist) X-451-13-B7 it reads in black authoritative font. She places the remaining cigarettes inside the bag and clicks the brass buckle shut.

Opening the car door the wind finds her, cold, alive, insistent. Her hair dances in the sudden freshness. The threats of rain seem urgent, alert, awake. The sky broods. The clouds are low, swollen, blue-grey and black, dragging themselves in land from the nearby coastline. Today they seem to threaten more than rain. The Institution pushes up, the sky pushes down, between them, crushed by inevitability and time she steps out into the single-file column of workers advancing in an autonomous trance towards the gates. Ready to do the work.

She arrives each morning just before eight. Passes through the vast entrance gates crowned with razor wire. Queues to enter the gatehouse where she must submit. Submit her identification, submit to recording, submit her possessions for scanning, submit her body for x-ray, for metal detection, for search, submit whatever remained of her selfhood. She queues in the throng and shuffles through security – but this is like no airport, where travel is freedom and security is safety – here there is no such end destination or concern. Security demands compliance, compliance with entry requirements, compliance with exit requirements, its promise is sterility of environment, its threat is ‘dare you disobey’.

She drifts through the process. At the end of the queue waits a strange vending machine, one that offers nothing but keys. Some shimmer with circuitry, others glint dull and metallic. It takes faces for currency, fingerprints for proof. Attached to the heavy bundle is a personal alarm that promises only violence, desperation and fear for those who may need to press it someday. She attaches them to her belt with a cold steel chain like a gaoler, accoutrements that make her feel more like she has been processed and shackled as a prisoner than equipped as a professional.

The internal electronic air lock buzzes, the green light blinks. The door opens angrily at her, not for her. Stepping into a small glass box the door slices closed with vitriol. Momentarily she is imprisoned in the glass cell before the opposite door slices open and closed with the same annoyance and spite as she steps through.

She is inside.

The routine buzz: *2nd October/08:00 AUTHORISED EMPLOYER ANNOUNCEMENT – please be advised your daily employment duties have commenced (AEA2.Inst)*

Within The Institution, space unfolds, silent and immense. It somehow resembles a cavernous distribution centre, technological, advanced, cold, and strangely but perpetually quieter than expected. The slowly blinking lights of digital eyes in the corners of rooms and corridors watch, always watching. Sometimes visible, often not, but always watching, recording, documenting. There are few visible guards. The security is administered in a remote, methodical, and covert manner. The real security is psychological, architectural and procedural.

The housing is anonymous and depersonalised. Thousands of individually contained cells. Row upon row, stacked in endless columns. The Secure Wing areas where the gaoled exist are harshly lit and eerily quiet. The cells are psychiatric, inescapable, and the heavy gunmetal doors open only with the remote buzz and clunk of a distant technology, but they are watched. Always watched.

Beyond the professional quarters, offices, and clinics stretches a maze of walkways and twisting stairs, binding the new to the old like fragments of a fractured mind. When a prisoner is summoned, an artificial voice speaks through the Internal Communication System – the ICS – its calm precision denying any hint of mercy. Lights awaken along the gangways, tracing a path that feels less like guidance

than command. They walk beneath constant observation, each step accounted for. Here non-compliance has long since ceased to exist.

The institution itself is total, operating under vague “Directives” rather than anything resembling regulations or laws, but order is maintained. The endless barrage of Directives is administered through the Internal Electronic Communications System known as IECS, though from where they originate and who is responsible, Clara does not know, no-one truly seems to know. Does it matter? At scheduled intervals she meets with her supervising case officer, but her questions aren’t on the agenda. Only the work matters: risk assessment, risk reduction, rehabilitation, reintegration.

Today is a day like any other.

Clara unlocks her office door with one of the cold steel keys. It tuns with the well-rehearsed click that triggers a Pavlovian response in her stomach. It sinks. On the outside of the door there is a blue rectangular plastic plaque stating her ID number and credentials. It was there the day she arrived. One time, the door swung closed with a little too much vigour, perhaps her fault, her suppressed frustration, and the plaque fell from its place. Beneath it was a faded metallic plaque, no name, but it was embossed with the words ‘Applied Therapist’. As far as Clara is aware there is no, nor has there ever been an ‘Applied Therapist’. No-one seemed to know what, or who, that was, or who had inhabited her room before her, so she fixed the plastic plaque back in place and mentioned it no more. From time to time now she fantasises about her ancestor, and the evolution of the people of this place. The metallic plaque remains still now, buried like a fossil from an earlier age.

The office is deep in the belly of the leviathan, there is no window, only the harsh clinical light. The room itself is perfunctory, simple and administrative. A perfect geometric square. Walls of magnolia, a large analogue clock that ticks

and ticks. Its rhythm is soothing, calming, somewhat out of place but she likes it.

Three metal filing cabinets line one wall, but now all information is stored on the Central Server System – the CSS – so they stand to attention, mostly empty, like old guards refusing to accept their retirement. Her desk is sparse, empty. Desks are for work not storage states the Directive. There are no personal possessions except for a tiny cactus plant in a mini terrarium that a colleague once mysteriously found abandoned on a gangway and tenderly gifted to her to nurse secretly back to health. She keeps it now in defiance of the Directive of Sparsity. The room is hers alone. Too small for others. Too small to see patients. On her desk there is a screen, linked to the invisible IT system, tired but functional.

On her way to the office, Clara stops at the single coffee machine in the wing, the one that dispenses, for a few credits, a tepid, coffee-flavoured liquid into a thin polystyrene cup. She takes a sip, grimaces, and sets it down beside her terminal. The chair awaits her: moulded plastic, workstation-approved, designed for compliance rather than comfort. She sits. The screen hums to life, light blooming across its surface. Tap. Tap. Tap. Messages. Mail. To-do

There is a new policy memo to read: *Policy K-55-50/Inst - Requirement for reporting Directive implementation response time*. She'll read it later.

More pressingly this morning there is a new case file referral to attend to. Opening it, she reads:

Subject ID: 6068-M

Index Offence: Anti-optimistic speech

Condition: Undetermined

Priority: Routine

Subject is referred for assessment and evaluation. Mental deviation suspected. Failure to disclose internal

thoughts and non-compliance with remediation attempts. Considered likely to be engaging in excessive rumination and possible pseudo-delusional belief structures. Pathological Personality suspected.

Opening ESARS – the Electronic Subject Access Record System – Clara selects the next available appointment slot and adds a note to the file before sending the communique to the prison Internal Communication System to notify the inmate of his impending requirement: “Referral Appropriate. Accepted. Rehabilitation pathway to commence”.

With faith and conviction, she reads the files. Each containing an Identified Personal Rehabilitation Framework or IPRF. The medicalised barrage of acronyms pummels and assaults her mind alongside the impenetrable array of diagnoses. Still, she reads on:

“Persistent Ideational Fluctuation Disorder.” Symptoms: failing to maintain approved thought patterns.

“Affective Dissonance Disorder.” Symptoms: behavioural and emotional instability in public zones.

“Volitional Drift Syndrome.” Symptoms: exhibiting preferences or decisions that deviate from normative behavioural pathways.

“Excessive Semantic Variation Disorder.” Symptoms: using outdated or uncommon explanations in public discourse.

The cases go on. There are no names, only identity numbers, no photos.

She notes the occasional inconsistent redactions in the file information, curiously blanked out sections of text and the need-to-know basis, that ostensibly does not need to be known, at least not by her. But her conviction is honest,

earnest belief. She matters, her work matters, it all matters. It must matter. She doesn't approach it with naivety but decency. Dignity. To offer expert help, to trust, to have faith, to know that society needs the essential function of experts who help the damaged, the broken, the disenfranchised, protect society from risk. The years of study and experience tell her the truth of the paradigm.

She looks up at the ever-ticking clock on the wall; her first session of the day is almost due.

Patients do not come here, not to this room. Her room, her office. Her sanctuary. Clinic Room 3 in the South Wing Administrative Area, amongst the sterile, disinfected, hospital spaces, is where she must go to meet her involuntary participant. She takes a black leather file from one of the metal filing cabinets, inside it crisp white pages, forms to be filled in, questionnaires to be completed. Her silver ink-pen, hiding more power and authority than she likes to admit. Swallows the last drops of coffee from the polystyrene cup. A deep breath. She locks the door behind her, and as she turns, the dark windowless corridor in front of her illuminates into harsh brightness as the motion sensors trigger the lighting system and guide her way.

The thin black heels of her shoes click against the polished floors, each step a punctuation in the labyrinth that funnels her toward Clinic Room 3.

She wears the uniform of compliance: tailored black suits, high-neck silk blouses, fastened at the collar. Every detail marks her obedience, every fold a reminder that freedom is measured in conformity. It is authority projected through style. Everything about her appearance suggests control, structured, composed, immaculate. A disguise? Her hair betrays her. Long, ice blonde, rarely tied back, the one visible rebellion in her otherwise restrained façade. Her femininity doesn't soften her. She moves like a spectre of a woman in a portrait who had accidentally wandered into this cold, fluorescent present. She has a sharp Nordic beauty,

although moves through the world seemingly unaware of it, or perhaps more dangerously, as though it had long since stopped mattering. The tired beauty of someone who had been serious too young. Her ice-blue eyes give the impression of a coldness that is unfair to her warmth.

She takes her seat, in Clinic Room 3. Tries to ground herself in preparation, to clear her mind of distractions other than the assessment schedule. Ready to do the work. Pen in hand.

The room itself is a strangely long and narrowly rectangular space that seems to race away into a vanishing point. At a mid-point, two comfortable but curiously low-set chairs are positioned facing each other, between them a small, square table, with short fat legs, equally low and oddly impractical.

She believes in this place, in this room, in the work, in the rehabilitation. Not blind belief, but with integrity. Detached, clinical integrity. “My job is to reduce harm. I don’t set the laws.” She mentally repeats her mantra. The machinery may be damaged, imperfect, but still necessary. The patients need help, hurt people hurt people, perhaps the system is flawed, but the therapy is curative. Redemptive. Healing? Helpful? Doing something? Better than doing nothing? At least not doing harm? Yes, she believes, she has to believe. Order exists. Morality has structure. Her work has value, even if imperfect. Despite her affirmation, still she hears the whisper from the walls: collaboration is a fiction, here there is only power.

Intake Session

Location: Clinic Room 3

Time: 09:30

Subject ID: 6041-L

Index Offence: Offences contrary to Section 1700.4c of the Official Legal Code [OLC]

Condition: Empathic Noncompliance

Priority: *Routine*

She sits with her back straight, hands folded in her lap, right leg crossed over left. The silver fountain pen poised between her fingers like a tuning fork. It forever leaks its black ink and stains the tips of her fingers, but she likes it, likes the old ways. It feels real. Like a mechanic with oil-stained hands doing honest work.

The subject is two minutes late, which is not unusual. For prisoners time is elastic here. It stretches, bends around locked doors, security overrides, and cancelled appointments.

On the table: a plain folder marked “6041-L” No photo. No name, it’s not unusual. No specified offence. Just one phrase next to Index Offence: *Offences contrary to Section 1700.4c of the Official Legal Code [OLC]*. The reason for incarceration unclear. She’s reads it over but still doesn’t know what 1700.4c entails. She did not ask. Questions only expand the hole. It doesn’t matter, here she must tailor rehabilitation plans to personality types, not crimes. Besides, a legal system of such complexity, devised by politicians, lawyers and bureaucrats, has to be just, it must be right, whatever the specifics of the law, the crime would have been wrong, the victim harmed. The corrective rehabilitation begins now.

The door clicks. The subject enters – tall, worn, thin, uncertain whether to sit or stand. Clara gestures gently toward the chair. He sits. No restraints today. That usually means a low threat assessment. Or an error. She taps the recording device. It emits a soft red glow.

“This is Dr Clara Verloren. Initial intake session for Subject 6041-L. Beginning at 09:33. Subject present. Cooperative.”

A pause. She looks up at him.

“Welcome Mr 6041-L. Or would you prefer to go by your actual name?”

There is something about her voice, warm, clear, unhurried. Even the angriest submit. She listens like she means it, a rare enough trait here to be mistaken for kindness.

He smiles nervously and stutters. “My name? It is Nelson Carter.”

“Why do you think you are here, Nelson Carter?” she asks.

He shrugs. “I assumed... hoped... you’d tell me.”

“I’m afraid that is not how this works.”

“Then I really don’t know how it’s going to work at all.”

Silence. She lets it settle. He blinks slowly, like someone adjusting to light. He’s not hostile, just tired. They all are, eventually.

She turns a page in her notes, though there’s nothing there. A blank template, waiting to be filled.

“I’m here to assess your capacity for reintegration,” she says.

“I don’t even know why I’m here, though. What am I supposed to have done? They tell me nothing. Miss, I just want to go home.”

Subject presents with pathological denial. Resistance against will.

The pen hovers. Her fingers ache. She hasn’t slept well. She dreams lately of rooms with no walls, no doors,

no clocks, just light and dust and a voice that says, this is what's left.

"Let's start with your emotional regulation patterns," she says. "Have you experienced difficulty processing anger, guilt, or shame?"

"I experience them just fine," he replies, "I'm angry. It just doesn't change anything."

He smiles again, nervously. Not mockingly, desperate, scared. It's worse somehow.

"Tell me more about this anger."

"What do you mean? What do you think I'm angry about? I'm an innocent man, here, in this insane asylum! I don't even know why I'm here. I'm innocent, I tell you!"

Shame and anger at self. Ego-protective defence of denial and projection of anger at system and therapist.

He continues, "I mean, what in the hell is Section 1700.4c? I've asked everyone, the guards, other prisoners, now I ask you."

"I notice that when I ask you to tell me about your emotions, your anger, you digress to legal matters and previous conversations you've had. I wonder if this is a defence to keep us from addressing the real problem. But this comes with a cost to you and only serves to maintain your empathic non-compliance."

He stares blankly at the indecipherable clinical jargon floating in the air. Broken bewilderment written across his face. He looks desperate and defeated.

The rehabilitation has started. The work has begun.

Later, back in her office, Clara files her report:

Subject presents with a lack of insight into risk, mental disorder, and need for treatment. No current violent ideation. Symptoms of empathic non-compliance disorder. General cognitive and behavioural stability. Potential evidence of problems with treatment and supervision response due to denial.

She pauses before saving. For a moment, she considers adding something more, something unsanctioned. Reflections, perceptions, perhaps. What is Section 1700.4c? The protestation of innocence. What if...?

No.

Instead, she closes the file, presses her fingertips to her temples, and whispers, “You are doing the work.”

In times of uncertainty, of change, of imbalance, she has always returned to the work. It is the port in the storm. The endless stream of risk assessments, dreary and methodical, offers a strange comfort: structure through repetition.

She opens the file labelled *SPJ: Risk Assessments*. Even the title steadies her. Structured Professional Judgment. The words themselves promise order, a semblance of control. She exhales and begins to type her thoughts back into order.

The hours grind forward, indistinguishable. Out of habit, or obedience, she returns to the mandated policy flagged for her review earlier in the day. The cursor blinks, patient, unyielding. As so many times before, the message appears, immaculate in its denial of meaning: *Error. File not found.*

Like a dream upon waking, the policy no longer exists. Only the faintest sense that it once existed. It never existed.

She straightens her thoughts, clears her mind, and prepares for the next intake.

Even if there isn't one.

Chapter 2

To understand and reduce recidivistic risk for the meaningful benefit of society: This the mission statement. This is the work. Clara's work. Meaningful and important.

To this end she is driven, focused. To master her craft, like all artisans, she observes her product. Tweaks the edges, touches up the brush strokes, and laments her imperfections. By Directive, all sessions are recorded. Stored on the CSS. This provides for the weekly ritual where she selects material to re-watch, re-listen, re-experience. A standard protocol, a process she follows, perhaps for self-improvement, perhaps it is a self-punishment. Recently she has been less certain. Still, she has always been driven by her belief in the work, it matters and so must be done well.

For today's routine, she selects the horror of a sexual murder. Perpetrated in a district a little too close to her own. Sheltered lives, filled with illusion and fantasy, daydreams of safety. People meander through their lives in the belief that horror is elsewhere. They know so little. So little of the world beneath the line, the underworld, the otherworld. Closer than they think. But she knows. Knows too well how close the shadows are. It's better they don't know, the streets they live on, the places they go. Its close. Too close. So little they know.

Her task: to review the cognitive distortions, to ready them for cognitive restructuring in their next session. To inform the relapse plan. This is the work.

She takes paper and her trusted pen. Sits back, fingers pinch at the corners of her weary eyes. She opens the file, skips the levity and introductions, and gets to the point. It whirs to sound. Two voices. Her's clinical but compassionate. His smooth and slow, slightly higher pitched than she remembered. Remorseless:

Offence Account 8081-D

Location: Clinic Room 3

Time: 14:00

Subject ID: 8081-D

Index Offence: Offences contrary to Section 1110.1 of the Official Legal Code [OLC]

Condition: Parasitic egocentrism

Priority: elevated

Recording commences: 11:18:02

T (Clara): As we've discussed before, these incidents, these offences, aren't momentary lapses. They don't happen by accident. A process is followed.

P (Subject): I understand.

T: Shall we take some time now to think through that pathway? As we've done with the others – to look more closely at what led you to be outside her window that night? To be inside her home? When we understand that, we can begin to change those processes.

P: I'd rather not... but yes, if we have to.

T: I know it's difficult. But this is a safe space. There's no judgement here.

P: Okay.

T: You told me before that you first saw her on the train, several weeks earlier, and again that night. Let's think about the first stage: *Your motivation to offend*.

P: *[long pause]* I don't know. It's like I said before: I'm sick of the longing, sick of the rejection. All my life, no one wants me. I deserve love too. I deserve a woman. To love, to touch, to... well, you know. Am I so bad? So ugly? So

weird? Don't they say there's a lid for every pot? Why am I always the one left alone?

T: And when you saw her, you found her attractive? You thought she might be the one for you?

P: No... well, yes and no. She was beautiful – of course. They always are. But I didn't fool myself she'd ever want me. She was from another world. I loved her instantly, lusted for her, and hated her, all at once. Do you understand?

T: Go on.

P: I hated that she was so untouchable. Better than me. A loser like me had no chance. So pure. So far above.

T: So, the idea of speaking to her didn't occur to you?

P: [*sharp laugh*] Speak to her? To be humiliated? Not a chance. I wasn't going to give her that power. But I knew, I *knew*, I'd have her. She'd pay for the cruelty of the others. No need to talk. I spared her the trouble of thinking up an insult.

T: You see what happened there? You created the whole encounter in your mind. You approached her, she rejected you, humiliated you, but none of that actually happened.

P: Maybe. But that's how it always goes. Why would this time be different?

T: So, you moved quickly through this phase. There was never really an alternative path in your thoughts.

P: Maybe so. Yeah... yes.

T: Yet an obstacle is always present, the knowledge that hurting someone is wrong. If not morally, then legally. Such behaviour carries consequences.

P: Illegal, sure. Wrong? I don't know.

T: And so, you had to convince yourself that it was permissible. The second stage: *Permission giving*, overcoming your internal inhibitors. In that moment, what did you tell yourself to make it seem reasonable?

P: *[long pause]* Like I said, she deserved it. They all do. The way they treat me. She wasn't going to humiliate me.

T: Go on.

P: I don't know... I just wanted her. I'm tired of being ignored, so why not take what should be mine? Dressed like that, provoking, teasing, she knew what she was doing. So, I decided I'd take it. If they won't give, I'll take. And if they weren't so cruel, things like this wouldn't happen.

T: *[pause]* May I summarise? You justified your actions: "she deserved it because of how other women treat me." You saw it as your right, and you blamed her appearance. Cognitive distortions?

P: Maybe. If you say so. To me, it's just the truth.

T: Those beliefs moved you to the third stage: *Overcoming external inhibitors*, creating the opportunity to offend.

P: Uh-huh.

T: How did you get from the train to her home?

P: *[long pause]* I stayed on the train past my stop. Just watched her. She hadn't even noticed me. Three stops later she got off. I waited until the doors were about to close, then slipped out another door. I didn't know where she was going, so I hung back, just following. She didn't see me. She turned down darker streets. Perfect. No cameras. No people. I thought about doing it then. But I was lost by then,

and before I knew it, we were in some quiet neighbourhood.
[pause]

T: Go on.

P: I thought about quitting. But then I saw her go inside a house, a small place, with one of those doors that you need to lock from the inside. So, I waited. The lights came on. I guessed she was alone. I went closer. Just to look.

T: But you didn't just look.

P: No. She saw me. Must've been there too long. She looked all panicked, like they do. So, it was then or never. I didn't want her calling the cops, screaming, making a scene. I knew the door was still unlocked, so I just... went in. Calmly.

T: And that brings us to the final stage: *Overcoming victim resistance*.

P: She ran for the door, towards me. There was nowhere to go. I grabbed her by the throat. She was mine. It was easy.

[Recording paused – 11:43:19]

....

She had heard enough. Every mind has a breaking point, a limit. Better to step back from the brink. Each time the threshold is crossed it is harder to return. She contemplates briefly, the delicate fragility of her own sanity. She needs a distraction.

Few smoke anymore. The habit had been sterilised out of culture, replaced by cleaner addictions, neuro-feeds, dopamine loops, digital rituals and the endless scroll of self. The world no longer burns tobacco; it burns attention. Clara still prefers something she can hold between her fingers,

something that leaves a mark. She pulls on her coat and heads for the rooftop, where at least the air feels real.

The cold wind braces her, its pushes and pulls assaulting her as she forces open the heavy door against the gusts. And then a moment of lightness, purity. Standing ahead of her in the wind, cigarette in hand facing the distant ocean, is her only happiness in this place.

Dr Lorelei Corven (Psychologist) X-4921-00-L, silhouetted by the meagre rays of a weak sun losing the battle to shine through the purple-black clouds. Her long sea salted wavy hair dances in the gale. The dark blue duffle coat and woollen scarf soften her in a beautiful contrast to Clara, yet the friends complement each other in poetic juxtaposition. She turns at the sound of the opening door. The gentle smile and warm eyes, communicate that the happy surprise is reciprocated.

Lorelei had joined The Institution long after Clara, more idealistic, perhaps naïve, more innocent, but deeply intelligent.

Clara had wondered at earlier times if her softness would betray her someday. Still here she was. With Lorelei there was little need for the banalities of conversation – the “hello” the “how are you?” the “how is your day?” Redundant.

Their conversations are always with meaning, deep, provocative. Lorelei has a habit of starting to speak, as though picking up the thread of an earlier conversation that Clara was part of yet hadn't been present for. Meaningful, profound, but always with a levity. Now, as they smoke together on the rooftop, in the rain and wind and cold, in this perfect moment, Lorelei thinks aloud in her characteristic heavy lightness.

“Do you ever stop to question the madness of it all? What is it all about? This place. Predicting the future like a fairground fortune teller.”

“How so?” In earnest, sometimes what Lorelei says matters little to Clara, only that she speaks to her.

Lorelei smiles, more distantly than usual, an air of reluctance, and continues.

“Think about it. We assess, review, read, analyse, all to develop our formulations and risk assessments. To try to make predictions about the future. A base impossibility.”

Rueful, the truth was undeniable. Making predictions is hard, particularly about the future.

She continues, “I mean, if we assess and predict that someone *will* commit offences, will do harm to others in the future, and then indeed they do, our prediction realised, we are correct. Masters of the future. Yet we lose the game. We have failed to protect. And so, they come for us.

“Perhaps it’s better we assess and predict that someone will commit offences, will do others harm in the future, and then are shown to be wrong in our foresight, when no harm is done. But then we were wrong, and we lose the game again.

“But this time, there is always tomorrow. Unfalsifiable predictions. There may be a black swan tomorrow if only we keep searching. And so, they come for us. Yet still we play the insane game.

“And what of the next possibility? We assess and predict that no harm will be done, that no future offences will be perpetrated. And then we are shown to be wrong, when the crime is committed. The game is lost, the worst of all our possible errors. And so, they come for us.

“That leaves one last possibility. We assess and predict that no harm will be done, and this time we are shown to be prescient in our correct foresight, when no harm comes to pass. A success? A victory? No. A temporary reprieve. There is always tomorrow. And then they will surely come for us.

“It’s a game of chance I’m starting to fear to play, Clara. We roll the dice, and they come up snake eyes every time.”

They stand side by side, looking out at the distant storm clouds over the ocean. The rain falls. In the silence, the enormity – and futility – of it all seems to whisper to her. They stand shoulder to shoulder.

Clara exhales without drama. The silence between them had never been awkward. It was the only honest part of the job.

“Do you ever think about leaving?” Lorelei asks eventually.

Clara glances at her soft face. It seems different today, less readable, like a report filed with too many acronyms.

“No,” Clara replies.

“Why not?”

“Because I wouldn’t know how to explain what I’ve been doing.”

Lorelei smiles faintly. Not amused, more like someone confirming a private fear.

“I think about it,” she confesses. “Leaving. Not escaping. Just... not showing up.”

Clara pulls her coat tighter. “You said once the work mattered.”

“I think I lied. Maybe to myself.”

They stand with that thought floating before them for a while. The hum of the building below is constant – like a machine no one remembers building, but no one dares shut off.

Lorelei flicks ash off the edge. It falls into the wind.

“I used to dream about being touched,” she says suddenly. “Not sex. Just... someone putting a hand on my back. Casual. Without protocol.”

Clara turns to her. The usual warmth in Lorelei’s tone is gone, replaced by something raw and unguarded. She looks tired in a way Clara recognises too well.

For a second, Clara wants to reach out, just to place her hand on Lorelei’s shoulder. To prove something. To both of them.

But she doesn’t.

She watches herself not doing it. Watches the moment pass like a visitor who never rang the bell.

“We’re not built for casual,” she says.

Lorelei nods, stubs out the cigarette on the ledge.

“That’s the thing, isn’t it?”

“We’re not built for much of anything anymore.”

She smiles, her warmth thawing her expression, then leaves without another word.

Clara stays. The sky greying fast. She waits for the first star, but it doesn’t show.

Chapter 3

For Clara, Thursday mornings in The Institution, mean only thing: Enhanced Cognitive Remediation Rehabilitation Offender Programme - ECRROP. Group therapy rehabilitation.

The apogee of cost-conscious remedy. The system at its most effective, core treatment.

The production-line, taking raw material, shaping it, fixing it, fastening it, correcting it, converting it to the finalised end-product ready to be delivered. Delivered back, a new unit, manufactured into a rehabilitated member of society. Clara is the Line Leader, the manufacturing supervisor. Together with her crew of one, she prepares to fire the great ECRROP machine into life. The gears will grind, the conveyor belt will whirr.

As the materials process down the production line towards the final assembly point, the cognitive distortions will be identified, challenged, modified. Antisocial traits will be corrected and reduced, impulses satiated, early warning signs identified, relapse prevention implemented. Discharge point can be found at the termination of the conveyor. Quality Control will determine success or failure. It ends either at the packing station and exit point, or if quality is unmet, the product will be disassembled, and the process can start over.

Sten Andersson (ECRROP Facilitator) X-4913-MU, is ready waiting in Clinic Room 7. Short and fidgety. A limited but inoffensive assembler on the production line of the Institution. His belief in the work: total. Innocent, naïve almost. He tightly grips 'the manual', the production line's instruction and user guide. To be followed, unquestionably, sacredly. The only way to ensure the work is done and done correctly. Today he is assigned to Clara, her faithful

assistant, following her expert lead. Or perhaps there to ensure she does not deviate from the plan, she can't be sure.

The beige Clinic Room 7 is the factory floor for this production line. It is cut in a L shape, the corner taken out to house the observation room, its two-way mirror soullessly reflecting the scene. No-one is watching from there anymore; they don't need to. The blinking lights of the recording eyes in the corner of the room watch everything, always. It is as though The Institution itself is watching, taking notes, deciding their futures.

The standard magnolia walls are coloured with metal-laced paint to create a magnetic functionality. It serves only to create the feeling of being trapped inside a tin box. A tin foil hat to trap the madness out, or in? This is one of the few rooms that has windows, yet they are thin rectangular blades of reinforced Perspex eight inches from floor height. Even if it were possible to look out of them, the view is of a grey inaccessible internal courtyard. An abyss of concrete. Once she lay on her stomach in an attempt to understand the structure. All that was left was the sensation of being drowned, trapped in a sinking car as it plunged into the desolation of an icy lake.

Eight plastic blue chairs confront each other in a half circle.

She takes her seat at one end of the horseshoe opposite where Sten sits, clutching his instructions. He looks at her like an audience member preparing to watch a grand theatrical performance. Desperate, hopeful? Ready to see the rehabilitation in action.

Voices at the door, and in drag themselves with reluctance, six pallets of raw materials, ready to be processed and rehabilitated. She glances down at the 'Session Plan' in her lap:

ECRROP

Facilitators: Dr Clara Verloren (Psychologist) & Sten Andersson (ECRROP Facilitator)

Location: Clinical Room 7

Time: 10:00

Group Members:

Subject ID: 7283-K

Subject ID: 5197-M

Subject ID: 8432-J

Subject ID: 3905-R

Subject ID: 6719-N

Subject ID: 2448-Q

Session: 28

Block: 5

Session Topic: Exploring internalised and externalised motivation

She begins the script, the opening scene. Her tone, as always, is professional, warm, without contraction, precise.

“Good morning, everyone. Before we learn a little of your week, it is for me to inform you that the focus of the session today is to deepen our thinking about the internal and external factors that motivate you to continue your journey of rehabilitation. To consider further the goals you might set to support your reintegration.”

She delivers it with conviction, almost as if she believes.

Yet today she is unexpectedly and prematurely interrupted by Subject ID 6719-N.

“Into what?”

She stops.

“Pardon?”

“Well... after all this... what is it exactly that we are being reintegrated into? I mean, what’s out there that’s better than in here?”

He gestures vaguely toward the door – or the world beyond it.

Clara blinks once, slowly, and starts to write a brief note to herself:

Subject ID 6719-N: Oppositional defiance. Queries the definition of ‘outside.’ Resisting normative assumption of social order...

“As I said, we are here to facilitate and support your reintegration...” she restarts.

“Yes, but into what, I said?”

She stops.

“I’m sorry?”

“Again, *what* are we being reintegrated into? What’s out there that we need, want to be integrated into? Is it better than inside here?”

In a soft, yet impassioned voice, he continues:

“Really, I don’t think you understand. What is out there for me? For us? An empty, vacuous, indifferent world. Sure, I may have a number in here, but I was just a number out there, a nothing, a nobody. One in the billions. I mean, look at you, for example. You think your life is better than ours? You think you are free? No, your prison is just bigger than ours; it just has more space.

“Think about it: you wake up in the bed, in the house that they own. Not you. They let you pay them, sure, for the

privilege of existing there. But miss the payment – they’ll soon take it back. You take a shower – you pay them for the water that falls from the sky. You get dressed in the clothes that they tell you to wear – but that you have to buy. You leave your home to come here, a prison within your prison. You spend more time here than at your home; they make you pay for something you barely use. Sure, they give you a meagre salary. Then they tax it to fund your work – you pay your own wages. And for what? All to facilitate and support our reintegration. So, I ask you again: reintegrate into what?

“Think about it. The insanity of it all.

“They make us work hard, driving us into the dust, all to earn money to spend on things we didn’t know we needed, didn’t want, didn’t know existed. But they tell us this will make us happy. It will fill the everlasting void inside you that they create by making you feel miserable and inferior because you didn’t own the thing you didn’t know you needed to buy. Only to own it, use it, dispose of it – and still feel the cold despair. But don’t worry, there is something else to buy. Always something else.

“Striving to be special, someone, something, seen in the billions. Unique? Unique wearing the mass-produced fashions and owning the mass-produced disposables that everybody else has. Maybe someone doesn’t have it; maybe you can be first, or at least one of the first, or perhaps just better than he who is without it. Sure, you have options – the options they give you, the choice of what they tell you to choose from. Too many, yet so few. Too many options, but unable to choose.

“Oh, yes, out there, the utopia. Everyone is hyper-connected, yet they’ve never been so isolated and lonely. They have more access to information, knowledge, resources than has ever been known in all of history. Yet they remain ignorant. More ignorant than ever. Yet we need Enhanced Thinking Skills? People’s lives polluted and

infected by technology designed to expedite the world and save your time, make them efficient and productive. More and more productive. To produce more, consume more, generate more, more, more. Smart technology that we don't understand. Yet the technology wastes your time and sucks out your humanity. Diseased anonymity. The insidious black death of technology and its artificiality. It robs them of their purpose and steals their meaning.

"And they record it all. Always recording. Digital memories created of everything, yet they refuse to live in the moment. Recorded out there, recorded in here. At least we don't have to worry about receiving validation. How mad it all is – they obsess over protecting their data but give themselves away so cheaply.

"It's a sick world, created by sick people whose sickness is selfishness and individualism. Yes, they produce more food, more and more, real food, artificial food, food in abundance. Yet people starve to death. They hydrate their pools and lawns, their animals. Yet still, they let people die of thirst.

"They abandon the frail, the old, the sick. If you don't contribute, you don't exist.

"The grotesqueness of it all is pure poetry. They have access to health and resources in abundance, yet rot in their sedentary lives, knifing and forking themselves to death. Simultaneously creating ever more effective systems of health and cures for disease, remedies to perfect and prolong their lives, whilst lamenting the impacts of the ever-swelling population. They manufacture their concrete worlds, destroying the natural world for the megalopolis, then at the centre of their mass cities, they create nature parks.

"Travelling faster and further but longing for simpler times. Demanding advancement but wishing for the old ways. Now, nothing is real. Everything is curated.

Everything is impermanent. Disposable culture, disposable art, disposable music, disposable people with disposable lives. Disposed of at the tap of a finger. Everything is valueless and comes at the priceless cost of their humanity.

“They download updates to their mindless lives, not thinking of the consequences of their decisions. And who do they decide should make the decisions for them? The greedy, the power-hungry, the wicked. They crave peace but elect warmongers. Warmongers who ravage war on their own people. Build guns and bullets and bombs and destroy everything they wasted their time creating. They devise laws and systems for justice, then happily turn a blind eye to systemic injustice.

“And at the end of all that, here we sit. And you – you tell us that we are the ones who need help. That we must be rehabilitated and conform. Conform to a society of madness. A world of wickedness and sickness. We don’t get rehabilitated to join society; we’re just reshaped to fit its dysfunction. No, no thank you. I’m happy here. And best of all, you, with your assessments and tests and diagnoses and conclusions, you justify it all for us. Your justification for my beliefs: I’m ill. But don’t you see? That’s just your perspective. Your truth. From our point of view, reality looks different. Out there is the madness, the sickness, the risk. In here? Order, structure, peace. You just haven’t realised it yet, but you will. You’ll come to understand. Look behind the mirror.”

His rationality is unnerving. Disconcerting. Misanthropic. Just.

Subject ID 8432-J joins in:

“He’s not wrong. About the mirror. About the cracks.”

He doesn’t elaborate. He doesn’t need to. They all seem to understand his meaning.

"I used to think it was me, too. The sleeplessness. The panic. The days I couldn't move. Then I started watching the news again."

He lets a thought float in the ether. No one laughs. Was it a joke?

"The world doesn't want healing. Just obedience."

Clara is curious.

"You think that is the same as illness?"

"Worse. At least illness is honest. There's no pretending in despair. Out there, they smile while they rot. And in here, they call that progress. When you learn how to rot politely."

He doesn't seem angry. Just tired.

The heating ticks once. A metallic cough from the pipes. It's cold.

"I remember when I thought this place would fix me."
8432-J thinks aloud.

"Maybe it's not me that needs fixing. Now it just feels like a place to rest between... whatever the world is now."

"And what is it?" she asks genuinely.

"A long hallway. Fluorescent lights. No exits. Just more doors that lead to mirrors."

He closes his eyes and breathes through his nose.

2448-Q joins the discussion and seemingly develops the same stream of thought.

“They used to say this was the hospital. I think it’s the last place where people admit they’re sick.”

There is a long pause.

“Maybe when this place closes, no one will notice. Maybe the whole society will just be one big group therapy room... except who would be listening?”

The clock on the wall ticks too loudly now. Silence vibrates.

At this, a man as yet silent, Subject ID 3905-R, leans forward in his chair. He is worn but lucid. He begins.

“They’re right, you know. Think about it. You both sit there with your clipboards, trying to map our minds like a maze, week after week, like we got lost in here somewhere. But no, not me. I didn’t get lost. I was born in the rubble.

“You want to know why I did what I did. But the better question is, why wouldn’t I? When you grow up where I did, it’s just survival, not malice. You think crime is a choice? It’s gravity. Inevitable.”

“You believe you had no control?” She asks with humility.

“Control?” He laughs. “Let me tell you what I didn’t have. I didn’t have clean clothes. I didn’t have breakfast. I didn’t have a safe walk to school, if I went. I didn’t have teachers that gave a damn. What I had was rats in the walls and a mother too far gone to know if I made it home at night.

“What I had was violence like background noise, like traffic. You stop hearing it until it’s in your face. Then you learn to speak its language.

“They say I’m broken. But I know broken. I came from broken. A broken home. Broken schools. Broken promises. Broken glass. And broken bones.”

“One could say that still doesn’t make what you did right?” The thought escapes her mind, aloud.

“I’m not saying it was right. I’m saying it was real. Real like hunger. Real like fear. You ever try to think noble thoughts when your stomach’s empty, the heating’s off, and your mate’s got a knife and says, ‘Let’s go get what they won’t give us’?”

“It’s easy to talk morality from a warm office. But when the world treats you like you’re nothing, sooner or later, you start acting like it. That’s not madness. That’s adaptation.”

Now Sten interjects, his discomfort palpable:

“So, you’re saying society made you do it?”

“No. No, I’m not saying society made me do it. I’m saying... society did everything but do it with my hands. And then it locked me up for obeying the rules it taught me. This isn’t just prison or a hospital or whatever it’s supposed to be – it’s punctuation. A full stop at the end of a sentence I didn’t write.

“You want to diagnose me? Fine. Say I’ve got a disorder. Call it ‘responding rationally to an irrational world.’ Tell your textbooks that.

“We’re not mad. We’re not bad. We’re just the ones who got handed a broken mirror and mistook the reflection for truth.”

He isn’t angry. Just offering his truth, his perspective, his reality.

Sten shuffles awkwardly in his seat; his discomfort increasingly manifest. Sweat beads form. This isn't in the manual.

After a short silence, Clara exhales her thoughts to clear her mind and respond. Yet Sten breaks the silence, reading from the manual...

"Thank you for your contributions. The therapy requires that we continue."

Her head aches. Sometimes she believed in the questions. Other times, like today, they felt like theatre, a script she had inherited and never thought to question until now.

She has always believed in the work. In its truth, in its reality. But lately, she finds that the silence after these sessions lingers longer. Echoes louder. She's begun to wonder if her words are a kind of sedative. Not for them, for herself. As though her thoughts had started pulling at her from the inside. She stared out of windows too long. She forgot the taste of her own coffee. She re-read files not to learn anything, but because she'd started forgetting what she'd already read.

She had found herself plagued by reflections of her sessions. Even dreaming of this place, of being watched. Not by the prisoners, or the staff, but by the walls. Observed and recorded by concrete. Judged by architecture. It wasn't despair. She wasn't falling apart. It is more subtle than that. She is simply beginning to suspect that her role may not be to help anyone, but to quietly bear witness to a machine that no longer remembers why it was built. And perhaps, in doing so, to become part of it.

There was a time when she had believed in the idea of this place, believed in its function.

Rehabilitation, introspection, maybe even its grace. But recently, it all seemed to make less sense. Conversations had started to feel like a loop. The same guilt, the same anger, the same manufactured remorse, the same lack of motivation to change. Today's discussion had been a refreshing change, a lightning rod of clarity, perhaps truth, in the darkness.

As late morning stales into early afternoon, the bright clinical lighting and sterility of her office becomes oppressive and foreshadows a migraine. Evidence-based self-care techniques mandate a mindful walk, perhaps some human contact.

She follows the corridors to the nearest exit, like a free diver thrusting ever upwards on their return from the depths, desperately craving the life sustaining oxygen of the surface.

She surfaces. Forcing a heavy steel exit door open against the howling wind and blusters of rain.

A briny scent hangs in the air. She is high, eighth floor. A small concrete space that resembles a ledge hanging over a crevice, creates a satisfying solitude, and gives a clear view of a mesh fenced, razor-wire loading bay. Like a sniper in his nest, she watches below, unseen, hidden from view. In her cross hairs below, she sees two men in black. To the backdrop of a distant thunder roll, the wind carries up to her a faint beep, beep, beep, followed by a rasping warning siren, that indicates a transport will be entering the loading bay.

The limited security, the shuttle transport. The randomness of the timing. It means only one thing: a prisoner release. She knows the processes well. A second, longer tone sounds out against the gales. Clunks and clanks, metal dragged across concrete, the rattle of keys and chains. The great loading bay door, with its yellow and black

warnings heaves itself open. And from the darkness into the grey, steps the freed, flanked by another two men in black. No ceremony, no goodbyes, simple process.

She instantly recognises the discharged.

A lifeless looking man, short, round, bloated, unhealthy. Broken by decade upon decade of incarceration. He is old. But the wrong kind of old. Too old to restart a life, but not old enough to be in his harmless second childhood. Sweet forgiving death, still too far away. He wears the only clothes he owns, Institution-issue grey. He carries one small blue plastic bag that contains his entire wealth on earth. His red-brown curls and freckles somehow unfriendly, and his wiry beard hiding the shame he carries in his face.

Isak Rowe 4902-S. Condemned long ago for the murder of child when lost in drink and despair, and the fragments of his lost mind. Unfortunately for him, the therapy helped him find the lost fragments. Some say insight is curative, Isak Rowe achieved the kind of insight that blinds you and leaves you wishing that you could lose forever the mind you found. But his is a story of success. Therapy complete, risk reduced, rehabilitation achieved. Treatment and supervision response: effective. Ready to rejoin the masses. To be productive. Ready for release.

Clara knows him well. Too well. For several years her mind was polluted by the horrors he confessed to her. The horrors he suffered, the horrors he perpetrated, the horrors his nightmares punished him with. She listened to it all. She gave herself, gave the therapy, the sacraments. She heard the confession and gave the penance.

Here now, his absolution. Freedom. He is an embodiment of the effectiveness of the system. As he shuffles himself into the transport defeated by his own success she looks on. It would be difficult to explain her emotion to outsiders. There is no victory, no satisfaction,

thankless. Only those who have looked into the eyes of the vessels of death's work and seen the broken child inside might understand. Affection for the lonely, scared and vulnerable; fear and rage at the wickedness. The dialectic of compassion and loathing. She feels nothing.

The ghoulish spectacle of a man condemned a second time, this time to freedom, does nothing to ease her aching head, although the freshness of the cold coastal air brings some anaesthesia. Semi-restored she takes a deep breath, opens the door a free-dives back into to the depths.

As the day limps to a close, her typing-tired fingers, and screen-drained eyes ache. Before crossing the finishing-line of another day she glances over the new-admissions notification on the CSS. A daily alert of all new arrivals scheduled in The Institution the following day. The system decides what is shared. Numbers, names, photographs, Index Offences, diagnoses; a seeming random array of redactions purposely edited. A patchwork of confidential information.

As she reads the list, an unexpected and curiously, perfectly, timed punctuation, distracts. Her solitude is interrupted by a tap at the door.

Rohan Mehta (Health Compliance Officer) X-L-143-22-H9 provides his own invitation smiling.

In the depths, he is a moment of oxygenated relief. He was here before Clara but somehow carries a lightness of spirit that replenishes and restores – a brevity and joy of spirit that either signifies enlightenment or ignorance. She isn't sure.

"I'm off then. A good day. Another good day. We've had a good day."

She smiles at his mask of innocence; she suspects it hides a deeper denial.

“Are you still reading? Come on, let it be. You always stay late, alone. There’s always work to be done. If you finish it, there’ll just be more. Don’t kill the job.” He laughs innocently, to himself, at his own humour.

“I just wanted to review the new admissions for tomorrow before I leave...”

She muses aloud after a short pause, “tell me, Rohan, how do you not carry the weight of this work? Don’t you ever wonder what it’s all for? I admire your levity.” The intent is pure, genuine.

He smiles knowingly, like he truly understands her question.

“Honestly? Carpentry. Carpentry is my salvation. Oh, it’s true. I used to be like you, too serious, too deep. But you can only fight monsters for so long. Now, when I can, I collect driftwood washed up on the shoreline. I carve it into ornaments, furniture, depends on what I find. It’s real. Your hands feel the resistance and yield of each stroke, the vibration of the saw, the smoothness of the sanded edges. The scrape, the knock, the hum. It starts and it finishes, and in the end, there is something real, solid, honest, useful, lasting. It is truth and human in a world of inhumanity.

“This in here? It mattered once. But now they make it nebulous. Insincere. Dishonest. What is it for these days? What does any of it matter anymore? There was a time when it was pure, all about them, the people, the patients. We were all of us carpenters. It was honest, true, we were innocent. Now? Its targets, directives, budgets, diagnoses. Quicker and more dangerous. No, now I do what I must. Then I wash it off.”

His truth. His reality. Enlightened?

She stops. As he recounts his wisdom, she had been half reading the admissions list.

The name: Isak Rowe. The photograph: the known wiry beard and sallow, shame-filled eyes. But the ID: 3333-R. Index Offence: Murder of a child, date given as yesterday. Condition: Narrative Continuity Resistance Disorder (NCRD). Admitted: Wing 18, Sector 6, Level 5, Cell 42.

Her thoughts betrayed by her eyes, Rohan asks, “you know him?”

“I... well... not this ID number, no, but...”

“Looks like someone you know, huh? Maybe it’s a twin. I wouldn’t worry. Happens more than you think.” And with that, he is gone.

Clara sits in the silence, staring at the screen, confused. Dis-ease lingers in the room.

Chapter 4

In the silence of her office, a familiar buzz: 5th
October/17:30 AUTHORISED EMPLOYER
ANNOUNCEMENT – *please be advised your daily
employment duties have now ended (AEA4.4.Inst).*

Rarely did Clara ever leave on time or even close to time. Late evenings in the depths of the labyrinth of The Institution were a regular occurrence. Time to take stock, to think in the quiet. To review files, make notes, plan her sessions. To read, to learn, to improve her craft. She prefers the quiet, these hours in The Institution on the other side of the sunset. Prefers the quiet and calm, the solitude. Without the thrum and bustle of other staff.

At times, she felt with irony that she didn't much like other people. But tonight, she won't stay. Not tonight. Tonight, she is needed. She needs to be there for him. Her only love. Her only companion. He needs her tonight more than ever, perhaps for the final time, and she needs him.

She reverses her process. Powering down screens, extinguishing lights, locking doors. She traverses the maze back to whence she entered, following Ariadne's thread. That which lurks in these dark passages, will wait for another day. Exiting the narrow corridors, down the wide flights of stairs. Exchanging false pleasantries with faces unknown. "Good night", "until tomorrow", another day is done. Unlike those behind the airlocks, great barred doors and magnetic locking zones, she can leave this place. Leave the sterility and clinicalness of it all. Abscond to somewhere real.

The ever-watching eyes, observe her departure. She moves through the queue to take her turn in the glass box. Returns her keys, her alarm, her chains, to the deviant vending machine. She places them in the tube and as they return to their position a blast of antiseptic vaporises the bacteria of the day. Passing through the security green zone,

she is scanned with the rays, the lasers, the lights and the beams. Confident she has removed nothing; she is freed for release. Identity returned.

A clinical “Goodnight Dr Verloren” from the control centre guard. She meanders in the line through the gatehouse and makes her way in the fading light of the evening, back to Parking Zone 3a, where each day begins and ends.

The evening is darkening, and the night is dropping quickly upon them like a shroud. Night feels different by the ocean, blacker.

The clouds swirl like ink in water, blotting out any vestiges of light. The city lights far ahead in the distance glint, their welcoming invitation masking their true threat. Driving out past the furthest outpost of the grounds, exiting the narrow lane that leads to the great entrance of The Institution she enters the desolate wastelands. The nowhere, between the city ahead and the asylum behind.

To her right is nothing. Marshes, remnants of the land reclaimed to build the great prison building between the ocean and the city. Inhospitable, uninhabitable. A boggy quagmire, ready to drag any wanderer deep down to watery end. To her left though, a different sight. A different site.

In the descending night, Clara pauses in the queues of exiting traffic. In the dimly lit distance, she can see a shanty town of sorts, a refugee campsite, the battered tents, the wooden huts with corrugated rooves, all lit by the burning barrels of the homeless. They huddle close for warmth, placeless in a cold world. Here on the outskirts of The Institution they remain. They are known as the *Unsuitables*.

Released from The Institution, sentences completed, disorders treated, rehabilitated. But not reintegrated. Not broken, but just not able. Not able to return to society. No place for them, no-one for them, no meaning, no purpose,

no point. Not people of The Institution but not able to be people of the world, of society. Ghosts. Ghosts of trauma. The twisted madness of modernity, the world of the productive, the capitalist, the false and glamorous, the fake and the curated. The hyper consumers, the buy, buy, buy, post, post, post, update, edit, profile smile. No, they are Unsuitable for that world. But The Institution has done its work. The Personalized Rehabilitation Framework, completed. Disorders done with, risk reduced, punishment served.

They are no longer considered suitable referrals. Unsuitable for here. Unsuitable for there. Creatures of a nothing. They exist in the netherworld of the camp. Seeking asylum from society. Desperate to return to the welcome embrace of The Institution. To the safety, the warmth, the rules, the directives, the order, the care. Many had begged for readmission, many had perpetuated crimes over and over to secure a place inside. But the multiple admissions and multiple treatments received had led the Justices to exile these nowhere people to the nowhere world. Untreatable, perhaps? Or just too well treated?

They would invest no more money on their rehabilitation, they were rehabilitated. Too well.

Asking to be admitted to the madhouse because of your insanity, demonstrates only an awareness that the world is mad and that sanctuary is inside, thus demonstrating your sanity.

You are no longer a suitable admission.

So now they live here. Longing to return to The Institution, banned from it. Unable to exist in society. They exist. Occasionally waving to the workers of The Institution as they come and go. Waiting as endless time passes by.

On she moves. The city rushes by. Racing through the night the lights flash past her. Blur past her. Like spinning

giddily on a fairground ride, carouselling through the night, the bright lights dizzily and drunkenly speeding past her, while the garish ludicrous music nauseates her senses. People laugh, inane hysterics, they shout, they sing, the go about their lives intoxicated and unaware. She feels like an outsider, an invisible spirit trapped between life and the world beyond. She longs to be home tonight.

She opens the door to her apartment. Home to her safety. As it clicks shut behind her a peace fills her heart. Away from the darkness and maddening crowds. Her home is small, compact, perfect for her needs. Warm, softly furnished, dimly lit to her perfection. Clean and ordered in the modern style. Her books and small desk in the corner of her living space the only reminders of the work she leaves by the Ocean.

And there on the sofa, the love she shares this world with, Frank. A lilac British Short Hair. Cashmere soft, plump as a pillow, whiskery and warm. Her old friend and companion through the vicissitudes of life. His love for her expressed through feline indifference has been the stable of her years, for so long. Yet tonight, he almost smiles to see her, his body motionless, conserving all energy for his fight.

Frank is an old boy. His is a life well lived. Loved, full belly, warm, a volume of memories and adventures. He has celebrated with her, been there for tears, the fear and the changes. Always there for so long. But now his race run, his little legs, weary. His body failing. Clara has fought, expended countless hours on research, countless costs on medications, and countless visits to veterinarians and animal hospitals. In the end, time chases all things down. Remorseless. The conqueror of all. The animal doctor had broken her hopes and heart with his clinical prognostics and cruel disinterest.

“He’s old, gall bladder has gone, there’s nothing that can be done. He has a couple of days, a few at best. Time to

start looking for another I'd say. It's just a cat, they're relatively inexpensive these days."

Everything disposable in these times.

Today she was forced away from him, mandated to go to *that* place. Tonight, she will not fail him.

She knows the hours are few and will stay by his side until the end. She sits with him, caressing him gently. The floor about the sofa where he lays resembling a field hospital, blankets, medicines, saucers of milk, water, every imaginable food, healthy, unhealthy, anything that might help. Help him to eat, to drink, to fight. But the battle is lost. Only the final surrender remains. But he is content. His colourful woollen blanket wrapped snugly around his cotton-fluff face. A life well lived.

She nurses him through the night, into the small hours. Only leaving his side to heat tea to sustain her strength and spirits. She sings to him, talks to him, sits in the silence with him. The hours tick by. Quietly Frank drifts in an out of dreamy sleeps.

For fear of her own sleep, and being absent when needed, in moment of quiet and stillness, Clara sits at her small desk whilst Frank snores. She opens her screen and remotely logs into the CSS and ESARS system to occupy her mind. To distract her darkening thoughts and spirits. She scans the messages mindlessly and with disinterest in the demands of tomorrow.

Rarely does she allow the grime of that place to seep into her home. But tonight, any distraction will do. With a foreboding curiosity, she loads up an old case file, just to check, just because... 4902-S.

"Error: File not found," reads the notification. She tries again. Same notification. It's late at night, and she searches by ID number. She knows this number too well,

imprinted into her mind after years of searches, sessions, notes. But presumably now, in the late, late night, with a weary heaviness and tired thoughts, she mistakes it.

She searches by the name she knows so well: Isak Rowe. He is found. Isak Rowe: 3333-R. Index Offence: Murder of a child, date of admission given as last week. Condition: Narrative Continuity Resistance Disorder.

She rubs her furrowed brow and opens the file. No notes. No history. No record. No other files, except for a note indicating that he has been allocated for an initial intake assessment next week with a colleague she doesn't recognise. She searches again. And again. No notes. No files. Years of her records: absent. Nothing archived, nothing hidden. Just not present. They never happened. A new admission.

Tired and confused, the questions can wait until tomorrow. She opens the window to watch the rain fall. She lights a cigarette. The smoke trails evanescently into the night, into the dark. The city rooftops and skyline lay out before her. She soothes her thoughts with more tea. The fresh gusts of air are welcome, and the smell of the rain oddly pleasing. She can't remember a time when it wasn't raining. She remembers the muddy pawprints that Frank would leave behind, the sodden cushions and puddles that would be clues to his mischief. She smiles at the memories.

The rain is slowing, easing in its anger and becoming different, its sound softer, a whisper, a hush. It seems to say, "It is time, but it will be okay." She tosses the cigarette into the wet night, closes the window, and turns to her friend. He stirs, not awake, but not asleep, not long for the night. He needs her now.

In the stillness and the dark, the soft warmth of the glowing lamp at her desk gently illuminates the comfort of the room. The patter of the rain sounds at the window, not harshly as was usual, but gently and kindly now. A choral

background has come to sing a farewell ode to an old friend. She cradles him in her lap, in the soft, warm blanket, as her tears flow in kind with the rain outside. The only goodness, the only innocence and purity in the merciless world.

As the light fades from his eyes and his soft paws twitch, she feels an indescribable ache, something like surrender. The cruelty and unfairness of the world rob her of her only love, her only reason. She doesn't know where souls go when the body lives its last. She doesn't even know if cats have souls, if anything has a soul. It seems too sentimental. These days, she doesn't know anything, and doesn't care.

Death? An intruder. If God exists, she thinks, then death surely must be his mockery of humans. Not a punishment. No, more sadistic. A psychopathic wickedness, to revel in the anguish and agony of the bereaved. What is the point of it all? The futility of living? Daring to love and being tortured by its cruelty. Love? Another cruel trick. The impermanence. All things end, must end. What is the point?

The rain patters softly. As she looks into his fading eyes, something in his innocence forces her heart to heave its love. To defy her nihilism. To endure. And the goodness deep within her pushes back, the goodness that humans once possessed but now is accessed only through primitive love. Maybe the impermanence of it all, the reality that it all will end, maybe that is the point. A moment lived once, lived with love, an ephemeral, temporary moment, can last forever. Such a moment can only be perfect because it is so delicate and fleeting. Each instant is beautiful because it may be the last. None of it has a point; it doesn't need one. To have so little time, to pass through the universe as the dust of a star, to not have a soul but to be a soul – the soul of the universe. She longs to believe, aches to believe. To resist.

His soft, warm body curls in close to her. She holds him in her arms. Face to face, she nuzzles him. His whiskers

tickle. His voice, his final breaths, gently vibrate both of their bodies. Her proud king purrs his last, and the lights of his eyes are dimmed.

“Good night, sweet Frank,” she whispers. The final pieces of her heart shatter and blow away on the wind with his soul. No one is there to hear her sobs.

PART II: DECOMPENSATION

Chapter 5

The following morning, Clara wakes with a heavy head, a heavy heart.

The less than few hours of sleep had only numbed her. Broken fragments of dreams, clocks cycling backwards, losing herself in familiar places, and being trapped rooms of mirrors that confused her with unknown reflections.

Frank lies comfy, swaddled in his blanket, snuggled in his sleeping basket. If she pretends with commitment, he is sleeping. Sleeping for now. Still the relentless indifference of the world, routine and work, demands she must go. Back to *that* place. The world doesn't care for her grief. She must wear her suit, wear her professionalism, wear her mask. The needs of the productive, the needs of The Institution, the needs of the selfish and sick relegate her need for sleep and peace to an insignificant afterthought. She will honour him later. For now, he can sleep. For now, her duties subjugate her needs.

From the same window the world looks different today. After nights like these, things are never the same. Still the wheel turns.

The rain this morning seems friendly. It showers like a garden sprinkler, falling in great waves, but light and gentle. The sun pressing through the cover creates a watery blur. There is a partial rainbow forming that brings a smile to her heart if not her lips. She wants to believe it means something, too perfect to not, it must, please.

A morning coffee and cigarette remain one of the few pleasures of her life. This morning is no different. Still, thoughts of traffic, the strain and the fight ahead, drift around her, encircle her, but she pushes them from her mind, just for now. Just for this one tranquil moment of the day. The silence soothes her. Though usually it is accompanied by gentle purrs and soft fur. His absence is loud. Almost too

much for her to manage today. He's just sleeping she reminds herself, just sleeping.

The city is a grey, dank place, but she likes the morning. Prefers the freshness. It is not unusual that she is up and out early for a morning run, it clears her head, and she enjoys the peace. The city streets, the cool air, subway vents throwing out their heat between the feet of the skyscrapers. She finds a joy in the theatrics of it, like being in a movie. The anonymity of the city can be harsh and unforgiving but, just sometimes, it is her only escape. No running today, at least not for pleasure. Not this morning. The lack of sleep and late night required an extra effort to respond to the alarm clock and now time is pressured. Today there is just time enough to shower, dress and fence with the traffic. A morning of appointments lies before her, on the other side of the city, the other side of the commute, the other side of the entrance processes. The other side of her life.

The relentless buzz of her watch had long since notified her that her *"daily employment duties had commenced"*.

She spends the early morning reviewing the ESARS system and preparing for her first appointment of the day. It is not an appointment that she looks forward to. Garrick Pryce ID 3984-A, is a life sentenced prisoner, scarce possibility of release. He has been detained in secure services, and latterly The Institution, for almost three decades. He has been a long-standing appointment of Clara's for several years.

Garrick Pryce had once been a fisherman on the opposite coast living in a remote fishing village, a loner, a drifter, a victim of a lifetime of familial abuse, humiliation, sexual rejection and failure. He had taken upon himself in a fit of pique to kill a neighbour who had confronted him over a dispute about shared dock space. A particularly brutal knifing – dragging him from a vehicle.

Having disappeared into the ether, this event seemed to trigger a pent-up rage. He had subsequently gone on to kill another five people as he moved throughout the country from coast to coast. Each murder had become successively more brutal and sadistic, with the final two being particularly bloody and ritualistic. As often happens he was caught by following a banal traffic violation. Upon searching his car, part of a dismembered hand was observed, a gruesome trophy he had uncharacteristically retained.

Garrick Pryce was not someone to shy away from his crimes and had openly confessed, almost longing to be detained, to save him from himself and his deteriorating grasp on sanity and reality.

Unfortunately, whilst incarcerated, his deterioration spiralled, and two further disagreements led to particularly brutal revenge killings. His death count ultimately totalling five men and three women. Postmortem sexual offences were suspected in three of the cases however the condition of the remains when ultimately, partially, located, left this grim detail somewhat inconclusive. All that was certain now, was that Garrick Pryce was an extreme high-risk individual who was not fit for any society, despite his recent successful period of relative calm.

Psychologists will often say that how a therapy appointment begins, more often than not, indicates how the remainder of the session will progress. In that vein, she strongly suspects that this will be a challenging hour:

Routine Therapy Session 3984-A

Location: Clinic Room 3

Time: 09:30

Subject ID: 3984-A

Index Offence: Multiple sadistic homicide

Condition: *Affective Nullification Disorder; Recursive Violent Impulse Syndrome; Empathic Resistance Complex; Moral Disjunction Identity Syndrome*
Priority: *Elevated+*

“Good morning, Garrick. Please take a seat.”

“Well, well, here we are again, Dr Verloren.”

“Indeed.”

“You know, of all the people in my life, I feel like I’ve known you the longest. You’re kind of like my wife, you know. I’ve talked to you more than anyone. Told you the most. You know the secrets – in there.” He points to his shaved head and taps his temple sarcastically.

“Now, Garrick, it is true we have worked together for many years, a professional working therapeutic alliance. You understand that suggestions of more are intrusive and unhelpful for us both. May I remind you of appropriate language, as we have discussed before?”

He smirks at her professionalism.

“Oh yes, Clara. Wouldn’t want to violate boundaries, violate you. Would I? That’s how I know you aren’t my wife. You don’t put out.”

She can feel his look upon her. A master of violating.

“This is not helpful, Garrick. Let us stay focused. I see from the weekly log that you have again remained settled. That is very positive. Well done. You have been in long-term segregation for six months now. No incidents. Why do you think that is?”

“Maybe I ran out of people to kill, or maybe I’m being mindful, mediating. Want me to say I found peace?”

“I am not asking for a performance. Just a thought. An honest reflection.”

“There’s no diagnosis I ain’t had. No medications I ain’t taken. No therapy is gonna change me. What’s inside, what’s wrong with me, my psychopathic, sociopathic, schizo-pathic sickness, disease, or whatever it is that all those fancy names the docs give me mean.” He laughs maniacally, then rapidly calms from his pretence. “Oh, come on, doc, lighten up. What do you want me to say? I’ve changed? You and I both know I ain’t mad or bad... well, maybe bad. But we both know I ain’t gonna change. I am who I am. Everyone I have ever killed had it coming. They deserved it. We’ve talked about all this. I’m not a violent man, but don’t push me too far. I’ll react. They knew that. You know that.”

His voice, an exaggerated accent.

She tries to recover from the rocky beginning.

“Well, Garrick, six months of stability is a positive for us to note. With that said, yes, here we are again. May I ask what you took from our last session?”

“Hmm, our last session... yeah, actually, I did think about something you said. After all this time – twenty-eight years of incarceration in these places, after three years of working with you – do I still think I am the same person I was when I came in here?”

“You said that you did believe that, and that you did not wish to be anything or anyone else,” she prompts delicately.

“Yeah, but I knew it wasn’t true when I said it. And I thought about that over and over this week. How am I different? Am I better? No. Am I worse? Maybe. Can I ever come back? I think I’m more dangerous than I ever was. This place, these places, they’ve changed me.”

“Well, that certainly sounds like something we can explore today. I am keen that we progress. Time is, as always, short.”

“I have all the time in the world. I’m not going anywhere.” He laughs derisively, almost mocking her comment.

She lets it pass, shaping her first meaningful question.

“How would you like to use our time today? What would you like my help with?”

“I don’t need any more help. I’ve decided recently. I’ve had all the help I can take. I don’t think, if we are both honest, it has helped much anyway. I’m beyond help.”

She muses on his words and reframes his thought.

“You don’t believe you can change?”

“Maybe I don’t want to change,” he retorts.

“When you make that statement, tell me, what is it that you feel?”

“What do I feel? I feel nothing. Listen, I get it. I’ve sat in this chair long enough. You’re thinking: deep in my unconscious is the rage and grief at my father abusing and then abandoning me. The anger I feel at my mother shacking up with him in the first place, letting him do what he did to us, then being stupid enough to get herself killed by the bastard. Oh, yeah, I know what you’re thinking. The rage and grief make me feel anxious when I dare let it surface, so I project my anger at others, the people I kill. I’m just killing my father over and over. Or maybe my mother. And now when you ask me your stupid fucking questions, you think it makes me anxious, so I just deny any possibility

of change. I psychologically kill myself, my future. How about that? Something like that, Dr Verloren? Am I close?"

She sits in silence for a few moments. "There is likely some truth in what you say," she considers aloud. "But the real defence that prevents you from making meaningful progress is not your denial and projection, it is the resistance to emotional closeness that you hide behind."

He looks angry.

"Emotional closeness. You wanna get emotionally close to me? Do you know how easy it would be for me to get 'emotionally close' to you right now?" His air quotes and perverse smile communicate his meaning with utter clarity.

She doesn't feel fear, but discomfort. Almost pity. A simple push of her alarm and guards would appear like ghosts from nowhere.

"I know what you're thinking," he repeats. She momentarily despises his arrogance. "You're thinking I can't hurt you. You can hit your alarm... maybe. Maybe they get here in time, maybe they don't. Maybe in here you're all right. But out there... out there you would be mine. I could hunt you down like a little pussycat chasing a mouse. Oh yes, Clara, I'll be the pussycat and gobble you up."

Her mind chills at his choice of words. Cheap sexual innuendo or...

"We are evidently becoming distracted. And again, I remind you of the boundaries of this room and this professional alliance." Her exterior remains unphased, despite the welling emotions inside; a proverbial swan: surface grace with thrashing legs.

“It is time, Mr Pryce, that this conversation refocuses on you instead of these avoidant comments.”

“Ah, who cares?” he retorts. “What’s the point? I’m never getting out of here. Probably for the best. Best for you!” He laughs. “I’m a sick and dangerous man; you and I both know it. It would be dangerous for both of us if was ever free.”

She knows it. Indeed, she knows it. *Just keep trying to do the work*, she thinks to herself as the minutes tick away and the session spirals downwards toward its unsatisfying conclusion.

The countless times that Clara has listened to such accounts, threats, deviant narratives, she wouldn’t care to think, to count. Wouldn’t wish to. Each time she seems to build a layer around her fragile self, fragile mind, like wrapping an innocent toy inside layers of black paper. A malevolent party game in reverse. At times, she fantasizes about retirement, thinks of how long it may take to unwrap, to unwind, to reclaim herself. Is that even possible? These words, once heard, cannot be unheard; cannot be forgotten. What prize lies beneath the black paper is not just inaccessible, it is changed. Different. No longer the innocent child’s toy. Maybe not even still there at all. Twice more this morning she must go there, cross the line, and try to return. More hours of sessions still lie ahead for her. In the few minutes’ pause between shelling, she breathes in some light, bathes in it, before going back to the front line.

With her final appointments of the morning survived, Clara follows the administrative processes related to the grim conversations, documenting the appointment with the categories: Time, ID, Name, Location, Type, Clinician, Attendance, Contact Type.

Dull. Repetitive. A system simply designed to ensure it bureaucratically corresponds with the digital recording of the encounter that is automatically uploaded. She detests

admin; it cheapens experience, reduces people and life to numbers and drop-down boxes. Her diligence trumps her will to resist. She fantasizes about disobedience at times. Her professionalism is victorious.

She progresses through the sessions. The contacts. Working backwards from most recent to earliest.

Time: 11:30 – 13:20

ID: 9681-M

Name: YAXLEY, Marten

Location: Clinic Room 2

Type: Intake Assessment

Clinician: Dr. Clara Verloren (Psychologist) X-451-13-B7

Attended: Y

Contact type: Face-to-Face

Copy schedule. Confirm. Save.

And repeat.

Time: 10:30 – 11:20

ID: 1251-C

Name: HALDEN, Raino

Location: Clinic Room 2

Type: Individual Therapy

Clinician: Dr. Clara Verloren (Psychologist) X-451-13-B7

Attended: Y

Contact type: Face-to-Face

Copy schedule. Confirm. Save.

And repeat again.

Time: 09:30 – 10:20

ID: 3984-A

Name: PRYCE, Garrick

<error code / ID not found>

...Irritated. She retypes to correct her mistake.

<error code / ID not found>

The morning has been long. Last night was sleepless. Relentless. Her clouded mind dulled by her heartache.

She searches using the name function:

PRYCE, Garrick.

<error code / ID not found>

Again. Stupid system. Not only pointless duplication, but now inept.

She taps across to the prisoner roll-call list, searching by Secure Wing.

PRYCE, Garrick.

<Found>

There you are.
She taps his details.

<ALERT – prisoner released>

What?

Stupid system.

She almost smiles to herself.

Of all the people who *won't* be being released anytime soon, it is Garrick Pryce.

Psychopathic. Dissocial. Psychotic. Extreme high risk.

She tries again.

<ALERT - prisoner released>

She looks again. Today's date, 11:45. She scans the audit code details below. Order from C/G. She recognises that to mean commissioners/Governor authorised. What? It must be an error.

She picks up the phone on her desk and hits the 'Administration and Authorities Office' speed dial. The office of all facts and information regarding admissions, legal and releases.

"Hullo, AAO," the man's voice answers.

"Good afternoon. Dr Clara Verloren X-451-13-B7. I need a prisoner check please?"

"Name and ID?"

"ID 3984-A. Mr Garrick Pryce"

"Mr Garrick Pryce, ID 3984-A, confirmed released, today's date, 11:45am. C/G authorised". The reply.

"But... what.. I don't ... that's not possible! I saw him this morning. He isn't for release! There must be a mistake"

The professional calm fading to dawning panic.

"Excuse me, miss, there is no mistake. The AAO is correct. I have access to the recording. Do you need it transferred to you?" If irritated, the man's calm voice does not betray him. Phlegmatic.

"No, no, I, no I just, sorry... no wait... yes, can you transfer the recording, I need to clarify something". She asks in desperate hope of mistake or confused error.

“Fine. Send me your authorisation code and password and I will transfer. It should be with you in a few minutes”. Efficient and pragmatic. Protocol followed.

“...Thank you...”

Click. The line drops she feels shaken, confused. It must be an error. Who? Why? How? How would he be released. Surely there was an error. Surely?

A few moments later the file pings. Uploads and opens. Two scenes transferred: One, collecting a small package at ‘Exits and transfers zone 2’, digitally signing and collecting papers. Then a second, there at the familiar loading bay, entering a transport. No mistake. No error. Reality strikes at her with venom. Garrick Pryce gone. Free to walk amongst the world.

A wave of terror and confusion rushes through her. Her mind races to the conversation from earlier today. A heat swells in her chest and a tightness grips her throat. A dizziness comes upon her. She grasps for a bottle of water from her desk drawer and takes a draft. Her thoughts race through pieces of broken glass mirror in her mind. In these days facts twist, and events surprise and shake. Shifting sands and jigsaw puzzles, maddening questions and she doubts the reality of her own perspective.

Clawing back at reality with logic, she resolves. Too many inconsistencies, too many oddities of late.

It is time speak to Dr Riemann.

His office is brightly lit, no natural light from windows, but it has an open glass front, glass door, glass wall. An engraved plaque on the door reads Dr Heinrich Reimann ‘Lead Psychological Officer’. It gives off a strange mix of authority and welcome, like a spider’s web there is an ever-present sense of danger, and those wise enough to avoid the place, will surely live the longest.

Dr Riemann (Lead Psychological Officer and Supervising Case Officer) X-763-62-WH is Clara's direct superior. She has known him many years still he remains an unknown, unreadable. An ally? An enemy? Something unknowable in his persona. A tall slim man, with chocolate slicked back hair and a tidy Freudian beard, the same dark brown but slightly greying. He wears his suit with a professorial air and takes great pride in his role as the psychological power broker of The Institution.

"Dr Verloren," he purrs. "An unexpected, out-of-schedule meeting request, I note?" His voice has a velvet drawl of smoke and steel, measured, deliberate. Each word unfurls like the stroke of a calligrapher's pen, slow and precise. Yet the words are always poured with something somewhere between disdain and threat. A corporate enigma.

"Please, sit. Tell me, Clara, what ails?" His tone is more familiar this time. It only serves to increase her building anxiety.

"Thank you for seeing me, Dr Riemann. I... I appreciate you making the time. I just... it is just that... some things... well, I have some concerns that some things lately have not seemed... consistent." A strange word to use, she thinks, as she hears it leave her lips. But a better phrase does not come to mind.

He sits back, reclining slightly in his chair. It creaks. He breathes, then sighs thoughtfully, steeping his fingers to a point. "Well, this does sound ominous, I must say," he murmurs wryly, with a mildly patronising tone. "Please, do share these... inconsistencies that you have observed. I am listening."

She stumbles through her thoughts and does not do them the justice she wants.

Her clarity of thought lost in her fatigue. The mysterious redactions, blacked-out portions of files and missing photographs. The dizzying array of diagnoses. The increasing lack of information that seems to be shared on referral notes. Why? What is the purpose? Patients report having no knowledge of the rationale for their incarceration. Is it denial? Not uncommon, but then what are offences contrary to Section 1700.4c of the Official Legal Code? If the incarcerated do not know, and no one will tell them – and she does not know – what does it all mean? Then what of those who do not wish for release: those with blinding clarity, who recognise the world for what it is, cold, vacuous, and cruel, and value what they have inside more than what they had outside? Are they mad? Wrong? Insightful? Wise? The perverse paradoxes they live by, the insane sane enough to see the insanity of others. And then, these last few days... Isak Rowe? The missing recording. It makes no sense. And what of this morning? How? How can it come to pass that Garrick Pryce is freed? Ultra-high risk, irredeemable, far from rehabilitated. An impossibility. His laced threats to her. What is the thread, the link, the rationale? Is there one? Does there need to be one? What sense in the senseless?

After listening with intent, he responds calmly. “Very interesting, Clara. Very interesting.” A pause. “May I ask, Clara... you look very tired. All is okay, I trust?”

She is thrown off guard by the deviation. “What... sorry, I mean, yes, yes of course, but... you do not think all this is strange?”

“Well, I must admit to not sharing your pattern of observations. True, electronic systems remain imperfect.”

“I think this is more than a computing error – ”

“I’m sorry, what is it that you want from me, Clara?”

“What do I want? I... I don’t... well, validation?”

He leans forward in his chair, arms folded on his desk and wraps his fingers around his arm. "I'm afraid I cannot validate that which is not valid, this you know."

She is taken aback, wrong-footed. He continues slowly, with faux compassion and a strange sense of knowing her personal world. "You've been under stress lately, Clara. I understand. Tell me, has anything happened at home? Sometimes a loss or personal pain can put us under 'stress', can lead us to overly interpret, distort our cognitions. Our clarity is not always what we would like it to be."

She feels affronted, irritated, angry. But she stands resolute behind her ice-blue eyes. Inside her mind, thoughts flash like passing trains in the night. "All is well, I assure you. I have experienced no stress nor loss," she lies.

"I see." He seems to disbelieve. "If you'll permit me, Clara... how is your relationship with Dr Corven in these times? It hasn't escaped my notice that you are close. She has been more distant lately, no? Distracted somewhat. Has she spoken to you of any doubts that remain on your mind?"

She feels the thread of the conversation unravel and begins to doubt her motives and wisdom in seeking out Dr Riemann. She feels increasingly irritated and searches for a reason to end the fruitless discussion.

"I have no reason to doubt myself, Dr Riemann. But yes, I had a late night with things I had to attend to. As for Dr Corven, I am not sure to what you refer, but I have not seen her in some time.

"These matters are simply enough resolved, pragmatically. I will speak with prisoner Rowe and recheck the recordings. With that said, I have taken enough of your time." She attempts to draw the discussion to a close. Her

suspicious raised rather than reassured, unsure if she is lying to him or herself.

“Indeed. Before you go, may I remind you, with your well-being my only concern, that all of us are wise to ensure we are taking self-care. No one, not even we, the guardians of the mind, are immune from the turbulence of life.”

“I am quite well, but thank you,” she responds flatly.

“It is always possible that we read into things when not needed. We must defend against such distortions.” Then, in somewhat more threatening, laced tones, he draws his thoughts to a less nuanced conclusion. “Clara, you understand how important our work is here. It is fundamental, bigger than us. We are here to do the work: the rehabilitation, the risk reduction. Curative, corrective. Elegant. I need not remind you of the importance of remaining within the therapeutic parameters. Permitted therapies only. Protocols adhered to. Directives followed. It is evidence-based. We have the difficult conversations, we ask the questions that others, those out there, those up there, are too scared to ask, too scared to know the answers to. But even for us, some questions are not for asking. We need not pull at threads that cats would do well to leave alone... Please remember that the process requires that you continue.”

Disquieted, she walks towards the door. Dr Riemann stands and interrupts her exit, arms outstretched, hands on her shoulders. “Remember, Clara, you are my principal.” He smiles disturbingly. Then he draws in close. There is a trace of the once-father figure in his eyes, compassion, as he whispers to her:

“Be careful, Clara, what questions you ask. Please. You wish to be she who divined the famed riddle but be careful what you wish for. You may become the most mighty.”

Her thoughts more confused than before, her dis-ease more unsubstantiated. The strings of her mind more knotted. She returns to her office, where she sits in solitude, in silent protest, in deep contemplation. She opens the file *SPJ: Risk Assessments* and starts to type, desperately seeking order. Waiting for the buzz of her watch notification to release her.

In a sleepwalk, she goes home to honour Frank.

Chapter 6

The weekend had been hard. Harder than she had thought. A sterile appointment with the Animal Crematorium, and box of cardboard containing the ashes of her best friend was the dutiful sad event. She hadn't quite known what to do with the box. She hadn't thought it through. There was no garden, no quiet patch of earth to mark an ending. Frank had always sought the wind, letting it flutter his whiskers, indifferent to everything but the gusts themselves. Perhaps she could take him to the sea and scatter him, release him to a freedom he'd never asked for.

But who can ever know what to do? He had expressed no preference, and she supposed, in a way she couldn't quite articulate, that it didn't matter. She smiled at the thought.

As with all cats, she reflected, he would likely have been indifferent. Contrary, perhaps. Annoyed, almost certainly, by her human insistence on meaning.

Her watch buzzes as usual: *9th October/13:30 AUTHORISED EMPLOYER ANNOUNCEMENT – please be advised your daily 30 minutes employer authorised rest period has concluded. Please recommence your work duties. (AEA2.1.Inst).*

It signalled that her lunch break was over. The irony, she never had any opportunity to take a break, certainly not time enough to eat, save for whatever she could quickly force down at her desk or between appointments and meetings and commitments.

The irritating announcement system had once been bothersome, an irritant, now she largely ignored it. It provided no meaningful assistance, it was simply a function of government authorised notifications, to increase productivity by constantly reminding people of the conditions of their work obligations. It served no purpose

nor benefit beyond that but had a powerful effect of letting people know that they were owned.

Friday lingers. Its residue clings to her mind like static, a low disquiet she can't quite reason away. She tells herself she's tired. Overthinking. Overreacting. Still, something in the pattern unsettles her.

Documents are often redacted, yes. Files disappear, yes. But not like this. Not this frequency, not this silence behind the vanishing. Her thoughts circle. *Surely* the systems are just updating. *Surely*, she's misremembering. Patients deny, deceive, manipulate; always have. The mind deceives too. Perhaps it's hers this time. But then the memory of Dr Riemann returns. She wishes she hadn't gone to see him. Wishes she'd stayed behind her screen, behind the safety of procedure. Instead, she keeps replaying it, the conversation looping endlessly. The kind of recursive torment familiar to anyone who's ever argued and lost, then lived the argument again, perfecting it in hindsight.

And yet there it is, the fragment that returns her to herself: "These matters are easily resolved, pragmatically. I will speak with prisoner Rowe." A provocation at the time. But now, why not? Why *shouldn't* she? Protocol forbids it, of course. No visit without referral, no contact without clearance. But what is clearance, if not a fiction of consent between the powerful and the obedient? Besides, Dr Riemann had replied "Indeed." Tacit enough.

Her resolve begins to harden around the idea. Better not to search for him on ESARS. Less trace, fewer questions. Wing 19, or was it 18? No, 18. Sector... 5? 6? She doubts herself. Only one way to know.

At her office she collects the black leather file, empty save for blank pages, a necessary prop, a symbol of legitimacy. It feels almost theatrical now, this performance of authority. The system demands actors; she has simply accepted her role.

A quick glance at the roster: Otis Merrow, P-976-QS on duty for Wing 18. The institution's obsession with documentation, invasive, suffocating, is for once in her favour.

An impromptu staff meeting reminder flashes on her screen. Today. Time is short. She moves.

The walk to the Secure Wings stretches, long and sterile. Only two nurses cross her path, their pace hurried, almost fleeing. For a moment she imagines they might be prisoners absconding in disguise; a half-thought that makes her smile, then shudder. The danger of how readily reality slips in this place doesn't escape her. So many people, so little presence. Faces she's seen once and never again. Everyone hidden behind walls, glass, procedure.

She used to like it. The silence. The detachment. Now it increasingly gnaws at her, hollowing out the edges of her thoughts.

The main ingress looms. A vast marble chamber, echoing and cold. Black floor, white walls, the symmetry is oppressive in its grandeur. From the centre, doors radiate outward, numbered, seemingly infinite.

At the centre, she sees the clerking desk: circular, elevated, ringed by screens that float above like indifferent eyes. Cameras trace her as she approaches. There is no turning back now. Only one attendant at the desk. Curious.

"Hello", she starts, nervously, working hard to regain her authority. "I require admission to Secure Wing 18; I have a scheduled visit".

"ID please?"

She hands it over. He scans it for authenticity. A pleasing beep confirms her credentials.

“Please fill in this form, Dr Verloren” he responds handing her a small device.

It requires her details, name, assignment, title, department, contact details, reason for visit, authorisation code... she pauses. In her rush, she had forgotten it was a code number, not a name that was required. She hesitates.

“My erm... my authorisation code, six digits...?”

“Yes please” he responds without inflection.

“...erm... if I had forgotten the code?”

“Then I couldn’t allow you in.”

She tries vainly to look like a lost child and feigns a poor memory. “I’ve just been so forgetful lately, and I’m in a hurry, couldn’t I add it later today, I’m sure its back at my office”.

“Listen” he says without looking at her. “It’s usually the first two or three digits of your assignment followed by another randomly generated three or four numbers. Put anything I won’t be adding them to the system until later. Can you return?”

“Yes, of course” she smiles with relief at her fortune: 451...123 she taps in and hands it back.

“Of course, if you don’t bring the real code...” He trails off and points in an upwards motion with his pen “...well, it doesn’t matter, they’ll know you were here...”

Following the sight of his pen with her eyes she looks behind her and upwards, a screen captures the events in real time. The enlarged image of her face looks uncomfortable and guilty. Too late now. She smiles awkwardly.

“Secure Wing 18, behind you to the right Doctor” he nods his head in the direction of the ominous door.

“Thank you,” she nods with false confidence and moves quickly towards the black door.

On the other side of the door, the descent begins. A spiral of steps unwinds into the lower interior. Clara takes each turn slowly, her hand grazing the smooth metal rail, her thoughts louder than her footsteps.

The foyer below is quieter than the one above. Not larger, but somehow more total. More deliberate. The kind of space that seems to have forgotten human presence entirely and yet was designed for it with obsessive precision. Strips of guiding light pulse faintly on the floor, like veins in an artificial body. Everything here functions. Without emotion or pause.

To her left, the glass enclosure of the Nursing Control Station, a transparent barrier that looks both banal and impenetrable. Beyond it lies the deeper sanctum, the Secure Area. She knows this architecture well; she has walked these corridors for years. And yet, every time, it feels like The Institution regards her anew. Not welcoming. Not hostile. Merely aware. Sometimes she wonders if the building is more sentient than its occupants.

She pauses; her breaths are shallow and slow. The silence of the hallway begins to press in, not as absence, but as surveillance. A kind of watching. She reassures herself that it is just the design, the way clean lines and reinforced glass make you feel perpetually visible. But a part of her knows that’s not quite it. It’s the *intentionality* of the place. The system is never neutral. It hums with purpose.

The glass box sits empty. She approaches and presses the call button. Her reflection in the glass meets her gaze: poised, composed, a woman of reason. But beneath the

tailored blouse, beneath the credentials and classifications there's something raw today. She feels it in her chest.

She had come here with a plan. A clear one. Authoritative and justified. She would assert her right to speak with the patient. A pretence of clinical urgency, confidentiality and continuity of care. But already, as she waits for someone to answer the call, her plan feels increasingly fragile.

For a moment, shame touches her, not for the manipulation, but for the fact that she considered it. Could her beauty buy her what her pretence might not? It's not that she believed it would work. Only that she had wondered.

She hears footsteps echo in the corridor beyond and a figure appears. But not what she had expected.

"Sorry" the woman says, her voice is kind but unsentimental. "I was just down the way."

Clara stumbles over her introduction, and the moment seems to fracture in front of her. A name misread, misunderstood, her assumption exposed. Merrow is not the man she imagined, hoped, but a woman with the practical air, and evident years, of someone unlikely to be impressed. Clara's blouse, unbuttoned a little too intentionally, exposes her motivations.

She regathers herself, reaching for her professional veneer, but there is no doubting Merrow's understanding.

"I don't have an authorisation code," Clara admits.

"No code, no visit, I'm afraid," Merrow replies, not cruelly. Just firmly. The machinery of The Institution does not halt for moral urgency or therapeutic instinct.

Clara pleads in vain. But the rules are inertial, and today Merrow is their voice.

She tries a final time. A pause. A softer ask: “just the file”, she says. “If I could just see the file.”

Marrow sighs. Something in her relents, evidently not out of trust, but pity perhaps, or maybe just curiosity. Clara isn't a threat. She's just another cog trying to spin a little faster than the rest.

After a few keystrokes. A few delays. The name appears.

Isak Rowe.

There it is: The familiar face. The beard. Those eyes. But then the words beneath.

Transferred.

Time: 18:25 of last evening.

Destination: Redacted.

Transferred. Without warning. Without record of discussion. The world tilts.

“But I spoke with Dr Riemann...,” Clara says aloud to no one in particular. Or maybe to herself. “That's not possible.”

Marrow only shrugs. “That's what it says.”

Something tightens in Clara's chest. A flicker of panic, of unreality. Not fear of The Institution, but fear of the disjunction – the disconnection between what she knows and what is written. Between what happened and what is recorded. Did it happen?

The file is definitive. And yet, her memory. Two truths, and no way to reconcile them.

Merrow notices her stillness. “Are you okay?”

“I don’t know,” Clara replies.

And more and more of late, she means it.

The boardroom of the Secure Rehabilitation and Psychological Approaches – SRPA – is an architectural riddle, a distorted hexagon that never quite seemed to fit together right.

A table, long and rectangular, stretches like a spine down the centre, flanked by twelve rigid high-backed chairs. At the head, one chair dominates, like a sentinel. Embodying the paradox at the heart of this place: a profession of care built on hierarchy, power, and control.

Psychologists, masters of the mind? Wielders of fragile authority. In this room they speak of empathy and healing, yet power lingers like a shadow, intangible yet heavy. Who among them could deny the seduction of control over the chaos of the self, over others’ fragmented selves? Can power be possessed yet wielded with grace? The constant question Clara asks of herself.

The meeting has been convened on short notice, an edict from the ether. A Directive: nebulous, coded, secretive. The Institution’s machinery spins on need-to-know currents, revealing just enough to keep its functionaries obedient but never whole. Today, Dr Riemann has summoned the twelve, including Clara. To share what? To command what? The questions hover, heavy and unanswered.

She arrives late from her misadventure below. The room already filled, a gathering of stern faces carved from years of solitude and guarded ambition. Clara’s mind drifts, seeing them not as colleagues but as a coven, dark priests in service to an altar of control. The irony doesn’t escape her.

Among the austere assembly, a single beacon, Lorelei. Their eyes meet briefly, a shared flicker of humour amidst the cold ritual. To find a kindred spirit in this grinding machine of productivity and surveillance was, perhaps, the rarest grace. A silent promise that you are not alone.

The gathered coven awaits the beginning. Dr Elen Weisz X-782-42-M3, sharp and steady; Dr Korrin Beck X-193-87-Z6, the newcomer; Dr Alten Halbrecht X-504-29-Z6, a relic of gentler times who still smiled with warmth beneath silver-rimmed spectacles; Dr Juno Strathen X-389-68-N2, the mathematician with quiet brilliance; Dr Isolde Renn X-699-15-D4, a presence both formidable and unreadable. The others remain shadows, unknown variables in this equation of power.

Clara seats herself as Dr Riemann rises. No introductions, no preamble. Just the gravity of expectation and the unspoken command to listen, absorb, obey.

“Welcome,” his voice cuts through the silence, precise, clipped. “We are all assembled. I understand how busy everyone is, so I will be brief. There are matters that require our immediate attention.”

The tension seems to thicken, a taut wire pulled tight. Clara can almost hear the whistle in her mind, like the sound of a kettle approaching the boil. Something was coming, something important, inevitable.

She settles back, bracing herself. The machinery of The Institution was gearing up, and she was caught in its inexorable turn.

“There are a number of matters at hand, but it necessitates that we commence with the new Directive TX-12. It has become increasingly apparent that a new disorder is taking hold within our system. A form of mass psychogenic social contagion that requires our expertise to

address. The Forensic Psychiatric and Psychological Rehabilitation Council – the FPPRC – has, following a rigorous and evidential review, identified this phenomenon as IAD or Institutional Acopia Disorder. A disorder I am certain you will have encountered. You will know it as characterised by people who exhibit the following:” His words are laced with disdain as he reads.

“Four or more of the following over a one-month period:

- A highly developed ability to cope within a forensic or incarcerated setting
- An over acceptance of incarcerated or forensic settings
- An over acceptance of legal conditions contrary to liberty
- Overly successful engagement with remediation efforts
- Distrust of non-incarcerated or non-forensic settings
- Raises doubt or aspersions regarding the nature, order or conditions of non-forensic or non-incarcerated settings
- Raises doubts or aspersions regarding normative assumption of social order
- Expresses preference or desire for ongoing detention”

As he reads, obsequious nods ripple through the room, sanctimonious murmurs following in their wake. Approval spreads easily, too easily. Not all join in. A few avert their eyes, uneasy. Yet the chorus of validation swells, learned professionals embracing this spontaneous new diagnosis without question.

The kettle begins to boil. Dissent flickers, stifled behind polite smiles and folded hands. Anxiety manifests in small betrayals, twitches, shuffles, a cough swallowed too

late. But who would oppose? This is the new science. The new order. Compliance is directive.

Then, a voice. Soft at first, but steady.

“Wait... I’m sorry? You’re saying that those who cope well with the system, who dare to question the world outside, are now to be diagnosed with something called *Institutional Acopia Disorder*? Is that correct?”

Of all those who might have spoken, Clara never expected Lorelei. Yet lately she has been distant, restless, searching. Clara understands that feeling. The unease. The absurdity pressing at the edges of sense.

“Please, contain your emotions, Dr Corven,” says Dr Riemann, his tone whisky smooth. “Who among us does not recognise this psychological phenomenon?” His voice carries weight; heads nod almost on reflex.

The newer faces fall quickly into line. Dr Isolde Renn, ever attuned to politics, follows suit. The others shift in their seats. Clara remains motionless.

“Indeed, Dr Verloren,” he continues, “were you not discussing this very subject in my office yesterday?”

A cruel barb, perfectly aimed.

She falters. “I... well, that’s not entirely accurate, it was only – ”

“Thank you,” he cuts in, smiling.

“No,” she says, louder now. “No. This is wrong. It’s madness.” Her voice trembles but does not break.

“We’re diagnosing people for coping with this place. The patients, some of them are right, we’ve lost our way. Out there, society is coming apart. We see only symptoms,

never causes. To help isn't to force conformity to dysfunction. Surely? *Surely?* Clara, you can't agree with this!"

Clara's heart hammers. Every fibre in her screams *stand with her*, but she stays still. Frozen.

"That will do, Dr Corven," Riemann snaps. "Enough. It's clear this subject touches a nerve. Perhaps your reflections would be better explored in supervision."

"I don't need supervision for having a conscience," Lorelei fires back. "Look at yourselves! You know this is wrong. This silence, this... pluralistic ignorance... it's shameful."

Clara's hands tremble beneath the table. She doesn't cannot move.

"I suggest," Dr Riemann says, voice tightening, "that you take a moment outside."

Lorelei exhales, shoulders squared. "Remember this. All of this is a fiction. Who needs a hospital when the world itself is mad? We don't lock the madness away, it's everywhere. We're part of it." Her voice catches. "One and the same." She turns and walks out.

Silence. It expands until it fills the room. Clara longs to run after her, but her courage fails. Around her, faces bow to the floor. No one meets another's eyes.

"Let us continue," Dr Riemann says at last, resuming his measured cadence. "An assessment template and diagnostic formula have been devised. A treatment protocol follows. You are all expected to demonstrate competency in its application. If there are no further concerns, we have work to do."

The indoctrination resumes.

Chapter 7

In the quiet solitude of her office, Clara sits down at her desk. Takes a breath and draws long from the polystyrene coffee cup.

Her mind paces through the events of yesterday. For now, though, the boulder she rolls back up the hill is yet another risk assessment. Doubts weigh heavy at the futility. Such depth, such length, such detail. Is there value? She self-corrects, she's doing the work, it matters. It must? She clings to the words: *Structure* and *Judgment* like life-rafts on the ocean.

The morning passed deep in review of the manualised treatment programme provided. Her duty now is to identify suitable victims to be exposed to the cure. Those with the newly categorised IAD. Her head aches from the dense text and psycho-psychiatric verbiage. In time passed it may have impassioned her, excited her mind. Lately something feels - less convincing.

Twenty-four hours have passed since the fractious meeting of the coven. Or rather the fractious beginning. The remainder having progressed in compliance. Those present had accepted the Directive, the instructions, without question, without concern. Were they believers? Was she a believer?

Certainly, her surrender had been total. Dr Riemann had outlined the categorisations, the disorder, the convincing data. Prevalence, aetiology, narrative case studies illustrating development, trajectory and impact on rehabilitation outcomes. She had surrendered to the new science, the Revelation. The remarkable clarity and weight of research amassed felt less like illumination and more like a void, an unsettling expanse of certainty that threatened to erase doubt itself. In-credible, she thought, but how? The rapidity of accumulation was dizzying, almost cruel in its speed. Yet, the only thing more meticulously assembled was

the treatment manual, the sacred scripture of reduction and control. Voluminous tomes outlining prescribed pathways to diminish suffering, instructions to recalibrate the mind's faltering machinery. Outcome measures, rigid parameters, the cold logic of internal consistency, test-retest reliability, inter-rater agreement, construct validity. Words that promised stability in an unstable world.

Who had authored this architecture of order? When had this relentless pursuit of mastery begun? Decades spent sculpting tools to tame the chaos within. And yet, as Clara's eyes traced the dense texts and layered attachments, an insidious fog of dis-ease settled in her chest, a quiet paranoia, not of others, but of the system itself. A miasma that whispered: What if this certainty is but another mask for the unknowable?

In her cold dread, her mind drifts back to the meeting. Lorelei had temporarily stepped out to calm, take some air, at Dr Riemann's 'request'. She didn't return.

Clara had not slept well. In that moment she observes herself turning and twisting the strands of her long ice-blonde hair between her fingers, a child within calling to her, needing reassurance. There is, however, no hiding, no shielding from the emotions that rise from the well. It overflows and she feels herself choking, drowning in her shame, in her guilt. Why sit as the ignominious bystander in Lorelei's moment of need? She doesn't understand her own paralysis.

Guilt and shame. Two mysterious and treacherous allies in the destruction of the self. She reads deeply into her own mind and mental library of psychological understanding. *The reflection on one's behaviour and the perception of it falling short of a self-imposed moral standard engenders in the actor the sense of guilt* – she reminds herself formulaically.

She tries desperately to understand her emotions. *I did something bad, I am bad.* Is it shame then that she feels? Her mind drifts, certainly she stared through the keyhole yesterday, the guilt was her personal experience to own. But the fact that the others observed her staring, leaves her shamed.

She knows, she should have stood alongside Lorelei. The shame burns. But shame of something more? To be seen, to be known by the others. To be known by *her*? She twists herself in knots and the child inside is pulled towards tears.

Lorelei has not taken her call, not returned her messages. She knows she must move beyond the cowardly approaches. Go to her. It feels too forced, too formal. She has one final recourse, to stage a natural encounter, or something that might pass for one. Even better, it involves cigarettes. A small peace offering, or perhaps an excuse for stillness. Ideal. To the roof. If nothing else, she will sit there and let the afternoon dissolve, smoke curling into the indifferent sky

The cold winds bring ocean spray across the bay. Clouds hang low and heavy as is usual. She can't recall the last time the sun warmed her face. Now she is just cold. She draws long from her fourth cigarette, here in their special place, the quiet place only they visit. She has lost track of how long she has waited. Hours? *Her* routine cigarette break, untaken.

She sits alone looking out across the grey skies towards the distant sea. Is she angry? Avoiding her? Hurting? There are few things more discomforting than an apology unable to be given, regret unexpressed and explanation unoffered. Especially to a friend. Guilt. Its appetite is insatiable. It eats those who feel it with authenticity. She waits. She is devoured.

Time, in its characteristically unforgiving relentlessness, ticks on. Always forwards. That's the thing with time. The cold bites at what remains of her and her will begins to break. Possible that Lorelei is not in work, unlikely, but possible?

The machinery below her grinds continually, the oppressive weight of The Institution is always there. Directive 1R, long instituted, forbids workers to develop or sustain social relationships outside of the system. Impossible to speak to her. She has courage and would disobey with abandon now, but impossible, she had always followed the Directives and lacks even the possibility of knowing how or where to find her. She curses her obedience.

Her mind dances in the wind, thoughts buffeted by the gales. What of those comments? IAD? Directive TX-12? What sense? Pluralistic ignorance? A system diseased? Her mind wanders to the camp outside institution, the Unsuitables. What of their madness? Their sanity? Sense or senseless? What of society that lies beyond? Who are the diseased, the sick? What psychosis, what neurosis leads them to live as they do? The questions swirl around her tired head and press down heavy on her flailing mind. She is not coming. She knows it. Just five more minutes? She tries to convince herself. There is tomorrow. She will try again. For now, the warmth of her office summons her back. There is always work to be done.

The Corridors leading to her office are even quieter than usual. She makes her way back to her small sanctuary. The sterile hum broken only by the distant hiss of the ventilation system and the thrum and click of lighting. She sits alone, as always, in the small room, a new intake of patient files waiting in her inbox. They stare at her like accusations. She doesn't know who sends them, but they always arrive. Work to be done despite her meandering thoughts. She longs to delete them, pretend they don't exist, pretend this place no longer exists. Just for a moment. The

monotony of monthly audits, routine, clinical, procedural. But nothing feels that way lately. She opens the first file with reluctance. Unease stirs, not from any dramatic cause, but something subtler: the weight of anticipation without a name. It isn't until she opens the folders that she understands why.

She scans the files under the flicker of the overhead fluorescents, each page a graveyard of blacked-out lines and missing names. More redactions. Less clarity. The 'need to know' reduced to nothing needed. Nothing to know. The typeface not merely censoring, it was erasing, rewriting the narrative into something sterile and incomplete. Diagnoses had no origin, symptoms hung without context, and entire histories vanished into voids where truth should have lived. She doesn't know why the records have been altered, she doesn't need to know. The silence around it feels engineered. It's not unusual, not without precedent. Just more. But now, this time, not the standard veil of confidentiality; something colder, calculated. Perhaps? The absences speak louder than the information that remains, and with each file she opens, a quiet paranoia begins to coil in her chest, not about the patients, but about the system that has written them out of their own stories.

Her mind is a maze of fragmented thoughts, each one echoing louder than the last; the questions come in waves, disjointed, insistent, like static in a broken radio, white noise, until her head pulses with a pressure that feels diagnostic, not emotional.

Time ticks onwards, always ticking onwards. The files must wait, her next appointment is urgent, it looms. She looks through blurred and mirrored eyes at this specific case file. Who is the patient that needs her now? There is no name. There is no photo. There is no known diagnosis. The ID is not listed but she knows it well. The therapy requires that she continue, and the patient needs her. Their mind is unravelling.

She takes her seat, like so many times before. A thousand thoughts circle in her mind and her focus is blurred and lacks its usual precision and clarity. She must continue despite the distractions of her emotions. The thoughts continue to arrive like trains one after the other and she sits at the station unsure whether to board them to who knows where. In truth she fears where they might take her now. Things just seem different, less real. Her head spins with questions and she tries to shake them away. She needs to focus on the work. The patient with no face, no name, will soon be here. Is already here. She owes this one the best of herself. Her mind twists thoughts and reflections in knots, she seeks clarity and sense, space from the uncertainty. A search for something.

Time to begin. The audio recording clicks into life. Static.

Session: *Unspecified*

Location: *Clinic Room 3*

Time: *15:00*

Subject ID:

Index Offence: *Unspecified*

Condition: *Unspecified*

Priority: *High*

“Good afternoon”. She begins “Please. Sit”. The chair creaks

“Thank you”.

“I must confess, I am pleased that you have chosen to engage in these discussions. I understand it has been difficult for you to reach this point.” She continues.

“All things considered I do believe that you are looking well today. Calmer. If not clearer?”

“Despite the confusion. I suppose it could be considered progress”.

“Indeed. That is a positive way to frame it.”

“Yes. Before we begin, I want to remind you: nothing you say will leave this room. It is important that you understand that this is a safe space”.

“A safe space?”

“Indeed”. There is a pause. Static. The air hums faintly.

“Do you remember why you are here?”

...

“No.”

“Perhaps not”.

“Sometimes it is difficult to remember such things. Such truths, sometimes we do not wish to remember. It is easier not to pull at the threads”.

“But yes. If you think deeply, that’s right”.

“You *chose* to come. It was, is, your choice to be here”.

“Yes”.

“You said you wanted to get better. To make things better”.

“Perhaps”.

“Perhaps you are not sure who for anymore? Perhaps you see it as your penance. Something you have no choice over.”

“How can anyone be sure anymore?”

“I understand. You said that you thought that you could not trust yourself anymore”.

“How can anyone trust anyone, trust anything anymore?”

“Indeed”.

“But you recall? You said the horror, the hurt was not the worst part, not really – it was what came after”.

“The silence”.

“The waiting”.

“The questioning”.

“The forgetting”.

“The remembering”.

“The inability to forget”.

A long exhale and a deep pause follow. Truth is never found in questions, nor in answers. Truth is only found in the silence between questions. The space between. At the bottom of the well.

...

“You remember now, don’t you?”

A Longer pause ensues.

“It’s all right. Take your time.”

“You told me about the girl.”

“How she looked at you. Like a reflection?”

“How you didn’t speak.”

“How you wished she had.”

“You said that meant something”.

“But when she called out the silence held a fracture”

“She just surrendered.”

“She was afraid”.

“Yes.”

“But I don't think that's true.”

“I think you made that up.”

Her voice, low and steady.

“She did not surrender, you sacrificed her.”

“You took what she had and sacrificed her. And for what?”

“You want there to have been a reason. For it all to have meant something. But perhaps it was senseless. And that is what you fear the most. That there is no reason. That it was meaningless. And now there is no way back for you. You are irredeemable and you want someone, something else to blame.”

“Yes.”

“So, a system to blame? Someone else?”

“But there is not, or is there?”

“It was just you.”

“Just a choice. A choice you cannot help but repeat day after day.”

“Too tired to continue, but too scared to change.”

“You go along with what they say. What they ask. Even though you have stopped believing.”

“Just a door you opened and never closed.”

The Silence pounds.

“And then when *she* stood alone on the edge, desperate for a hand that never came, you were afraid to be seen.”

“You fear the truth. The truth of your feelings”.

“Yes”.

“You nod, but you do not feel it.”

“Or do you?”

“I know.”

“I nod, too”.

“Every time.”

“Acquiesce”

She whispers now, a shift in tone, gentle, almost childlike:

“Is this helping?”

“Do you feel better after we talk?”

...

“No.”

“Me neither.”

Pause. Then, slowly:

“But we will keep doing it”.

“Until you feel it”

“Until one of us disappears.”

The static crackles and the recording ends with a gentle click.

Chapter 8

The rain patters at the window, stitching a soft rhythm against the pane. A lullaby from the waking world. It is dark, warm, soft. The kind of almost-perfect moment that can only be enjoyed when there is nowhere to go, nowhere to be, nothing to do.

Beneath layers of warmth, her bed is a hushed sanctuary, where time thins and the urgency of the day fades to a distant murmur. The cold outside whispers at the chilled glass, but inside the womb of stillness, safe, calm, the scent of sleep lingering. The weight of the blankets like a gentle caress saying: not yet. Perfection missing only the hush of Frank's velvet body.

Buzz.

...

Buzz...

...

What breaks the stillness?

...

11th October/07:30 AUTHORISED EMPLOYER ANNOUNCEMENT – please be advised this is your 30-minute employment preparation notification. Your work duties are scheduled to commence at 08:00. Please make arrangements to ensure prompt attendance. (AEAI.Inst)

“What?!”

Immediate and cruel, adrenaline and panic pounds at her from the inside.

She sits bolt up, yanked upwards from her slumber like a puppet on strings. How? The basest trick of time. Harsh, unfair, cruel. To oversleep on a workday. But how? Flooding the room with artificial brightness, she notes her alarm clock. Stopped. The wall clock. Stopped. The screen clock stopped. All read the same time. 00:01am. How?

Her wristwatch has unkindly kept the score. Or perhaps fortunately. Thirty minutes to be ready, cross the city, arrive at The Institution, crawl through security. Impossible. Not even worth it to try. She puts her head in her hands and accepts defeat.

The bathroom is a shrine of steam as the world beyond the glass fades into silence. Outside, the morning bites, a brittle kind of cold today, that clings to the windowpanes. But within the steamy fog, time softens. She feels no rush, even though the minutes march forwards. Sometimes radical acceptance of the situation is all that is left. The hot water pours over her shoulders, chasing the questions away and bringing momentary peace. Each droplet a tiny benediction. For a moment nothing exists but heat, steam and the muted drumming of water, a hypnotic baptism, not of faith but comfort. But such solace can only be temporary, it is not made for this world. A moment that vanished in the steam. Her mind wanders ahead to the excuses she'll make if asked of her tardiness. But in truth she barely cares.

Again: 11th October/08:00 *AUTHORISED EMPLOYER ANNOUNCEMENT – please be advised your daily employment duties have commenced (AEA2.Inst)*

... They should have. They have not. At least not for Clara.

Traversing the city is an often unpleasant affair. Surrounded on all sides. A claustrophobic suffocation of vehicles encapsulating her, great buildings reaching up to the skies, staring down at her. Insignificant and fragile.

She feels a strange sense of déjà vu, although shakes it away as just the repetitive monotony of the same daily journey. As the radio flitters its banalities something feels different. The rhythm of the traffic plays a different melody. The road is the same, or so it claims. The buildings still stand to attention in their ranks. The trees hold the same tilt in the wind, and the streets bear the familiar scuffs of the

morning haste. But an hour's drift has unstitched the pattern. Faces change. The jogging woman has long since jogged, replaced by a man whistling into his coffee steam. The men in suits have vanished, in their place, meandering bleary eyed school children. Shadows slant differently; the light falls with less urgency. What was usual routine has slipped into a new parallel. The same but different.

The same commute but seen through a different keyhole.

The greying morning clouds drift aimlessly above. As she nears the approach to The Institution, her resolve steels, she prepares her mask of sanity. Thoughts of home, and her own softness fade, replaced by the necessary fortitude and professional persona that are required to play her role.

Still the skies grey, becoming darker. A grey and black not accounted for by weather. Then through the ventilation an acrid taste in the air. The bitter smell of smoke. Across the horizon, the grey and black is tinged with amber. Turning the corner to follow the grand concourse towards The Institution she sees the blaze. Still burning brightly amongst the plumes and bellows of smoke clouds funnelling upwards. Too close, too small to be The Institution. The camp?

The refugee camp of the Unsuitables. It has evidently been burning for some time. The shanty town shacks, corrugated roofs and wooden structures, mixed with the cacophony of dirty tents and steel drums – all alight. All gone. Unsavable. And as for the poor wretches, their meagre possessions and place in the world, gone, or going. They stand like ghosted silhouettes against the backdrop of the flames, some scurrying back and forth, some have simply given up, resigned to cruel fortune. Others wander amongst the rows of vehicles that crawl towards The Institution in single file.

As she creeps forward looking aghast at the flames, she sees more chaos and disorder closer to The Institution, as half-people try to force entry at the main gates, pushed back with negligent ease by heavily armed guards. The volume increases as she nears. Squadrons of Fire Officers and the Forces of Order visible. They do as they must though with a lacklustre of effort. The scene hellish and gruesome in part, charred bodies. Victims in situ in the remains of vanquished huts and tents. Somewhere a dog is barking. She is hypnotised by the scene.

A loud thud at the passenger window scares her from her daydream, her nightmare.

A bedraggled half person stands in charred rags. Frenetic at her window. "This is the beginning of the end! See what they've done! It wasn't meant to last!" Immediately a large figure in black yanks him away. Pushes him backwards towards the burning embers. Another figure in black appears at her window:

"Keep moving, keep moving. You're here for The Institution? Stay to the left, you'll be directed. Keep moving". She obeys without comment.

Focusing forward on the road in the queuing traffic proves difficult, arched necks and mirror gazers trying to view the chaos.

Interruptions from the sleepwalking destitute, traumatised by their loss. She follows the directions of masked men, faceless, beneath a small archway and follows a narrow roadway. The scene burns in her senses. A kind of un-realness at observing tragedy from safety. Guilt and revulsion pressing at her from all sides. Fate stealing again from those with the least. Or is it more than fate?

She pulls into a crowded concrete square. The sign reads 'Rehabilitation Facility Parking Zone 5'. She has never been here before, but then she is rarely ever late. The

chaos of the fire has twisted the routine of reality even further.

She follows her process, from a new angle. Makes her way through those vast metal gates crowned with razor wire. The pillars of black smoke pluming upwards in spirals into the gently precipitating sky. The smell is hostile now, angry. It hangs in the air and embers flutter on the wind drifting upwards towards The Institution. Her hair already soaking up the smells of the grim bonfire. She makes her way through the queues, to the gatehouse, to submission and takes her place in line to be processed. The guard, an unfamiliar face, looks at her unflinchingly.

“What happened?” she asks, pressured and forthright.

He shrugs nonchalantly. “A fire.” Unhelpful.

“But how? What happened? It’s terrible?”

“Who knows? It was only a matter of time, all those people, those drums they light, the tents and sheds. Not a surprise. Maybe someone got drunk, knocked a barrel over. They’re packed in it wouldn’t take long.”

“It can’t have been an accident, its total. It’s too big to be a small accident surely?”

“I don’t know.” He says in annoyance at her questions.

“But the people? People have died, I saw bodies. What will happen? Where will they all go?”

“I don’t know” he says again. “Who cares? They’re not coming in here. Look, they’re just a bunch of crazy people. Ex-cons who won’t work, can’t work. They can remove all that mess now, close it down, make things right. Better this way, easier.”

In her search for restitution her mind drifts back to her father. He was a good man, honest, decent, hardworking, loving, kindly. He had worked in a Lithium Processing Plant for most of his life until AI and automation had taken his place in the world. One system that did the work of a hundred men. A simple enough story. He had taken his own life within a year of the end. But in that year, he had become obsessive over the details, the insignificant, the order. Lining up drinking glasses, folding tea towels, arranging cutlery drawers. Personality changed to intemperate, prone to fits of uncharacteristic anger. What use to dwell on it now? She moves on from the thought briskly. Not because she doesn't feel it. Not because she's found peace, nor because she's resigned herself to futility. No – she moves on because there is a kind of pain too deep for thought, too vast for words. A pain only the human heart can carry – raw, engulfing, unspeakable. The kind that lives somewhere between desperate rage and oblivion. To dwell there would be to unravel. And so, she doesn't. She moves on. But now in her own moment of chaos, she recognises the need for structure – she sets to old routines – the weekly ritual of selecting material to re-watch, re-listen, re-experience. The Structured Risk Assessments to complete. The standard protocol, the process she follows, this she knows.

She opens the file and sets to review her recordings. Comfort in the familiar drill of therapeutic improvement. Later today she will see him: Isa Dexin 7892-Y. Another who claims to not know why he is detained. Why? Does it even matter anymore?

She has two hours until the appointment. Time enough to review the recordings, make notes, organise her thoughts and plan her session. She loads up the file:

Session: 1

Location: Clinic Room 3

Time: 16:00

Subject ID: 7892-Y

Index Offence: Offences contrary to Section 1700.4c of the Official Legal Code [OLC]

Condition: Defiance Spectrum Instability Disorder (DSID)

Priority: Routine

Recording starts: 00:00:02

She considers it with conscience. Defiance Spectrum Instability Disorder: A common enough condition characterized by "persistent, irrational questioning of authority, social norms, or official narratives."

Four times they met, four hours of assessment and therapeutic conversation. She's had little recourse to question the applicability of such psychogenesis, such diagnostic specificity. Offences contrary to Section 1700.4c of the Official Legal Code [OLC]. A fog covers the clarity of her mind and through the misty haze formless shapes drift in and out of focus.

Perhaps if she just looks a little longer. Stares a little longer into the abyss.

She taps through the numbered files of sessions one to four. Time in abundance to review and reflect, calm her mind, sharpen her focus and take the mornings events from off centre stage.

File ESARS-P-7892-Y/21/1/video

<error code AB1>

Confused. A little irritated. What does that mean... again...? She perseveres.

<audio file found> ...?

No video. Something has gone wrong. She realises quickly only the audio is available of the session. Her irritation swells, but still useable. she taps play.

.... Static, a crackle. A hush and a background fuzz, a few pops and then – nothing. She skips ahead minutes at a time. Still nothing. The file corrupted. Exasperation hits her. She knows the file *was* there. Yet now? No more. A thought lights her up. The other files.

File ESARS-P7892-Y/22/2/video

<error code AB1>

Again, the same white noise. Static, crackle, hush. Deleted? Blank? Recorded over? Wiped? It doesn't matter, it's not there.

File ESARS-P7892-Y/33/23 video

<error code AB1>

The pattern repeats. There are times in crisis where panic takes over, frenetic actions follow a hyperactivity of thought. But that is not today. Not now. Resignation, close to defeat grips Clara. Not worth opening file four, but she does so regardless.

File ESARS-P7892-Y/44/44 video

<error code AB1>

Nothing. Her overthrow complete.

The infallibility of the System proven corruptible. Records gone? Where? Why?

The jigsaw of possibilities lies fragmented at her feet. Too tired to ask more questions, bored of herself and her endless thoughts. Her inquisitive resistance almost broken.

She hesitates, gathering what resolve remains, and decides to seek a colleague. Some other consciousness who might confirm that the world itself still functions. Perhaps the fire has spread beyond her reach, unravelling systems both visible and unseen. The thought barely takes shape before she dismisses it; belief feels foreign now, a language she's forgotten.

Kneeling, she begins to search for the corner pieces, trying to build a frame, some boundary against the chaos. But the pieces are smooth, unending – as if the idea of an edge no longer exists.

She calls upon the office of Dr Alten Halbrecht X-504-29-Z6. The only person she still has faith in here. A decent man. He had been here when she arrived. Clara has always admired him, professionally, but something in his kindly nature and throaty voice has always made her feel safe. In truth, in difficult times he had been something of a father figure to her. She recalls how he had helped her when she first came to The Institution. To find her place in the vast machine. He is sitting at his desk, polishing a small silver ornament. He had always been a little eccentric:

“Dr Verloren, a sight for sore eyes!” He smiles. “What brings you down here?”

“It's been a strange day.” She opens. “The fire?”

“Ah yes, a terrible thing. I hear from one of my patients that there was a commotion in the early hours. The fire seemed to flare up dramatically from nowhere. Curious the extent of it given how little there is to burn.”

If anything is curious, it is how the inmates know so much of external affairs. It was ever thus.

“It seems unnatural, no accident.”

“Indeed. I have long stopped believing in accidents and coincidences” he replies with a slow shake of his wizened head.

“Something else.” She adds, “Have you noticed problems with the Systems today?”

“No”

“A number of files, recordings of mine have, well, I don’t know, they’ve vanished. Perhaps deleted. I wondered, hoped, there might be wider problems”.

“I cannot say I have noticed, I’m afraid. Perhaps an anomaly? These things happen more often than you think.”

“Sorry?” She catches his final words.

“Just technology I mean. An inscrutable thing for the older gentleman to concern himself with.” He smiles and laughs in a soft kindly manner. She feels irritated.

“Right. I won’t disturb you any longer then,” she smiles in a gentle manner. “One last thing, Dr Corven? Have you seen her? I haven’t heard from her since the – well, since the meeting?”

“The meeting?” He looks blank.

“Yes, when she left?”

He shakes his head. “I don’t recall. In truth I haven’t seen Dr Corven for some time. She still works here?”

“What? Yes, of course.”

He shrugs, “then she must be here”.

Clara is disconcerted; she makes her excuses and leaves him to his polishing.

Her afternoon has been as long as the morning.

For fortune, the appointment with Isa Dexin unfolded without deviation, progressing as expected. Almost monotonous. The recording present and correct. Visual and audio.

The missing recordings have left her off balance though. She contemplates a return to a personal system. To the old ways. Clara takes a brown note-book from her desk. Its touch smooth, real, grounded in an earthly reality that the artificial classlessness of technology cannot emulate. She opens the volume of blank pages, takes her trusted silver fountain pen and inks the date. Truth. Real.

Tangible. Touchable.

Perhaps she will keep her own diary of events, appointments, curiosities. A second private account, beyond the reach and view of the all knowing, all seeing Systems. It is of course not permitted. Directive P12 states that no paper records or private files or records may be kept separately. But she needs it. She needs it to stay oriented. An island of honesty in the dishonest falsity.

As she writes her reflections, an urgent rap sounds at the door. *What now?*

“Dr Verloren?”

“Yes?”

Pushing her way through the office door uninvited is a bulldog of a woman, short, squat, sharply bobbed, and functionary-looking.

“Edith Clemm, A-1100. Administrative Clerking Officer,” she announces.

“What can I do for you, Ms Clemm?” Clara asks, trying to sound as though she is still capable of tolerating anything, or anyone, more today.

“Dr Verloren, as you know, the Rehabilitation Adjudication Board and the Reintegration Authorisation Committee – the RAB and RAC – require your risk assessments and reports to be submitted on a weekly basis, as per Directive R97. Each Friday by 17:00. It is essential.”

“Yes, I’m well aware. And? Are you here to tell me it’s changing?”

“No, Dr Verloren. I’m here to tell you that we have not received any of your reports for three weeks, and you have not responded to our requests.”

“That’s not so. I have never missed a deadline. They are sent as routine, I receive the receipt notifications. You must be mistaken.”

“I’m quite sure there is no error on our behalf,” she retorts in her clipped, bullish tone.

Clara flushes, turns her screen toward the intruder, and shows the evidence.

As they both stare at the screen, small red alert icons listed beside her reports for the past three weeks glare back at them. Each reads: *File flagged as unsent. Urgent action required.*

“You see Dr Verloren? Unsent. Fortunately for you, I can see they have been prepared, so please forward them immediately. And please see that this does not happen again.”

“Thank you. And please address our future correspondence promptly, Dr Verloren. If documents are not received, the system will soon slow. You are a cog in

the machine, as we all are. If a part fails, the whole will fail. We must not fail. I'm sure you understand. If this repeats, I will have to escalate the matter. Good afternoon, Dr Verloren."

Clara sits in silence, fraying.

Time blows forward. She stays lost in thought, staring blankly at the luminescent screen in front of her. It has been a discomforting day from its inception, the kind of day that leaves you wondering if reality has loosened its grip a little. Familiar things feel distant, and each encounter hums with something just slightly off-key. She feels her grip loosening further.

In the momentary stillness, the screen flashes again. A new notification: *24-hour alert – be advised a New Directive – 42B – will be issued 15th October, 10:00. Implement with immediacy.*

A pang of anxiety hits her stomach. More change, more process. Better not to consider it further. Not yet. A problem that belongs to an unknowable future.

As she leaves The Institution that evening, she feels nauseated. The hours have staggered by in a breathless haze, stitched together by moments that don't quite belong in the same day – or perhaps any sane world. She passes what little remains of the burned-out camp. The Unsuitables have gone. All of them. Where?

Guards stand watch like tombstones in blacked-out masks. Smoke still lingers in the air, and the dark sky menaces from above. The sun has slipped away to a safer place, and something in the night feels threatening. She longs to be home.

Chapter 9

The narrow spiral staircase coils upward to the southwest rooftop boiler room, a forgotten artery of the old Institution. Clara ascends with trepidation. Her stiletto heels adding to her instability. The air grows closer, warmer, more intimate, as if the building itself were exhaling its long-contained secrets.

It is a secluded corner of the vast edifice, accessible only through an almost-hidden door behind the long-disused library. Few even know it exists. Known to her only because, many years ago, her office had been adjacent to that same library. A dim, leaking space where plaster flaked like old skin. An aged caretaker used to visit, quiet and kind, to patch the ceiling. Once, in a gesture of rare companionship, he had led her up to the boiler room, the source of both the warmth and the leak.

In that private refuge he kept a secret: a tortoise, living in a bed of sand and straw beside the humming pipes. It was a strange, tender incongruity. Life in the heart of machinery. Clara had fed it green leaves each week for a season, a ritual that seemed to soothe something unspoken in her. Then winter came, and the caretaker retired, taking the creature with him. She never saw either again.

Now, as she climbs, she feels the ache of that remembered kindness. The soft wound of a time when this place still offered redemptive moments. After he left, the winter turned bitter. She recalls standing half within the boiler room, the panelled door ajar, smoking in the draft, finding a small absolution in the heat and the solitude.

Progress had promoted her to a drier office, a higher station, a narrower view. The new rooftop space she now shares with Lorelei faces north, toward the ocean, the boundless horizon, the breathing expanse. It is a place of light and company, far removed from The Institution's

southern face with its oppressive gates and concourse of stone.

But now, ascending again toward that old warmth, Clara feels time folding in on itself. She climbs toward what once was, toward a memory of simplicity, before the tides of duty and consequence. Through the narrow door she hopes to see the inferno's aftermath from above, but some deeper part of her seeks something else: a reconnection, perhaps, with the place where she once believed that even within The Institution, something could live quietly, unseen, and be loved.

The earth is charred, and silhouettes of the lost can be made out on the stained grassy heath. Littered with debris, the remnants of a cursed festival. This is no happy aftermath. No hangover from the revelry.

All that remains are the charred scars of a horror scene. How many perished? But most disconcerting of all, everything has gone, the scene wiped away, a forgotten memory already. The Fire Officers, the police, the guards, the people, the tents, the shacks, possessions, structure, chaos, lives. Nothing but litter blowing like confetti in the wind. An industrial and planned operation has unfolded. The Unsuitables and any trace of them are less than a memory. Ruthless efficiency. Time marches onwards. It never looks back. What would be the point? We only travel in one direction.

She looks at her watch: 09:40am. Time enough to head north and return to her office, time enough to get back to assimilate the new command.

Directive 42B: Due to an observed Folie à plusieurs within the Rehabilitation Facility and a noted increase in Defiance Spectrum Instability Disorder (DSID) characterised by "persistent, irrational questioning of authority, social norms, or official narratives." No Rehabilitation patients may now be informed of the reason

for their incarceration and treatment. All diagnoses from this point forward are to be classified as follows: Not Otherwise Specified (NOS).

She re-reads the Directive several times to integrate it into her understanding. An understanding that has long since left her alone.

She doesn't react.

She learned long ago that to react to anything in haste is a fool's errand. Instead, she has devised a system of percolation for new information, wherein her mind filters the granules of incoming data and allows them to sink down through her. Haste and reactivity beget problems. She doesn't trust herself in spontaneity. Only the Northern roof top can now offer the required thinking space to process.

The wind blows the salt air up towards the roof top where Clara stands alone. Polystyrene coffee cupped in both hands and a cigarette delicately poised between the curled fingers. No Lorelei.

She reflects on the meaning of the new Directive but is distracted by the vastness of the beauty ahead of her. She looks out towards the sea. What is it about the sea and people? Perhaps it reminds them how small they are, how insignificant? How temporary. The endless water that rises and falls. The spray of the salty rain against her face makes her thoughts drift. How many people had this water fell on, where had it travelled, what things had it seen? To be here now with her. She opens her mouth under the rainfall. A droplet settles on her tongue. What chances of it being created and meeting her, here, now on this day, becoming part of her? The universe connected. She smiles to herself. A small moment of attachment to something greater.

Click-clunk.

Her solitude interrupted, the door to the internal stairwell opens slowly... Lorelei? ... No. Standing in the opening, looking a little lost is a face she recognises, Dr Korrin Beck.

“Dr Verloren!” she starts, with a look of genuine astonishment and perhaps a little relief.

“Dr Beck? What brings you up here? Have you started smoking?”

Clara tries to act gentle and offer light surprise, masking her disappointment and frank irritation at the intrusion; an outsider here, in her privacy, in her special place of solitude. The sensation of a stranger walking into her bedroom. She tries to hide her thoughts from her face.

“Oh, goodness, no,” she laughs, in a slightly sanctimonious tone. “In truth, I do believe I’ve utterly lost myself! I have been down in the Clinic Rooms facilitating a group therapy session. In my inattention I think I took a wrong turn or two and lost my bearings. I saw the doorway below and knew I needed to go upwards and, well, what a surprise to find myself in the cold!”

Clara inhales long and nonchalantly on her cigarette, musing on the improbability of the account. She too had long suspended her belief in coincidence.

“Indeed. Well, I’m afraid you have not found your office, just my smoking corner. It is a rarity to see anyone up here, I’ll admit. Except, of course, for Lorelei.” She trails off.

“Lorelei?” Dr Beck looks blankly at her.

“Yes. Have you happened to see her, since the meeting, that is? I’m starting to worry; it was tense, and, well...”

“I don’t recall.” She seems confused by Clara’s question. “As meetings go, I must say, invigorating. Indeed, I have just come from facilitating the new programme, the treatment group for IAD under Directive TX-12. I must share my reflections with you; it’s a wonderfully written protocol.”

Her lack of acknowledgement of Lorelei’s absence spikes Clara’s paranoia, but before she can formulate her response, Dr Beck continues:

“As for new Directives, I assume you have just received 42B? Excellent, excellent. Just what was required. I have noticed these outbreaks, these presentations, on the rise throughout the Wings. I suggested some response was required. Of course, I have volunteered already to be part of the working group to develop further interventions to address DSID. I hear there may already be a medication in train...”

This time, Clara feels her face betraying her. “You don’t think there is something coercive about not revealing reasons for detention? Unethical?”

“Goodness, no! Clara, insight can be curative, but at times the fragility of the ego is too delicate. We must tread with care and permit the rehabilitation to reveal itself to those with complex presentations.”

“Right.” Clara dismisses the nonsense.

“Well, well, enough of the cold for me. I admire you smokers, really, I do. Oh, the cold, the wind, the smell. You have a stronger constitution than I!” The cut is clean and deep.

Clara smiles sweetly, and thinks profanely.

As Dr Beck departs down the stairwell, her footsteps swallowed by the void below, Clara extinguishes what

remains of the cigarette. The ash lingers on the wind. She shivers in the cold. The morning air bites, but it is not the chill that unsettles her. She sips the coffee and sighs.

She must speak with Dr Riemann again. Make him understand.

He will not welcome her, this she knows. He regards her questions as indulgent abstractions, and her presence as a disruption to his ordered world. But something within her has shifted. Dr Beck's words still echo in her. This is not impulse. It is not panic. It is clarity, the slow, terrible kind that follows disillusionment.

She wraps her coat tighter and turns back toward Dr Riemann's office, not in hope of understanding, but in search of something more elusive: confrontation with the self she is becoming.

She has no appointment to see him; however, he is not unaccustomed to her unannounced visits.

Time changes people. This place changes people. It was changing her. She remembers there was a time when there was safety to be found in his embrace. His tolerance greater. Once, Dr Heinrich Riemann had been welcoming, passionate, idealistic even.

He had written excessively, a library of publications. So committed he was to the work that he had once spent two weeks living and sleeping at The Institution, developing a new system of therapeutic support. Where do such ideals go? How does age bend and shape and mould people. Time dilutes people.

What she most admired was that he had been, in the early days, one of visionaries responsible for the closure and elimination of what were then known as *prisons*. An absurd system of incarceration and punishment. Strange now to think they had lasted so long.

Dr Riemann had been part of a social, political and psychological movement. They had forced the closure of the failed system and led the development of the new order. *The Rehabilitation Facilities.*

He had been a young man joining at the tail end of the revolution, but he had played his part. She admired him for this. If he had not quite stood on their shoulders, he had clung to the ankles of giants. Many hours she had spent listening to his stories of the those who had blazed the trail. Their vision had been a society where crime was not seen as a symptom of evil, but as a sign of unmet needs, trauma or miseducation. The archaic concept of punishment was to be abolished, and its place the Rehabilitation Facilities would offer serene, community run therapeutic environments where those who commit harmful acts would be gently guided back to wellness and moral alignment.

The aims of the facilities were to be open and welcoming. No fences, bars, nor cells; freedom and liberty within. Nurses, not guards, healing not punishment. A sense of the voluntary, the collaborative. The restoration of the society through the restoration of the individual. Patients or participants, rather than prisoners. Universal compassion and care. The mantra: If someone harms, they are hurting, if they are hurting, we must help.

Of course, it was naive. Or perhaps just too innocent. Society was not ready for such empathy. The calls for punishment, for wrongs to be righted through cruelty were never far away. Was it truly possible anyway, that all people can be saved? Can be rehabilitated? For some, such damages they have experienced, nothing can redeem or rehabilitate. In truth, some high-profile failures led people to question the very essence of wickedness. Are some people simply evil? No, not everyone could be cured with kindness.

What then is the purpose of such systems? Public protection, protection from retribution, rehabilitation, punishment, deterrence, care and cure? The result, a lesser hybrid of psychiatry, security and prison.

The Institution evolved, or rather, it calcified. Psychiatric and psychological care became its dominant language, administered by nurses-turned-guards, overseen by financiers, and nominally regulated by indifferent commissioners.

The remnants of the prison system, its walls, its locks, its doctrine of discipline and control, endured like a scar, undermining any claim to therapeutic intent. These carceral residues eclipsed the hospital's purpose, hollowing out its promises of healing.

What lingered of the once-hopeful Rehabilitation Facilities bore no trace of the visionaries who imagined them. Their spirit had long since departed, leaving behind a husk, ordered, funded, operational, but utterly soulless.

Materialism won the war of ideas.

Time had ground at Dr Riemann, and now in his later years, he was not the idealist of his youth. A corporate believer, manager and bureaucrat. Embittered and resentful, irritable at inexperience, a turncoat believer of the new order diagnostic paradigms. All questions and critique had abandoned him. Now he simply delivers the commands in obedience and faith. As she approaches the familiar corridor, his secretary, Ms Black, sits behind her desk, en garde. Toadlike and ill-tempered.

"I need to see him, I'm sorry," she says, hurrying past to avoid obstruction.

"He's not in," she rasps back, standing to attention in vain.

Clara strides past the woman to reach the familiar glass door. She can see, indeed, that the office is in blackness, light and hope sucked away by gravity. A wave of frustration floods her. She turns to protest. The usual engraved plaque on the door that reads *Dr Heinrich Reimann, Lead Psychological Officer* catches her eye with its difference. It looks the same, the same position, the same font, yet it now reads *Dr Octavius Malbeth, Interim Lead Psychological Officer*.

“What is this? Who is this? Where is Dr Reimann?”
The questions fall out of Clara.

“I’m afraid Dr Malbeth is in a meeting. I will pass on a message that you were here. Please...” she states robotically, ushering Clara away from the office door.

“But who is Dr Malbeth? Where is Dr Reimann?”

“I’m afraid it is a busy time. Now is not ideal. Please, can I ask you not to disturb? I will pass on the message that you were here.”

With that, Clara is evasively guided out, and the door closes abruptly at her back, shutting out any hope of understanding.

The remainder of the morning is uneasy. An uneasy sensation, imbalanced and disjointed. Still time ticks forwards. Always.

12th October/13:00 AUTHORISED EMPLOYER ANNOUNCEMENT – please be advised your daily 30 minutes employer authorised rest period has commenced. (AEA2.01.Inst).

Clara takes note of the buzz and glances passively at the announcement. With a sigh, she throws down the pen she is absent mindedly twisting in a few strands of her hair. Perhaps a short walk and space from her office might

provide a needed reset. Unanswerable questions leave her floating adrift in a vast ocean, the stars above refusing to guide her.

She feels the currents pulling in contradictory directions as she walks.

She doesn't know to where she is walking, it's not particularly important. But she moves downwards, always downwards. Recently, she doesn't know which way is up. It matches her descending thoughts. Down flights of stairs and along dark corridors that spring brightly into light.

Curious how certain parts of this place are always so quiet she wonders absent mindedly. She chases the thoughts around her head. She once believed in this place, in its mission, the work, the therapy, the rehabilitation. But now things feel... different. Changing. Her faith slipping away. Things make less sense. People shaped to fit society, diagnoses make no sense any longer, constant changes in direction and Directive, the expendability of them all in the pursuit of... of what? Recent days have pushed her around with hostility.

As she re-emerges from her thoughts, she realises she does not recognise the unfamiliar door in front of her. Lost in the labyrinth.

She pushes the steel bar in the centre and walks through. The cool air whips up around her and she is again outside. She half smiles to herself, perhaps her paranoia of Dr Beck was misplaced. It does seem easy to lose oneself in this place. She finds herself in a walkway between two wings of the building, a few hundred meters in length and not more than a few metres in width. The corridor is formed by two walls and a ceiling made of chain link fences constructed of galvanised steel mesh. Through them she sees an outdoor exercise yard or transition space for prisoners. A new place, a new intrigue, but the same oppressive sterility.

As she crosses the corridor, curiosity tugs at her like a whisper from a distant shadow. At the far end, a small cluster of figures looms, waiting, or perhaps simply lingering in a moment suspended between time and meaning. As she draws closer, she discerns three Nurse-Guards and a solitary man, his prison-issued clothes a stark contrast to the quiet dignity in his stride.

He moves toward the opposite doorway, but when their eyes meet, the world tilts. Despite the uniform, despite the cage around him, she recognizes the impossible: Dr Riemann. That tall, lean frame; the dark hair slicked back like a memory; the meticulous beard, a ghost preserved in this fractured place.

Her voice cracks, barely more than a tremor. "What the...? Dr Riemann? What's happening?"

He pulls gently free from the nurse-guards, stepping closer until their faces hover on the edge of understanding. His lips move, barely audible. "This is the beginning of the end. Look at what they've done. It was never meant to last."

Her heart fractures under the weight of his words. "Dr Riemann, please... what's happening?"

Two nurse-guards seize him abruptly. "Enough. Move along," one snaps, dragging him back towards the door.

"Dr Riemann!" she calls again, desperation threading her voice.

His gaze meets hers one last time. "It's your turn now."

Then silence. The remaining nurse-guard meets her stare, cold and empty. "No Dr Riemann here. That's Heinrich Riemann, T-6237. Been inside for years. Circular Maladaptation Syndrome. Untreatable. Pity."

With that, he turns away, the sound of the door closing a final punctuation mark.

Clara sinks to the cold concrete floor. Rain begins to fall softly outside; each drop a fragile echo of what she no longer understands. A world unravelling into shadow and silence.

In the desolation her watch buzzes quietly: *12th October/13:30 AUTHORISED EMPLOYER ANNOUNCEMENT – please be advised your daily 30 minutes employer authorised rest period has concluded. Please recommence your work duties. (AEA2.1.Inst).*

Chapter 10

The week has been long and unsettling, and Clara cannot stabilise the dizziness it has left her with. But as she wakes this morning and looks out at the city skyline, she realises she has slept a dreamless night. Deep and replenishing, undisturbed by the abstractions of nocturnal imaginings. Though for a fearful moment she wonders if her nights are beginning to be spared because her reveries and nightmares have seeped into her waking days. Consciousness is not only nature's nightmare.

Yet, as she gazes out across the morning city, she becomes aware of something even more precious.

The morning glare and blur flashed across the roof tops, reflected in windowpanes of high rises, is none other than her old long absent acquaintance, sunlight. The daystar itself. And what is more: A pause in the rainfall. Her heart skips; the feeling of a child on her birthday. Saturday morning, nowhere to be, to owe no-one the debt of time, and a partially covered sun fighting for freedom in the watercolour sky. Is this hope?

Even between the sodden clouds that hang like sponges ready to release, the radiance of Sol Invictus gifts a warmth across her face that she not known in too long. Her mind is instantly with Frank, how he would have adored the moment. To sit on the ledge, sun on his back, to laze, to scratch, to purr, to sleep. The golden herald breaks through the gloom, and her heart is lighted and her spirit is lifted. At once she knows that on a morning such as this there is only one place in the city she desires to be.

Along the edge of the glistening canal, the morning sun splits golden ribbons across the cobbled path. The flower market stirs gently to life. A quiet symphony of colour, scent, and stillness. A piece of heaven on earth, and Clara is at peace.

The morning chill is crisp and leaves her skin tingling with light. Above, the sky, a soft pastel blue stretches wide, unmarred except for the occasional thread of cloud drifting lazily. The air smells of fresh earth and petals, a mingling of tulip-sweetness and the faint spice of dahlias, chrysanthemums, and asters.

In the water, canal boats, repurposed as floating flower stalls, bob softly in place, their decks brimming with blooms in every imaginable hue. The tulips stand tallest, proud and upright smiling at the sun: rich crimsons, buttery yellows, blush pinks, deep violets nearly black in the shadow. Others curled and twisted with wilder grace. Anemones with silken faces, frilled ranunculi like tissue paper caught in a breeze, and buckets of narcissus so bright they seem to catch fire in the sun.

The water beside them is still, reflecting the blooms in impressionist form, blurred, but no less beautiful. It carried the occasional ripple from a passing bird or the slow churn of a bicycle crossing a distant bridge.

The explosion of joy and colour steals her breath and her heart. The market is quiet but not empty, it is a moment of tranquillity that she has longed for. As she admires the scents and sights, she watches an old woman in a long coat, she leans in close to breathe the perfume of a white peony, her eyes closed for just a moment too long, as though she were holding onto summer with her lungs. A small child with his parents points at a bunch of orange tulips and smiles with the unbridled joy only children can experience, his breath puffing tiny clouds into the air.

The sellers, wrapped in scarves and worn gloves, move without hurry. They rearrange blooms, clip stray leaves, or simply stand watching the light shift across their wares, letting the morning unfold like a petal.

Everywhere, there is a hush, not silence, but a reverent quiet, as if the market itself knows it is too lovely to disturb.

colourful glory. But they've been clipped, you see, already dying. They've bloomed their last, and yet, even in these final days, they bring joy. Their fate is sealed, but they still offer beauty, even as they fade. Everything ends, but it's the faith that the flowers will return that carries us through."

Clara looks at him for a quiet moment, then nods.

"The purple ones, please."

He wraps them gently and holds out the bouquet with a soft smile.

The watery haze of the weekend's momentary serene sky feels a world away on Monday morning. The rain has returned with wrath. The clouds have moved back in from their temporary distraction, and the wind bellows with violence. It is as though the weather is enraged by the deceit of the sky and is now punishing it for its insolence.

Clara is wrapped up in her office, cold. A thick woollen scarf pulled tightly around her and her still in her overcoat. It is uncharacteristically cold and not solely because of the weather. In truth, the heavy rain beats down from an unusually mild atmosphere. Clara checks the room thermometer in angst.

Why so cold?

She passes her time in faithless reading, searching for the records of a *Mr Heinrich Riemann*. A morbid search for answers that provides no truth. Unease grows within and she no longer trusts her observations. She opens the small brown notebook to pen her inner world. She is interrupted:

A vibration at her wrist feels misplaced: 16th
October/13:30 AUTHORISED EMPLOYER
ANNOUNCEMENT – please be advised your daily 30

*minutes employer authorised rest period has concluded.
Please recommence your work duties. (AEA2.1.Inst).*

The threads of time have come undone and order itself has fallen from its uniform synchronicity. Time has paced ahead. She seeks a second opinion from the wall clock, which again serves only to tell her untruths. 16:48 she reads?

Confusion wafts irritatingly across the room, though with a humorous fragrance. It seems the system is creaking somewhere. She tries to push it from her mind, yet something feels foreboding.

After an hour or so weaving together risk assessments and writing reports, the biting cold begins to take its toll. The structure of the work grounds her, yet her nose is iced and her fingers ache from the nip of the chill. Enough. The cold starts to feel personal now, deliberate, almost vindictive. Seeking warmth, or at least the illusion of it, she decides to find a coffee from the vending machine.

The route is familiar, worn into her like a muscle memory: a warren of corridors, two flights of stairs, the dull echo of her heels marking a pattern she could trace blindfolded.

She's walked this path countless times, reading reports, scrolling through emails, never needing to look where she was going. The building, at least parts, like her work, long ago ceased to require attention, it merely contained her.

But today something interrupts that automatic drift. From one office to the next, she notices, not consciously at first, but as a creeping wrongness, that the atmosphere shifts. Behind some doors, people sit huddled in coats and scarves, their breath faintly visible in the sterile air. In others, shirtsleeves are rolled high, faces glisten with heat, fans tilt and hum like supplicants. The temperature seems to

rise and fall with each turn of the corridor, as if the building itself were fevered, incapable of regulating its own body.

She pauses. It strikes her that she's moving through a living thing. One that's glitching, dreaming, breaking down. The Institution, always so solid, so ordered, now reveals its nervous system in failure: cold, heat, motion, stillness, all pulsing out of sync.

And in the strange oscillation of temperatures, she feels something familiar; the same instability she carries within. The same sense that everything, given long enough, starts to malfunction in its own peculiar way.

Still, she walks on toward the coffee machine, her breath fogging briefly in one corridor and vanishing in the next.

She is stifled by the heat, dense and indifferent, as she orders the bitter, low-quality coffee. Her scarf clings to her neck like a mistake, the coat heavy and absurd. The vending machine claims it is 06:45a.m. It's wrong of course. The real time has slipped beyond reach, lost somewhere between drafts of a report she no longer remembers writing. She guesses, without conviction, that it might be near eleven. Or later. It doesn't matter.

She stands still, uncertain. The thought of returning to her office intolerable. Another room, another silence, another hour watching the cursor blink. Out of something like instinct or foolish hope, she turns instead toward Lorelei's office. A small gesture, perhaps. A human one. Desperation? Maybe she'll knock. Maybe someone will answer.

Purposefully she strides in quick step along the well-known walkways. Her blind hope that Lorelei will be there, at that well known desk, where so often they have discussed a case, a complexity, a colleague, or simply a banality. Each conversation meaning more than the words.

In the quiet theatre of her thoughts, the image unfolds: Lorelei will smile at her through the glass and welcome her. She will explain that after the meeting she had felt irritated and defeated. She had needed some repose. In the depths of frustration, she had decided not to return but to speak privately to Dr Riemann. He had apologised, the rupture repaired. Then offered her some deserved respite from the crushing gravity of The Institution. The failing systems had prevented receipt of her messages. Today, Monday morning, marked her return. Sense and order restored. Momentarily she breathes peacefully into her self-deceit.

A beautiful fiction Clara thinks to herself. The vignette fading into ether. Her anxiety building as she turns corners and skips up steps.

But then, with strange perception she takes note of her surroundings. She recognises the walls, the irrelevancies they carry. She notices the cameras in their usual place. Directions and orientation too familiar.

In that moment, she realises, she is back at her office.

She had followed the route, or what she believed to be the route, on her way to Lorelei. Yet somehow, in a quiet violation of reason, she finds herself once more outside her own office door. The corridors, it seems, have conspired to rearrange themselves in her absence, shifting like the folds of a dream.

For a moment she stands there, bewildered, searching for a rational thread to pull. She tells herself she must have turned without noticing, drifted into her habitual path, the reflex of countless repetitions.

But even as she says this inwardly, the explanation feels rehearsed, like a line whispered to ward off panic. The alternative, that the building itself has moved, that space has

betrayed her, presses at the edge of thought with quiet menace.

She touches the door handle, as though confirming its reality. It's cold, familiar, indisputably hers. And yet something in her resists entering, as if to do so would mean consenting to the distortion, acknowledging that what has shifted might not be the corridors at all.

Something shakes her from her defeat. The shrill bleep of the telephone. It pierces the air from inside the room. Maybe it is Lorelei? Maybe something important? Maybe she no longer cares? It continues, and professional guilt compels her.

She answers. "Dr Verloren speaking."

"Dr Verloren. Mr Whyte, Senior Administrative Clerk for Directorship."

Clara recognises the title as one of importance. The formal voice continues:

"You are required to report in one hour to the Grand Boardroom in Sector MC1A. Your attendance is mandated by the senior leads of Rehabilitation, Medicine and Psychology. Can you kindly confirm if you will be in attendance?" he order-asks.

Is there any point in resistance? "Yes, I can be there."

"Thank you. The Board will be notified. Good day."
The line drops.

In the silence, her anxiety rises. As she regains her senses, she notices that so too does the room temperature.

An hour passes with anxious haste.

The boardroom is buried deep within The Institution's restricted administrative wing, a place few would ever see. It's cold. Unusually so, however the temperatures have deceived all day. The walls are sterile white, but not clean, streaked with a grey discolouration where the paint bubbles over external piping and old wiring.

On the wall is a large screen that has evidently not functioned in some time, given its visible condition. Overhead, fluorescent lights hum and flicker out of sync. There is no natural daylight, just the pulsing institutional glow.

The centrepiece of the room is a large conference table, bolted to the floor. Behind it sit a panel of four evaluators, doctors, or administrators, or something in between. She doesn't recognise them. There is a lone black, high-backed chair sitting facing them, it looks afraid. She is invited to sit with the indication of a waved hand by the man on the far left and she is pleased to keep the terrified chair company as she sits.

Three men and a woman sit looking at her, stern of expression. The first man to speak peers over his round metallic spectacles. He wears a white medical coat with a black suit and red tie visible beneath. His only hair is a whitening moustache.

"Dr Clara Verloren. A pleasure to meet you; thank you for joining us today." His voice is cold and unfriendly despite the warm words. He continues, his aura of authority intact: "I am Senior Medical Officer Dr Mikhel Strauss. My colleagues here are Dr Howell Brehtt, Primary Rehabilitation Medical Officer; Dr Ophelia Laing, Primary Psychiatric-Medical Officer; and the most esteemed Mr Edward Lartin-Kerr, the Director's Chief of Rehabilitation."

The four faces observe her, Clara, with emotionless countenance.

She holds the anxiety like a stone in her throat. “Good afternoon.”

The Director’s Chief of Rehabilitation begins to speak. His black pinstriped suit gleams faintly under the harsh light; the blue tie at his neck seems to throttle him. A rotund man, made for cigars and counting money, not for care or conscience.

“Dr Verloren,” he begins, his tone plumbed with self-importance, “we have convened this meeting to address the matter of succession. As you are aware, Dr Octavius Malbeth has been performing a sterling job in the role of Interim Lead Psychological Officer.”

He has?

“...Yet, alas, his oversight and expertise are now required elsewhere, with immediate effect.” His voice rolls on – sonorous, indulgent, a cultivated accent belonging to another age. “We therefore look to make the appropriate appointment to ensure the continued excellence of our distinguished facility.”

She feels her anxiety sharpen, the uncertainty gathering into form.

A woman’s voice interrupts, clean and precise. “Indeed, we have followed your career closely, Dr Verloren.” It is Dr Ophelia Laing: white-coated, bespectacled, her hair pinned high above a mustard turtleneck. Her hands are steepled beneath her chin, her expression somewhere between kindness and appraisal. “Your discipline, commitment, and devotion to progress have not gone unnoticed.”

Clara remains silent. She has yet to be given a reason to speak, let alone permission.

The third voice belongs to Dr Howell Brehnt – younger, handsome, strangely sunlit in this fluorescent gloom. “We are well pleased with our decision,” he says, smiling as if rehearsed. “You faced remarkable competition, but we are confident the department will flourish under your guidance. You have our warmest congratulations.”

Clara’s mind stumbles. Decision?

“Yes, congratulations indeed,” the first man resumes smoothly. “Your appointment as Lead Psychological Officer and Supervising Case Officer for the Secure Rehabilitation and Psychological Approaches Department is now confirmed. The Board will ratify it post-haste. As Dr Malbeth has departed, you may re-station yourself immediately in – well, your new office.”

He stands and extends a hand. “Again, our sincerest congratulations.”

Her body moves before her mind can object. She shakes his hand automatically, hollowly. “But... I... Dr Rie –”

“Yes, yes,” he interrupts briskly. “A great honour. A great responsibility. Your secretary, Ms Black, will make all necessary arrangements.”

The mustard woman gestures with a stylus, her tone as clipped as her hair. “You’ll find everything prepared. Naturally, you will cease all patient contact – your duties now are administrative. Ms Black will assist with the transition.”

A faceless functionary opens the door, and Clara is ushered out without ceremony.

Back in her office, she packs what little she owns into the brown cardboard box provided. A box for everything and nothing. Her identity. Her leather file. Her cactus in its

glass terrarium. Desks were never meant for possession, only occupation. The Institution prefers it that way.

She studies the cactus in her palm. So small. So spiked. So fragile and defenceless. For a moment, she feels an overwhelming urge to smash it, to grind it into dust. But the impulse passes, leaving only frustrated exhaustion.

She sits, head in hands. The desire to cry flickers and dies. Only a dull ache remains. A slow, deliberate despair.

Her computer pings – one final notification.

A new memo slides onto the screen. It reads simply: “*The System is evolving. Trust the process.*”

PART III: DISINTEGRATION

Chapter 11

Looking out of the glass fronted panels of her new office, Clara can see her new secretary, Ms Black. She is deep in conversation with a suited man Clara doesn't recognise. They are talking about her. Or not. Paranoia grates at her.

She can't make out what they are discussing. Pointless to try. She sits in the high-backed black seat of power. Foreign to her and distasteful. A throne for a monarch she doesn't want to be.

She knows this office well. The faint smell of Dr Riemann's presence lingers, yet her name is now on the door. As she runs her hand across the smooth, cold desk, the room temperature now ambient at least, her mind drifts back to the first time she entered this room.

She was newly employed at The Institution when the summons came. Made to wait by the eternal Ms Black. At last, she was shown into the glass-fronted room and told to wait longer still, suspended in time. The space was empty. Dr Riemann was not present, and so she had sat, nerves taut, anticipating the arrival of the department's formidable and celebrated lead. She recalls how she had stared intently at a painting that hung behind the desk, a large square canvas with no frame. The paint seemed to have been poured, not brushed she recalls. Thick, cascading layers of grey, ochre, and white, like ash runnels down a concrete wall. At its centre there was a single irregular shape, something like a stone, but not quite. Too smooth, too soft at the edges, like it was almost alive before it was buried in pigment. She remembers how there were scratch marks, gouges through parts of the surface. Not chaotic, but repetitive, as if someone had tried to dig the stone out. And faintly, beneath the layers, it was possible to make out a figure crouched behind the stone, half-suggested by negative space. A shadow without features. Watching. Waiting. Or hiding? As her mind had fallen deep into its symbolism, or lack of, Dr Riemann had made his entrance.

She never forgot the first few words they exchanged. They had seemed loaded with something even then, but now it seems more poignant:

“Ah you are already here. Good. This room doesn’t like being empty”. He had said. “You’ll see, it has a way of choosing who it wants.”

“That sounds superstitious.” She had answered with a nervous laugh.

“No. It’s just patient. It waits”. He had replied.

She recollects how he had then paused, looked at her with a strange smile and said, “I think it may already have decided who it wants next.”

Now she feels the echo of the conversation and can’t shake the uncomfortable sensation that fate is taunting her. But fate would imply design, and in the mists of chaos order is hard to see.

Given any choice in the matter, Clara would never have desired this position. She has always detested power. Power over others. An irony not lost on her, considering the authority her position commands. Freedom or confinement. High risk or low. In or out. The absolute power to determine a life’s course. In truth, she hates it, loathes it, is nauseated by it.

No one who covets power deserves to wield it. Those who reach for it are the ones who should never touch it. This, if nothing else, she knows to be a truth.

Ms Black enters the room with a small device, a diary, which she places on the desk in front of Clara.

“Your agenda, Dr Verloren, and a comprehensive list of your new duties and requirements. Dr Malbeth was very

particular about how he liked his appointments coordinated. You may, however, have different preferences. There are several pressing commitments that require your attention, pre-scheduled appointments..." She points to various diarised meetings with evidently important figures. "Once these are taken care of, you may wish to send new instructions. I will gladly reschedule commitments as you wish."

With that, she turns to leave the office.

"Ms Black?" Clara interrupts her departure. "What happened to Dr Riemann?" she enquires softly, her voice low.

Ms Black stares at Clara for a moment, her expression porcelain, immovable. Then she offers a scripted reply: "All I know is that Dr Malbeth's oversight and skills were required elsewhere with immediacy. I will be outside; please let me know if you require anything."

Clara sits in her new gilded seat. She stands, wanders aimlessly around the room, pulling at drawers and opening cupboards. All empty. She looks out of the glass windows. She turns and looks back at the desk. She is suffocating. In truth she doesn't know what to do. She stares at the list of duties and instructions. New Directives that apply to her in her new position. Meetings with the power brokers, the money men, the service heads, transformational projects, implementation and finalisation boards, disciplinary boards.

Boards, departments, committees, groups, projects, management, leadership, supervision, regulation, Directive Implementation – the list of corporatised health-speak has the air of stale coffee-breath. She recoils. Even now she feels she is losing herself, vanishing. Being erased. Scanning the duties she sees a passage that seems added, improvised. Almost purposefully for her, though it can't be so:

“Directive TX091: Without exception, it is directed that The Lead Psychological Officer and Supervising Case Officer for the Secure Rehabilitation and Psychological Approaches (SRPA) Department will not hold a patient caseload. They will not work directly with patients. Direct interaction with patients is not within the sanctioned operational scope, which is strategic, supervisory and systemic. Any deviation from this directive, regardless of intent, shall be considered a breach of protocol and may trigger disciplinary review, up to and including removal from post. This measure ensures structural integrity and preserves the chain of accountability.”

A shudder falls down Clara’s body. She feels cut-off, isolated, promoted into non-existence and futility. Her expendability and lack of purpose exposed in one paragraph. She hears the rooftop calling and the cigarettes asking to be smoked.

The days of tedium drag by, closeted in her new power, a prisoner to conference calls and performative vanity. She detests every second.

She has taken to smoking even more, hiding on the roof for as long as she can tolerate the howling winds and biting cold. Outside, the temperature is falling, the rain as relentless as ever. Inside the system is creaking – or evolving. Room temperatures swing rapidly, the system decides upon the information it shares at its own whim, and the clocks have become timeless and confused. No one mentions it.

She can’t seem to shake the feelings of increasing isolation. A derealisation from the fragile grasp she once had on her tentative truth. Up here on the roof in the solitude, she can hear the distant seabirds calling, their cries carried on the winds toward her. She can smell the salty air. The briny, crisp smell of salt and minerals mixed with the

earthy smell of the algae. The freshly caught fish, heaped on the back of fishing boats coming into harbour. The moment is real, and she knows she is here. And that's enough for now. She breathes it in. So much of this life is unkind and unknown, uncertain, changeable but she has always loved the sea. The eternal ocean. Never the same, forever moving, rolling, thundering, changing. But always there. Constant, permanent, infinite, overpowering, meditative, healing, primal.

In her meditation, the flotsam and jetsam of her thoughts drift by, and in that moment, she resolves upon her means to grasp the hope on the tide. She will defy the Directive and continue to see patients off protocol. She knows it is the only way. When the world tilts and warps, when nothing stays familiar, when even time seems to fold on itself, most things lose their meaning. When balance is gone and voices become echoes and even your own name feels like a borrowed sound, there is always connection with another. To look into the eyes of someone, to share their pain or their peace, that is all that there is left for us. It is all that we need. Even when reality deceives, in them she can find truth.

The luxury of her new position, if it can be called that, lies in authority.

Amid the monotony of boardrooms, hollow meetings, and airless afternoons, she holds the power to authorise. To summon the patients from the bowels of the leviathan. She searches the system for Patient ID 2509-R: a long-standing case she's been ordered to terminate. Once, she'd dismissed it as another instance of Persistent Ideational Fluctuation Disorder. Now, she isn't sure. She isn't sure of anything.

Offences Contrary to Section 1700.4c of the OLC. He had accepted his fate with that peculiar calm; resigned, almost grateful. She, however, had held on to a flicker of hope. Still does. And now, something stirs in her: a tremor of defiance, a dangerous thrill.

She brushes the thought aside, or tries to. But the decision has already taken root. A call to Merrow Otis. The patient will be brought to Clinic Room 3.

A current passes through her, electric and illicit. The intoxication of power. Like a president discovering the pleasure of decree. It's a small rebellion, perhaps, but hers. A fragile reclaiming of control in a world that feels increasingly out of reach.

She flicks down the contacts, finds *OTIS, Merrow P-976-QS*, and presses dial.

A few hours later she sits in Clinic Room 3 and welcomes the arrival of her clandestine patient.

A quiet and reserved individual, with whom she has worked this past year. His previous diagnosis now of course replaced. Now simply *Not Otherwise Specified*. He is a young man, kindly, unsure of himself and desperate for a mother figure. Deeply intelligent, introspective and thoughtful beyond his years. Their sessions had always impacted Clara, left her wanting to save him, to be the maternal carer he longed for. It seems appropriate that he is who she thought of first in her disobedience. Or did she get too close? The flash of confusion, of regret, flashes away as the thin young man with his childlike haircut enters the room.

Session – *Off list*

Location: *Clinic Room 3*

Time: *15:00*

Subject ID: *2509-R*

Index Offence: *Offences contrary to Section 1700.4c of the Official Legal Code [OLC]*

Condition: *Not Otherwise Specified*

Priority: *Routine*

“It’s good to see you again, Dr Verloren. After the notification that all sessions with you were ended, it’s nice. A surprise,” he says genuinely.

“We were making progress. Sometimes continuity is required, despite directions to the contrary.” She isn’t sure if she is responding to him or reassuring herself.

“Well, I am glad to see you again. I’ve been thinking about you a lot, since they said I couldn’t see you.”

“How so?”

“I dreamed of you again, two nights ago. But it was different from the others.”

“Tell me of it,” she asks.

“You and I, we were together. I don’t know where – it was in a kind of zoo. Not a normal one, nowhere I have ever known. The cages were of glass; the halls were endless. You and me, we were together, in one of the enclosures.

“People walked past us on raised walkways, pointing. They were wearing masks. Not animal masks, no. Not human either. Just... blank faces.”

“And we were animals?”

He shakes his head softly, a deepness in his eyes. “No. We looked exactly like we do now. But above our cage there was a sign. It said: ‘EXHIBIT: THE DERANGED.’ Only... it was written backwards, like for them to read in a mirror.”

“And what were the others like, the people outside?”

“They didn’t walk right. They bent their knees the wrong way, moved in little jerks like puppets. They didn’t speak. And when they pointed at us, their fingers multiplied.

Hundreds of little fingers wriggling. But to them, we were the spectacle.”

She says nothing.

“Then you turned to me in the dream. You said, ‘Why are they looking at us like that?’

“And I said, ‘Because we’re not wearing masks.’”

The feeling is intense in the room as he continues with the dream narrative. Uneasy, the dreamlike quality seems to pour itself into the air. Quietly, she asks:

“What happened next?”

“They opened the cage. Only instead of walking out, we just... stood there. Because the walkway was swarming with them, the masked ones. But then something strange: one by one, they started to remove their masks. Underneath, their faces weren’t faces at all, just smooth skin. Nothing. No eyes, no mouth. They didn’t see us. They were just... acting.

“You grabbed my hand in the dream. And you said, ‘If they’re the actors, then who’s the audience?’

“And I said, ‘There isn’t one. That’s the trick.’”

“It sounds like a nightmare,” Clara suggests.

“No. It felt like the first time I’d woken up.”

As the session closes and he leaves the room, he turns to Clara. “If I don’t see you again, thank you for the chance to see you this one more time before I leave. I know you weren’t supposed to come. They know you are here.” With that, he is gone.

The dream replays in her mind as she tries to make sense of it. It feels heavy, calling to her with its clearly opaque messages. She finds herself again an automaton, walking the corridors in her mindless meanderings, this time upwards towards her new office. She dreads the return and needs to begin thinking of some reasonably believable account of where she has been, to distract the intrusive Ms Black.

They know you are here. She shakes it off; she tries not to care. But then, what if? Her thoughts are momentarily interrupted. Ahead, there seems to be some commotion. As she approaches, there are shouts and cries – but not of anger or distress. More like celebratory, mocking laughter and hollers. Nearing the busyness, she recognises him – Nelson Carter 6041-L. He stands flanked by two guards, who look vanquished. He is smiling and shouting to someone in the distance.

As he draws closer, his smile is evident, ballooning joy.

“Hey, doc! Ha! I knew it! There’s some justice, some truth in this crazy world! I’m outta here. Keep your treatments and your help for someone who needs it!” He jeers, like an ungracious victor.

She turns to the guard, perplexity written across those cold Nordic features.

He shrugs. “Repealed them, didn’t they? The new Directive.” He stares at her as though she should know. “All offences contrary to 1700.4c – turns out they’re legal now, or weren’t illegal anyway. It’s all the same, who cares? There’s a bunch of them going to be walking out of here now, that’s for sure.”

Clara is rocked. Confused. But she understands well enough. She will return to her office, and there will be a new notification advising just as the guard has explained. What

once there was, now there is not. She stands frozen, statuesque in the corridor, watching him walk away to his freedom. She doesn't know if she is satisfied or embittered.

Halfway up the staircase, the loudspeaker crackles – then a flat, automated voice begins its slow, relentless drone.

“Directive F1 is now enacted. Following the re-categorisation of offences contrary to 1700.4c of the OLC, the following ID codes must now report to the gatehouse for immediate release: 6626-S, 7885-N, 4642-S, 4210-B, 9865-T...” It seems to continue endlessly.

As she hurries back to her office, the numbers drone out in a hypnotic, trance-like monotone – like the alarm call for the end of the world. Or the beginning of a new one.

Chapter 12

Ms Black stands at the door. Self-important.

“Dr Verloren, you will note an addition to your calendar for this morning. At her request, I have taken the liberty of scheduling an appointment for Dr Weisz. She has requested to see you most urgently. She is waiting, shall I show her in?”

Clara looks at her watch; she no longer trusts time. It is just more doubt. Unsubstantiated and isolating her from reality. She is irritated by the intrusion but pleased for some contact, though her stomach fills with the dread of more potential problems.

She knows her visitor. Competent, decent, a believer. In some ways she admired her, a highly intelligent and capable woman. Serious minded, but unpredictable.

Her anxiety builds. She tries to self-correct, adjusting her seating position to give an air of authority. Why? What is her aim? As she preoccupies herself in a self-indulgent managerial narcissism, the door opens and Dr Weisz is ushered in. Ms Black smiles with a supercilious manner.

Clara stands to greet her. She knows she is tired and her nerves fraught, but something feels wrong. Dr Weisz doesn't quite look as Clara remembers. She is dressed as The Institution requires. A tailored black suit, white silk blouse high buttoned. Authority projected through style. Long, ice-blond hair and blue eyes. A sharp Nordic beauty, but the tired beauty of someone who had been serious too young.

She senses anxiety building in her, and with a trembling hand pours two glasses of cold water for them both from the iced carafe between them on the table.

Then, for no perceptible reason, almost lacking control of herself, she proffers the slow and precise words: “Dr Weisz, an unexpected, out-of-schedule meeting request, I note? Please, sit – tell me, Elen, what can I do for you?”

“Thank you for seeing me, Dr Verloren. I... I appreciate you making the time. I just – well, it’s just that some things... I have some concerns that things lately have not seemed... consistent.”

She sits back, reclining slightly in her chair. It creaks. She breathes and then sighs, as if thoughtfully, and steeples her fingers to a point. “Well, this does sound ominous, I must say. Please, do share these... inconsistencies that you have observed. I am listening.”

Suddenly, she feels overtaken, possessed and sickened, as if something has seized her from within or from without; she can’t tell which. Her head and heart pound with the visceral certainty that something is wrong. Her ears ring. It’s like the moments before waking from a nightmare or slipping free of sleep paralysis. She’s fighting, screaming silently inside. She slams the seat back and bolts upright, gagging for air, sweat beading on her skin, breathless.

“Are you OK, Dr Verloren?” Dr Weisz asks kindly.

“What? Erm... no, yes... yes.” She lifts the glass with a trembling hand and swallows generously in an effort to steady herself. As if cued by the projected anxiety, Dr Weisz does the same. They sit in silence for a moment.

“If now isn’t a good time...”

“No, no, it’s fine. I just... it doesn’t matter.”

Silence. Her hand trembles as she holds the glass. They share an awkward pause while she regathers herself.

“Elen,” she says, looking at her, as if reorienting herself to reality. “It’s not right...”

“I know. That’s what I wanted to say. Something isn’t right. I feel it.” Her eyes seem blurry.

At that, she unfolds a tangle of confusion and disoriented thoughts: Mysterious redactions, blacked out portions of files and missing photographs. Questions the dizzying array of diagnoses. The increasing lack of information that seems to be shared on referral notes she receives. Why? What is the purpose? The fire at the camp, where have the people gone? The bizarre temperature shifts, the clocks failing to synchronise. And now the path twists again: legalising certain offences. Patients have been leaving freely in vast numbers. Simply walking out. Some in the very middle of therapy sessions. Their ID called aloud, summoned to gatehouse to gather their belongings and leave. What is the thread, the link, the rationale? Is there one, does there need to be one? What sense in the senseless?

Clara burns with a desire to deny reality, to tell Dr Weisz that it is her fiction. A desire to scream, to cry, to run overwhelms her. The maddening nonsense of it all frustrates and convulses her. She longs to wish it all away. The room spins in a dizzying turn. All that there is to see in her tunnelled eyes is the door. Without control of her feet, she vanishes through it in haste, leaving this moment behind her.

Her breathless escape takes her nowhere in particular. She finds herself somewhere she does not recognise facing a cold steel door. Without hesitation she opens it, in the childlike hope that it will take her home. It does not.

The corridor behind her slams shut with a mechanical hiss, the kind of sound she could feel in her teeth. She staggers forward; one hand braced against the cold brick wall. Her breath rasps in her throat like dry leaves. She had

fled from the conversation in her office, but now, doesn't quite understand why.

As she walks through the courtyard it opens, gradually widening. She turns a corner and finds herself facing an old-rusted doo unmarked. Not one she has ever seen before. The lock snapped, the hinges buckled as if the building itself had tried to forget it. A whisper of wind, earthy and green, pushes from the gap. Not air from inside.

As she pulls open the door, Clara realises the short path leads into a garden.

It is enclosed on all sides, a box of breathing life hidden in the decaying heart of The institution. Ivy claws up the cement walls. Wild herbs burst from planters made from old hospital bed frames. The sunlight, faint and filtered comes from a ceiling grate far above.

The hum of bees. The scent of mint and decay.

She stands frozen. The panic slowly ebbing. Something in her chest cracks open, just a little.

She realises then that there is someone else present.

An older inmate, or someone playing the part. Kneeling in the dirt, hands coated black, pruning a cluster of silvery-green stems. Uniform sleeves rolled to the elbows. Thin as wire. He moves slowly, precisely, almost reverent. He doesn't look up.

"They say rosemary remembers what the mind forgets."

The voice is low, husky. Not unkind.

Clara blinks.

"Sorry?"

The figure plucks a sprig of rosemary and breathes in its scent.

“Memory. This one. But you have to crush it. To get the truth out.”

The scent hits her, sharp, clean, ancient.

“Who are you?” Clara asks.

He looks at her. His eyes moss-coloured, deep.

“That depends on who’s asking. “You look like someone who’s asking too many questions.”

She almost laughs. Or cries. She sinks down onto a low stone bench.

“I just needed air. I needed to get away.”

The gardener returns to the soil.

“From the noise or the silence?”

“Both.”

A pause. A gentle breeze stirs the chimes, low, metallic tones that didn't sound tuned to anything human.

“They built this place to cure madness,” the figure says. “But maybe it’s only the soil that’s sane. The only thing here that’s grounded.”

He digs his hand deep into the earth and lets the soil fall between his fingers. A worm surfaces, curls, and vanishes again.

“Everything else rots. Memory, language, identity. But the roots know what to do. Always down. Always deeper.”

Clara stares at her hands. They are still shaking.

“I’m afraid I’m losing myself,” she whispers.

The figure looks at her for a long moment.

“Then maybe you’re closer than you’ve ever been.”

For a while, neither of them speak.

There is only the sound of wind, bees, and far, far above, the faint clang of the outer world still grinding on.

Then the figure stands and hands her something small – a poppy seed. Round, black, weightless.

“There’s a door to our release that is always open,” he says softly. “But only those who choose can walk through it.”

At that he turns away, back to the soil, as if she’d never been there at all.

The fresh air and the mysterious gardener have somehow had a grounding effect on Clara, and she draws strength from within to return to her office and explain herself.

Climbing the wide staircase towards her office, the monotone drone continues to call out. Endlessly summoning passengers for a ship that will abandon the earth. One ID number at a time until the world is emptied: *“Directive F1 is now enacted. The following ID codes must now report to the gatehouse for immediate release: 3276-B, 4433-H, 1209-Y, 6251-R, 8792-E...”*

With embarrassment, she acknowledges Ms Black on her return.

Ms Black stands, strangely to attention as Clara enters the anteroom. She feels bedraggled and disorganised, but in reality, it has been a long time since she saw her reflection.

“Dr Verloren are you quite alright?” asks Ms Black, though without compassion.

“I’m fine, thank you, Ms Black. I just had a... there was something... I needed a –” She trails off into nowhere, thoughts alluding her.

“I hadn’t seen you all morning. I was beginning to be concerned that I should reschedule your appointments.” A curious comment. Was there a kindness buried deep within, enough to spare her blushes? Unlikely.

“I’m here. Dr Weisz, has she left? I may need to apologise. I just needed some air.”

“Dr Weisz?” she looks confused.

“I ended our meeting a little prematurely. I wasn’t quite myself.”

“I’m sorry, to when do you refer?” enquires Ms Black in her clipped, robotic tone.

“Just this past hour. My 10 a.m.?” Clara retorts, confusion building, or irritation.

“I’m sorry. You have just arrived? And Dr Weisz – Dr Elen Weisz, X-782-42-M3? She left us not a few days ago, you will recall. Handling her impromptu departure was one of Dr Malbeth’s final tasks before his transfer.”

Again, the room spins and blurs, like spilling water, diluting the colours of reality all around her.

All she can say is, “Yes...” barely more than breath, before turning and walking slowly into her office. She closes the door behind her with care, as if afraid the sound might shatter something fragile still hovering in the air.

Inside, the stillness is complete. Only the faint tick of the clock and the intermittent drip from the carafe. On the table, two half-drunk glasses of water. In her palm, she realises, she is still holding the poppy seed. Small, inert, weightless.

A quiet confusion settles over her. Not panic. Not clarity. Just a strange sense of having arrived somewhere without knowing how. As if the moment had opened a door not into revelation, but into the unbearable ordinariness of returning.

What can she do in this moment? She sits at her desk. Something takes hold. She opens the familiar file: *Structured Professional Judgement Tools*. Her fingers find the keys. And she starts to type. Not because it matters. Not because she believes anymore. But because the alternative, staring at the seed or asking what it all means, feels too vast to bear.

Outside the weekend waits. A soft promise. Or a void.

...

As Clara dutifully waits in line for processing her mind drifts. Curious how such a beautiful building contains such modern banality. Glass fronted control rooms, scanners, lockers. Even the entrance to The Institution feels maladjusted. Her thoughts are interrupted by two curiosities: The first – the usual buzz:

23rd October/07:30 AUTHORISED EMPLOYER
ANNOUNCEMENT – please be advised this is your 30
minute employment preparation notification. Your work
duties are scheduled to commence at 08:00. Please make
arrangements to ensure prompt attendance. (AEA1.Inst)

Curious because it seems to be functioning correctly for the first time in several days. The second curiosity, increasingly noticeable as she moves forward in the queue, is a commotion at the main air lock.

She approaches, raised voices. A man in black suit looking somewhat funeral is directing all employees to make their way directly to the Grand Meeting Chamber. A rarely used vault, retained for general meetings or staff training, and even more rarely used for mass gatherings due simply to its cavernous size.

“What’s happening?” She overhears two men speaking. The questioner is unknown; however, she recognises the second immediately: Sten Andersson, ECRROP Facilitator – X-4913-MU.

“I heard a rumour,” Sten replies in paranoid tones. “I was here at the weekend – extra shifts.”

“Heard what?” the other asks impatiently.

“Big meeting this morning. A series of them, one after the other. Calling everyone in to tell them.”

“To tell them what? Who? *Who* will tell us *what*?” His irritation is building.

Clara pushes forward in the mêlée to get a better sense of their conversation, surrounded by a fervent air of rumour spreading. Guards have started abandoning their posts; the ripples shake the water.

“Something important. Something big. A new Directive. I heard that...”

The crescendo swells beyond her ability to listen, drowning out everything else. The heaving crowd, now a

restless, furious tide, lifts her helplessly, carrying her forward against her will toward the great room.

The great hall reaches deep into a cavernous recess. Its towering walls clad in gleaming black marble veined with streaks of gold. Sharp geometric patterns in polished chrome and frosted glass frame the vast space, casting angular shadows beneath the cold glow of enormous, stepped light fixtures suspended from the high, vaulted ceiling.

The floor beneath is a checkerboard of black and white tiles, fractured here and there by cracks where neglect and decay have crept in. Along the sides, towering columns rise up, dwarfing those below. The room is as cold as it looks, despite the heat of the building crowd.

At the far end, elevated on a stark platform framed by a monumental archway of brushed steel, stand two figures ready to make an announcement to the assembled staff. The first is a man in a black suit, immaculate, tall and thin, with a hooked nose and an unreadable expression. Beside him, a woman in a rigid white coat, her face masked by a thin veil disdain and detachment. The noise of the bustling crowd reaches a crescendo as the chamber fills.

Then the man with the hooked nose raises a hand to indicate he will begin to speak. The crowd falls to silence after a few busy moments. His voice, when he speaks, cuts through the heavy air like a scalpel, precise, cold, and unforgiving. As the crowd listens, caught between fear and obedience under the harsh light of the Grand Chamber, he offers only a few words; however, they are announced with great proclamation.

“Attention all those gathered. You are hereby advised of the New Directive: Directive 00, to be enacted immediately: All Directive Codes up to and including this one are henceforth repealed. They are hereby rescinded and rendered void.”

A stunned silence falls upon those gathered, faces frozen amid their confused contortions. Then the woman begins to speak.

“Thank you for your attention. Please now make your way out of the Grand Meeting Chamber using the East Exit and continue with your duties. This notification must continue to be cascaded to all.”

At that, a cohort of guards enters the chamber and begins ushering the gathered crowd out of the hall. A chaotic noise erupts in the chamber, but the two figures offer no response. As Clara is carried in the throngs and mêlée towards the exit, she glimpses the woman signalling to invite those waiting to hear the new commandment.

The yells and protestations of the gathered swell to a climax. Panic and excitement reverberate around the marble columns. Anxious faces, angry faces. Some simply walk away in confused silence and submission. Others look to each other, asking questions they know cannot be answered.

Something, for Clara, feels... inevitable. She doesn't feel the anger, the anxiety, the panic, or the excitement. Just a sense of prophecy fulfilling. Those they wish to destroy they first make mad.

Chapter 13

She knows what must be done. In times of rupture, the path is seldom hidden. It is the will to walk it that falters.

The difficult tasks rise unbidden, like truths no longer afraid of consequence. She should call the meeting. Gather them – the SRPA Department. Not to solve anything, not really, but to look, together, into the question. To try to understand what this new gravity means.

But already, in the solitude of her fear, the future unspools. Dominoes fall in her mind. One after another, inevitable.

She sees the room before it exists: The hollow faces arranged around the long table, waiting. They will stare. Expectation has weight, and it presses down. She is not herself anymore, not a woman with doubts or history. She is Constantine, overseeing the crumbling order, summoned to preside over the slow unwinding.

Not all will be there. Dr Riemann will be absent, Lorelei too. Dr Weisz's chair will sit empty like a question. The rest, Dr Beck, Dr Halbrecht, Dr Strathen, Dr Renn, and the others whose names still escape her, they will come. They will sit, not out of faith, but out of duty. And no one will mention the absentees. The silence will sting more than reproach.

What would she say?

What does it matter now?

There are other questions. Heavier ones. And they will turn to her, waiting.

She imagines her voice. She would falter. Not from fear, but from the absurdity of it. The performance of control. The detachment between what is said and what is

felt. The clumsiness of borrowed authority, wearing her like a poorly fitted coat.

Their responses would be cold, predictable. Relentless. Not questions, but accusations.

There was a time she would have been amongst them, a few months ago, a year perhaps. Asking the same questions with the same vehemence. How the wheel turns.

She will answer as she must. Reason, qualify, plan. A speechless hope behind her eyes. She won't believe a word. The mask, such as it was, will slip. Not in drama, but in quiet collapse. They will see it. The cracks in her voice, the smallness of her presence.

They will not pity her. They will strike. The theatre demands it.

And behind their words: no faith, no expectation. Only the wish to deflect the dread they too carry.

She doesn't believe anymore.

Not in the purpose. Not in the outcome. Not in the justifications they pass between them like coins. Her role has become a ritual of futility.

Where then, does salvation lie? She does not know. Only the silence afterward seems honest, and even that is too large to hold. The catastrophising and panic swell within.

She pushes the thoughts to that place in her mind, where they disappear. For now, there is a need to be elsewhere. At the door, she scans her electronic key to enter the upper corridor leading to her room. The red-light blinks to the small electronic blip. Immoveable, it remains locked. She repeats the action. A third time. The irritation builds, what now? Through the glass, she sees that lights are

dimmed, Ms Black is not present. Few things seem now to be of curiosity. She turns for the Clerical Information Centre to resolve yet another obstacle.

Several flights downward she finds them. The digital janitors, the custodians of electronic systems. Concierges of technology. They sit in semi-silence. The yellowing walls, grime carpeted floor and heavy malodour combine to create the perfect atmosphere somewhere between a stale afternoon and a teenage bedroom. Technology, screens, computers, stacked against walls and thrown carelessly beneath tables. The ensemble giving the visitor a strong desire to wash.

“Yes?” he says in a perfunctory manner.

She tries not to labour an explanation of the irritant door-lock and expeditiously gives her details. *Tap, tap, click, click*, comes the reply.

“Dr Verloren, you said?”

“I did.”

“There is an urgent message that you were supposed to read,” he mutters, annoyed, chewing the remains of a sandwich. There is evident disdain in his unfriendly eyes, and she feels a flush of embarrassment at her lack of competence.

“Well, you see, that’s problematic, as I can’t access my office...” She tries to remain composed.

“It’s here. Look,” he says again, as if it had been inevitable in the absence of foresight.

He turns the screen to show her a communication addressed to her. She reads it twice, slowly, to understand.

Directive: R2
Date: 19th October, 23:59
To: Dr Clara Verloren
Re: Role Adjustment Notification

Effective immediately, the post of Lead Psychological Officer and Supervising Case Officer for the Secure Rehabilitation and Psychological Approaches (SRPA) Department is no longer required. You are reassigned to your prior classification. No new patient interactions are required or authorised at this time. Continue routine administrative compliance until further notice.

End Message

She reads it a third time, then asks in hope – or in hopelessness –:

“But this is a Directive? All Directives are rescinded?”

“It is dated yesterday,” he retorts.

“So then... I am reassigned or not?”

He looks confused, frozen, like the systems he's meant to repair. Crashed and unresponsive, this error needs a reset. He pauses, gathering himself.

“I couldn't say. I suppose it's up to you.”

It is a facile point, but fair. And a responsibility she cares little for and walks away from eagerly. She had always suspected the title was somewhat ceremonial, a formality wrapped in a lanyard. She smiles sardonically and begins to walk away. But as she turns to leave, an idea strikes:

“Wait... you can reactivate my key?”

“I suppose.”

“Please do. There is something I need.”

Her old office is welcoming. Like an old friend, or a pet that missed her while away. Yet there is the disjoint, an unreal feeling of returning to a childhood bedroom. The time has passed yet it looks the same, smaller, different somehow, less real. Like it belongs to another time, another person, another life. It feels right but not right. Stranger and less, like so much has happened, yet so little time has passed.

Momentarily she bathes in the uncomfortable comfort, but it won't last, she knows. It can't. It doesn't. As she looks at the familiar surroundings, a satisfaction, a relief fall upon her.

And then it begins.

From somewhere beyond the walls of her office an announcement is sounding aloud.

An alarm that heralds the end of days. Or the beginning of the new order?

“The following ID codes must now report to the gatehouse for immediate release: 9087-P, 2457-D, 1116-H, 3768-A, 8965-Q...”

As before the ID codes drone out through the air. No Directive, no fanfare, just a mass release of all inmates. No explanation. It is ceaseless, endless, total.

On the walkways and corridors staff wander aimlessly, like sleepwalkers, drifting through the haze. The numbers drone out slowly but relentlessly. There is no panic, just calm, orderly. No-one acknowledges her, too caught in their own daydream.

She needs to see, to understand. To be at the epicentre. She makes her way to the Wings.

In her mind, the phantasy grows, or the fear, as she makes her way downwards. Perhaps it will be chaos, that echoing antechamber with the black marble floor, the white marble walls. The circular clerking desk. Will Merrow still be there? Fighting back the hoards as they race to abandon the land before the flood. The chosen to be saved. Riots, disruption, disorder. The surveillance cameras passively watching on.

But calm presides. Quiet, almost silence. No joy, no rancour. Just an orderly departure of those whose numbers have been called. They pass her on the walkways making their way to the gatehouse. They are leaving. Free. It is just a fact. They glide past, like passing ships, or ghost ships. Something lost in their eyes. And there indeed is Merrow Otis. Still at her post, continuing. The normality of it all, almost banal.

“Merrow? They’re leaving. All of them?”

“Yes,” she replies without inflection.

“Why?” Emotionless. It is simply a question now.

“It’s better this way. It’s least restrictive,” she replies hypnotically.

To her left, the sound of one of the black doors slowly opening alerts her to the release of another. She recognises him well; how could she not? ID 2509-R.

“You’re leaving?” she asks with utter futility, almost contemplating putting out a hand in an effort to stop him.

The young man looks back at her blankly, with a hollow smile. “I am.”

“But... but I’m back now. Things have changed. We can start again.” He continues walking; he doesn’t listen or need to hear.

“The treatment isn’t finished yet,” she says quietly.

He turns with a blank expression and replies, “What treatment?” With that, he is gone.

She stands statuesque in the semi-silence, only the *click* and *tap* of shoes on the marble floor as they process past her, one by one, looking towards the door through which they pass.

She feels a hand on her shoulder and turns to see an ashen man. Something in him looks lesser, like a light is fading. The joviality he once held is no longer present, replaced by gravity. It is Rohan Mehta.

“I suppose we knew it would end like this. Quietly. No speeches. No outrage. Just a notification from someone who’s never heard a man scream because the world won’t stop burning in his head. We weren’t perfect. We failed more than we succeeded. We listened when no one else would – or could. Perhaps we brought a little silence. A little peace.

“Maybe they no longer need us. Maybe out there is so mad now that no one would know the difference. Maybe they are so depraved and dangerous that we’re all diluted into the mix.

“Still, when I see them walk away... I keep thinking of them, the ones who came here with nothing but their trembling hands and broken sleep. And we gave ourselves, and more than we had. We promised to stay. And we did. For a while. And now we pack it all up like it was a mistake. Like none of it mattered...”

“But we were here. We remember. That matters,” she finishes his thought.

He smiles softly and walks away through the door, in the throng of passing freedmen.

There is little sense in staying to watch. She doesn’t know if will continue – or end as rapidly as it began. There is no sense in the absurdity of it all.

Her tired feet move her where she needs to be, where calm can prevail in the tempest. She weaves between the throngs of those heading for the exit. Some faces she recognises, most anonymous. Just the ID codes over the loudspeaker. The siren calling them to their wreck on the rocks of their freedom.

She passes her base camp in the climb, gathers supplies and continues upwards.

She pushes open that highest of doors, heavy against the wind, the cold air whipping inside with violence. But in truth, she craves it. The freshness of the sea air, the rumble of the distant waves, the call of the gulls.

She wraps her scarf and coat tighter. Inside the building the quiet maelstrom of activity has hidden from them a growing storm outside. As Clara stands on the rooftop, the heavy black clouds roll by like trains, spewing out their pollutants in the form of thunder, lighting and rain. The atmosphere without seems to mirror the atmosphere within her. She lights a cigarette with challenge in angry winds. The rain horizontal off the sea.

Now more than ever, would have been a precious moment of salvation, to share the rooftop with *her*. To talk through their thoughts and find solace in connection. The storm bellows and the winds flail her hair across her face. She takes a phone she should not have from her pocket and stares at it with hope. Her final act in that hollow,

unwelcome role had been to use the reactivated pass and permissions to slip quietly into the databases and retrieve the only thing that still mattered.

The call rings out.

Her heart pounds in her chest. She hopes still. A click, and then a voice – automated: “This is Lorelei. I’m not available right now. Please leave me a nice message, though.” <tone>

Her voice – familiar and playful. Clara doesn’t know what to say. What she wants to say. Softly, slowly, tentatively, she pours from within:

“Lorelei.

It’s Clara.

I found your number. I don’t know why I’m calling. Maybe I needed to hear a voice that isn’t my own. Maybe I needed to touch a point that still exists.

I wanted to say hello.

Are you there?

Are you anywhere?

I’ve missed you. I still miss you.

Everything has fallen away. The rules, the Directives. Finished, erased. Nothing stands where it stood. The sands have shifted again. When I reach out for something fixed, my hand closes on air. I want a rock, but there is no rock.

Nothing makes sense now. Or perhaps it never did. I’m adrift in some ocean without shores. I tell myself to understand it. It laughs at me. Understanding is an illusion.

That day on the roof I wanted to reach out, but my hand trembled. So, I said nothing. That day in the meeting I wanted to follow you, but my feet stayed rooted to the floor. I don't know why I stayed. I wish I had followed you.

Since then, I've been trying to explain it to myself – why I stayed, why any of us stay. Why do we stay? Why do we all stay? We tell ourselves it's for safety, for certainty, for stability. But there is none. Everything dissolves, reforms, shifts, as if mocking the idea of permanence. Perhaps that is the only truth: everything changes, and yet it is always the same.

Still, we believe. We believe we matter. We believe we help. We believe in one another. This belief is all we have. Without it, the rest is nothing.

There is no gratitude. No applause. Not even recognition. We don't ask for it. All that exists is each other. We give ourselves away. This must mean something. Even if no one sees. Even if our hands are pushed back. Even if the system does not care. We continue. Because we believe.

I miss you, Lorelei.

I hope this reaches you.

I hope you think of me.

I'm still trying to make sense of it.

I miss you.”

The call clicks off.

She knows it stopped recording some time ago, but somehow that doesn't matter. A confessional prayer whispered to herself.

The wind blows her hair across her face and her words
away out to the ocean beyond.

Chapter 14

The night presses in, her sleep is broken. Restless and uneasy. The rain drums at the windowpanes, angry, far from lulling. The small hours are punctuated by images and thoughts that melt together in surreal artworks. The heat is a weight. She bathes her face in cold water, as if rinsing off the hours. It doesn't calm her fevered mind.

Drifting in and out of consciousness she dreams in kaleidoscope:

She is in a house. Her house. Her home. And yet – not.

It is the place they built together, with laughter in the walls and love in the grain of the floorboards. A home shaped by shared years, made warm by memory. Around her, books line the shelves, their spines softened by hands long familiar. Photographs glow in quiet corners. Every object speaks of a life lived deeply, a woven tapestry of joy, sorrow, and belonging.

The fire is lit. It crackles softly, steady against the hush of a winter morning. A neat pile of firewood waits beside the hearth. The dog, old now, sleeps curled in a patch of sunlight. A clock ticks, patient and certain. Outside, through the window, the garden rests under the weight of frost, still beautiful, still theirs.

Then, without knock, without warning, they come.

Polite men in clean boots. Smiling. Efficient.

They begin dismantling the house piece by piece. The walls come down with care, not violence. Furniture is catalogued and carried out. The fire is smothered. The photographs disappear, one by one. The dog is led away.

She turns to her children, grown now, standing at the edge of it all. They hold clipboards. Nodding. Agreeing.

Pricing the books. Logging the heirlooms. Ticking off memories.

She feels no confusion, no panic. Only the dull certainty of the inevitable.

She reaches out to stop them, to object, to hold on, but her hands pass through the air like smoke.

The morning is fresh. A bracing wind chills her, and the sky is a cold pale blue, blotted by grey clouds. This morning, she moves through the city like a ghost. It is quiet but there is a tension in the air that she cannot name. It is quieter than usual; an atmosphere is building. The city lies in a hush, as if the streets themselves know that something is coming. Deserted, the People, creatures of a night, stay away. Waiting for darkness to fall. For now, the vampires sleep, sundown will be their release.

There is no alert this morning. No buzz of her watch. She can't remember anymore when they stopped coming, when they still kept the time. It doesn't seem important anymore. In the silence she smokes her second cigarette. Like so many times before. Here in the limbo, the nowhere, the purgatory? Between The Institution ahead, the city behind. The gulls circle.

In the stillness there is peace, but an uneasy peace. Here in no-man's land the guns have fallen silent. Alone she goes over the top.

The great door of the gatehouse is open, waiting for her. It welcomes her like a memory she can't be sure is real; familiar, but wrong around the edges. Today there is no need for submission. No requests or demands, rules nor prompts. There are no queues. No scans. No searches. No forced gatherings. No threats. No promises. She takes the keys without the payment. The air lock, more air than lock. Nebulous, nimbus. She walks through the vapour. The keys still work, the cameras still blink. They look on, eternally.

Recoding the nothing. Her pass still passes her on her way. Systems run, The Institution still breathes, inhales and exhales. Hums. Heaves. The machinery grinds eternally. Everlasting.

The silence thunders around her. It pulses through the space between sanity and insanity. It has weight, like something unsaid screaming at the edge of hearing. Not the absence of sound, but the presence of silence – loud, unbearable, absolute. Nothingness. The silence isn't empty. The Institution is. Total. Overwhelming isolation.

It stands alone. Utterly still, emptied of purpose, of people. A monument to a vanished need.

No echoes, nothing stirs. No footsteps. No voices. Absent of the memory of breath. Just the long corridors where the rooms emptied one by one.

She is the only one left.

Not the last patient. Not the last witness. Just the last.

She doesn't feel grief. Nor even fear. It is just the quiet realization that everyone has gone. No word to say why. But she knows.

The illusion of separation falls away; the world within was simply the world, seen differently.

She walks the halls, traces the corridors, climbs the staircases. Only the echoes of her footsteps, her heels on the concrete. The faces gone. Memories linger. Each corner, each wall, each room. Ghosts of times gone haunt her. No Directives, no patients, no staff. No-one left to give orders, to take orders. No-one to interview, to assess, to diagnose. No-one to treat, to cure, to manage. No risks to evaluate. No-one to detain. No-one to release, except herself.

The aloneness is total. Final. The order dissolved into the chaos. She knows within that resistance now is meaningless. To become utterly aware of her own irrelevance in the chasms of silence is somehow simultaneously a relief and an oblivion. The death-drive complete, the pull to return to the stateless calm of non-being. But in a final desperate act of rebellion against the collapse she returns to the repetitive compulsion. Perhaps there is solace, meaning still to be found in structure.

In her office the cameras blink still. The system functions yet. She opens the file. *SPJ: Risk Assessments*. She starts to write: Patient engaging well. Mood stable. Responding well to structured silence. She fills in the reports anyway. She does the work. She files the documents. She books the appointments. She chairs the meetings. It still matters?

It doesn't matter anymore.

She does her rounds, duties fulfilled.

She opens a door she doesn't recognize.

Inside, rows of steel cabinets, folders filled with paper. The air dense with dust and disuse. A forgotten room.

She opens one file. A face stares up. Blank eyes, a name, a diagnosis. Stamped across the front: Void. Another. Same. Another. Every file, every life, reduced to this: Void.

No explanation. No sense. Just records. The people who vanished into the walls. Vanished out of the walls. This place had swallowed them all and given them back. And she is still here. She places a file back and walks out without shutting the door. Only one place left now.

The rooftop gives one last moment. The wind bites at her skin as she lights the last cigarette. Fingers half-numb from cold. She doesn't flinch when the flame catches. The

rooftop empty, save for the humming vents. Below, the layers of concrete, locked doors, and silence.

She has stood here before. Dozens of times. A hundred. Maybe more. Same spot. Same view. The same smoke pulled into her lungs like it meant something. Now, it doesn't.

Clouds drag across the sky. The sea air curls around her in gusts – salt and rust and something faintly decaying. The kind of air that strips things down over time. Metal. Paint. People.

She exhales slowly, watching the smoke vanish into the grey. Memories stir, faces, voices. The warmth of *her*. Now gone.

The cigarette burns unevenly.

This rooftop has been her chapel, her confessional, her judgement. But this is the final time.

The wind howls louder now. It wants her gone. She stares into the distance, where the sky meets the sea and neither care that she is there. She feels it deep within, dense, quiet. Aloneness. Meaninglessness. Nothing heroic. Nothing tragic. Just the end of a routine.

She drops the cigarette. Watches the ember die on the concrete; stands there a while longer, until even the smoke is forgotten.

The day is spent. The time is done. The sun has set.

No alarm. No clock to tell of the final finish, but she knows. She honours it. The madness has fled into the night. And now she must follow. The inside has become the outside, one and the same. It calls to her. She doesn't look back; she can't look back. For her, for the patients, for the staff, for the life that was, for the faith, for the belief, for the

hope that lived, for the times that were good, for the times better forgotten, for all that came before and will never be again, for The Institution: it is the end.

She drives but doesn't know where. Maybe home. Not home. She sits in the traffic. Endless. Around her, the red lights. She opens the window, and the cold air rushes in and fills her. The noise of the city, a low hum, starts to grow, and she fears the crescendo will take her. Paralysis of movement all around.

Men in dark uniforms stride between the rows of vehicles.

"Go back," they say. "Turn around. Leave your vehicles. Walk. Road closed." They command.

There has been a murder in the road. A killing. A death. A woman dragged from her vehicle – a particularly brutal knifing. The transfiguration is progressing. She isn't surprised.

She leaves her vehicle. The night is cold, and there is a large white moon low in the sky. But there is a heat to the city, a madness rising. The atmosphere is hot, psychotic, paranoid. The fervour is encompassing, and the night nurse is nowhere to be found. In her dissociation, she starts to walk. She doesn't know where nor why. Through sections of the city she does not know. The mania compels her.

Around her, neon lights glare brightly, beating down. They erase the stars. The hedonistic loudness overwhelming. People laugh in hysteria and yell in delirium. They drink outside bars, smiling insanely. A man vomits against a wall. The world spins and twists and races past her. Bright colours. Clowns. Blurred faces in the crowd, sounds she doesn't recognise. Lights flash and pop. Down streets and avenues she walks. Around bends and corners, down alleyways. She crosses the Styx to the gates of Hades.

Men fight in the street. Laughter bubbles over. She crosses the canal bridges, the flower market is gone, but beneath, in the darkness, a man violates a woman – or are they screams of consent? Who would know? No one cares. Passers-by look at their screens and record themselves. She walks on through the frenzy. A man lies homeless, dying on the floor. She walks past. They all walk past. The neon lights continue to beat down mercilessly. Buy, buy, buy. Noise and music. Borderline. Histrionic. Disposable humanity. The filth and litter blow on the wind, and in the corners they inject their addictions to escape the madness. They queue outside a pharmacy for medications to kill the pain; to make it all go away. When everyone is sick, no one is sick. Everyone is happy. Aren't they?

But the city has absorbed them all. Now they all walk the long halls. Only they are paved with concrete and neon. The delusions are more expensive, the restraints invisible, but the madness? It's everywhere. And no-one now is watching the doors.

Further still she walks in the cold heat of the night.

Down the corridors, past the cells. Lost and deluded, she finds herself outside an old building. Smaller than the giants that surround it, reaching up to the sky. But she can see it once held a dignity, long since stripped of its purpose and pride, repurposed. Yet behind the no longer functioning neon signage and the modern clad front, it retains something of its ancient nobility. She recognises what it once was. She has seen them in pictures.

A small crumbling stone wall marks its perimeter. An overgrown yard of thornbush and ruin, where great joys and sorrows once unfolded; their human traces erased by the treachery of modernity. In the pale moonlight, the ancient little church exudes its solemn beauty, quiet and still. Nestled among dark trees, its silhouette honest. Built of weathered stone as black as the sky, with narrow pointed arch windows lined in lead. Aged stained-glass windows

long cracked or boarded over. She can still see some fragments of deep blue, red and violet. A single tall spire pierces upwards like a bony finger with a rusted iron cross. Gargoyle-like creatures still cling to the upper stone, frozen in timeless grimaces.

It has long since been converted.

Its sacred beauty scarred by a modern glass entrance but now sealed up like a tomb. She can see from the fractured plastic sign reading '*Library*' that it had been repurposed to house community books. A concept which again, has long since lost its value. The building long since closed. Now in ruin.

She wishes, just for a second that she had either of those sanctuaries now to seek answers. Still, she knows. Truth and reality, just points of view. Perspective. The only truth to be found inside is the one she would take in with her. Then what sense?

Around her in the carnival of absurdity, the revellers who no longer believe in their own beliefs. The noise of the city swells up around her, the voices, the laughter, the screams, the din of the crowds.

And they all become the same, united in the orgy and ecstasy: the innocent, the fools and the wicked. The naive, the deluded and the depraved. The good and the bad. The sane and the mad. And in this moment, she is swallowed by the danger, by the madness, and by the night.