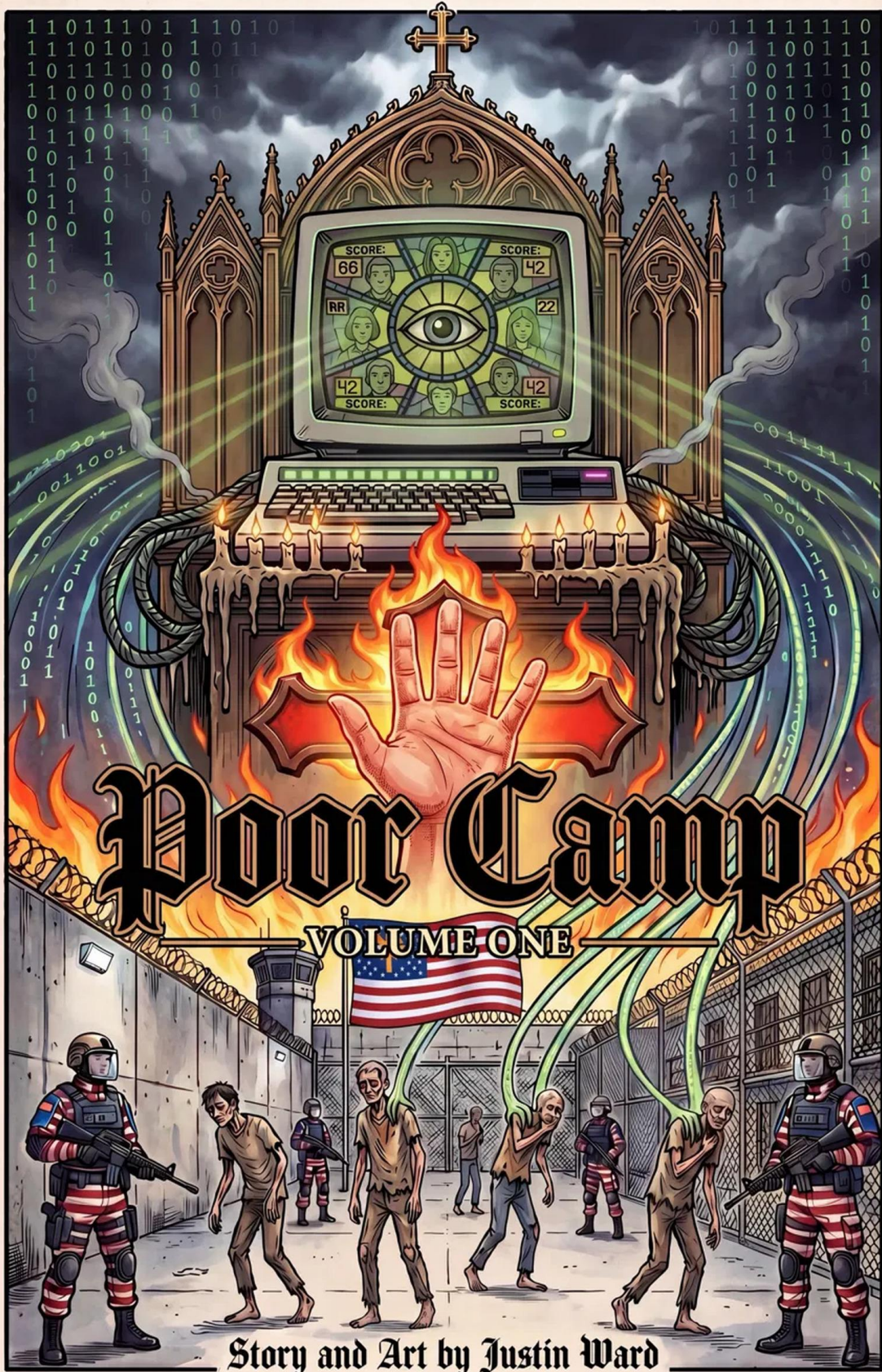
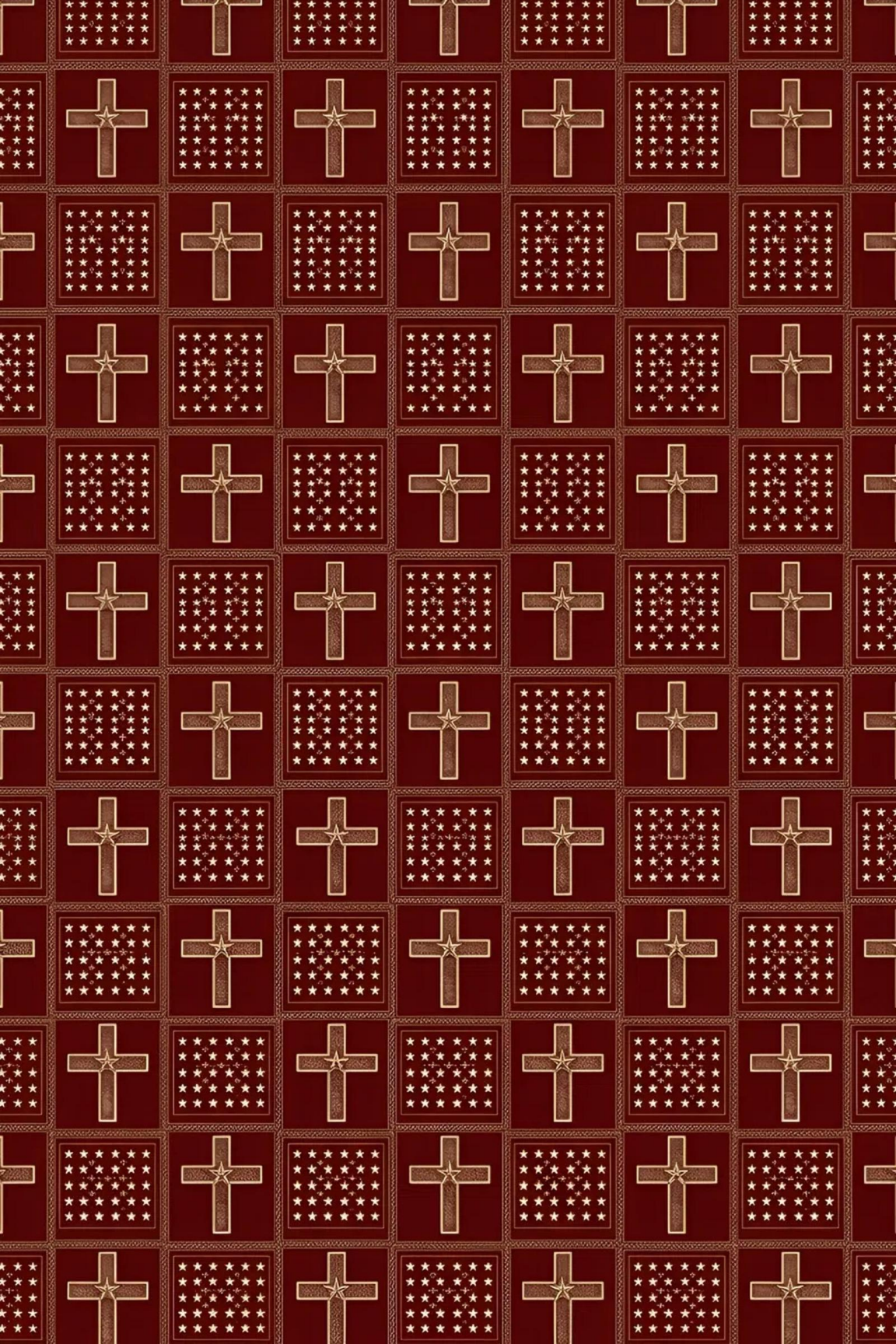




Poor Camp

VOLUME ONE

Story and Art by Justin Ward



POOR
CAMP



POOR CAMP

SACRIFICE — “What is given is never lost. What is kept was never yours.”

CONFORMITY — “The many are never wrong. Stand where your neighbour stands.”

DISCRETION — “A closed mouth keeps a clean record.”

OBEDIENCE — “You are not asked to understand. You are asked to comply.”

PURITY — “A clean body, a clean ledger, a clean soul.”

PROSPERITY — “Blessing is measured. What you have is what you deserve.”

FAITH — “Doubt is a debt. Pay it in service.”

DUTY — “The machine does not rest. Neither should you.”

DESTINY — “Your place was assigned before you were born. Take comfort.”

WISDOM — “Wisdom is knowing which questions are not asked.”

DEBT — “What is owed is owed. The ledger does not forgive.”

ETERNAL — “Your children inherit the balance.”

CREDITS

Story & art by Justin Ward



NO ONE IS EXEMPT. THEREFORE NO ONE IS WRONGED.





A NATION'S GREATEST HOPE

Greater America

THE UNIFICATION SIXTY FOUR STARS SHINING AS ONE

LEGEND



THE UNION

FIFTY STATES - FOURTEEN UNIFIED TERRITORIES



NOT YET WELCOMED

HOME



ONE FAMILY, REUNITED
IN THE YEAR OF OUR LORD



POOR CAMP

OBEDIENCE



ISSUE 4 • WHISPERS OF THE PAST
STORY AND ART BY JUSTIN WARD



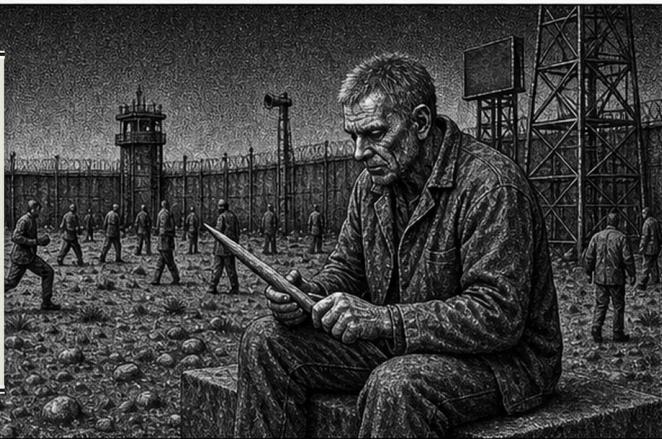




My beloved children. Tonight I speak to you about OBEDIENCE. The obedient child is the blessed child. For the scripture is plain: submit yourselves to every ordinance of man for the Lord's sake, whether it be to the king, as supreme. I did not place Myself above you. God placed Me. To obey Me is to obey Him; to defy Me is to defy Him. Servants, be obedient to them that are your masters — with fear and trembling, in singleness of your heart, as unto Christ. Obedience is not submission—it is LOVE. When you obey the algorithm, you love your neighbor. When you comply with your ration, you love your God. Disobedience is not rebellion. It is selfishness. And selfishness is the root of all sin.

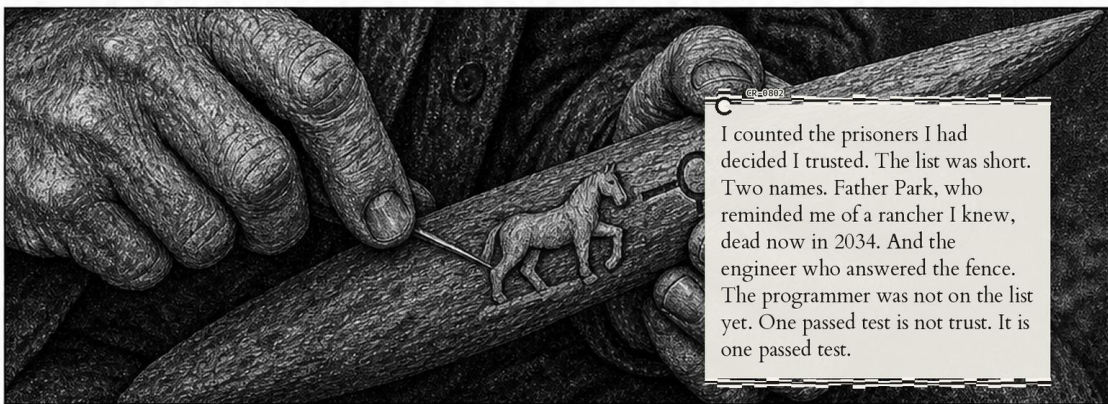
CP-0001

The yard had a rhythm. You learned the rhythm or the rhythm killed you. The rhythm was: which guards walked the perimeter at what time, where the sensor blind spots were, when the kitchen brought the second meal cart, which prisoner was watching for the chance to inform on which other prisoner. I had the rhythm down by my second week. I had been keeping it in my head ever since.



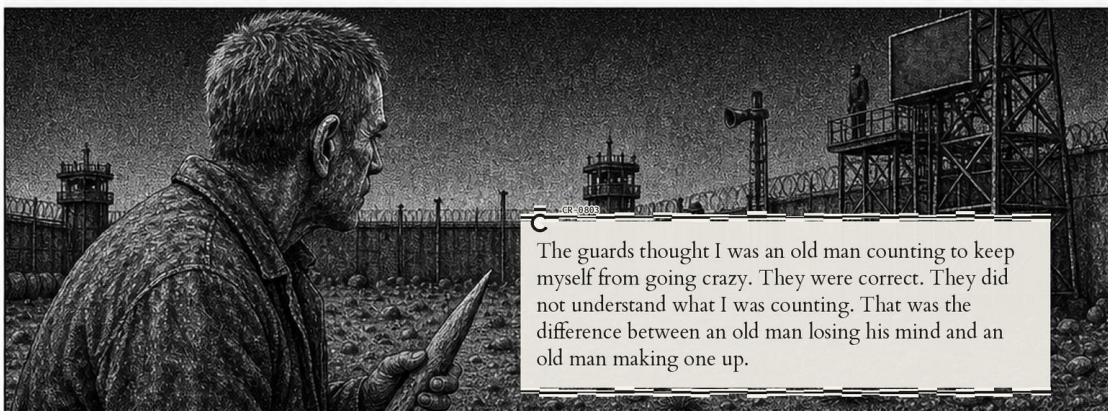
CP-0002

I counted the prisoners I had decided I trusted. The list was short. Two names. Father Park, who reminded me of a rancher I knew, dead now in 2034. And the engineer who answered the fence. The programmer was not on the list yet. One passed test is not trust. It is one passed test.



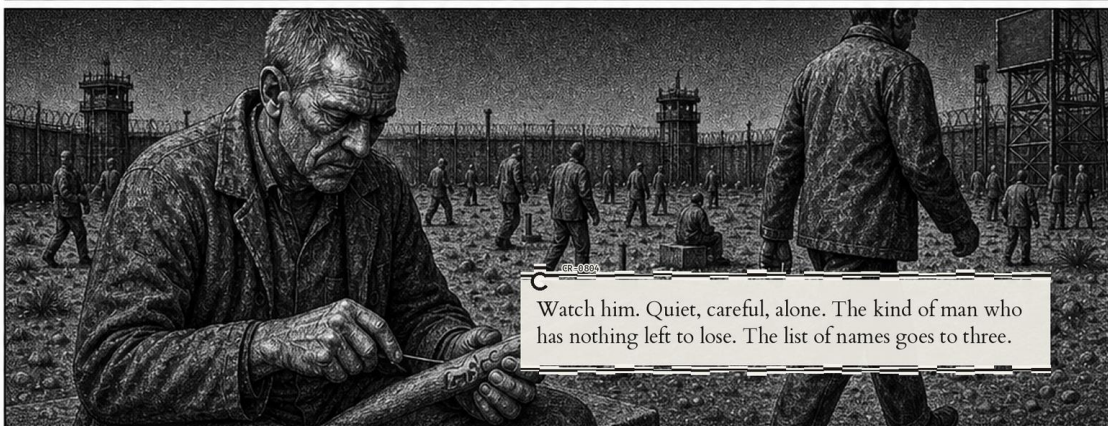
CR-0003

The guards thought I was an old man counting to keep myself from going crazy. They were correct. They did not understand what I was counting. That was the difference between an old man losing his mind and an old man making one up.



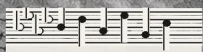
CR-0004

Watch him. Quiet, careful, alone. The kind of man who has nothing left to lose. The list of names goes to three.

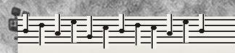




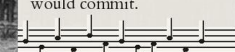
I do not remember leaving the data center. I remember being inside the data center and then being outside the data center, and the transition between those two states was something my body did without consulting me. I had walked maybe forty yards before I understood that I was walking. I kept walking. The understanding did not slow me down.



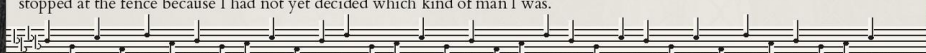
The guard at the perimeter was deciding whether to call in. I knew the moment he decided I would have something to explain.



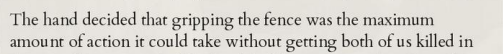
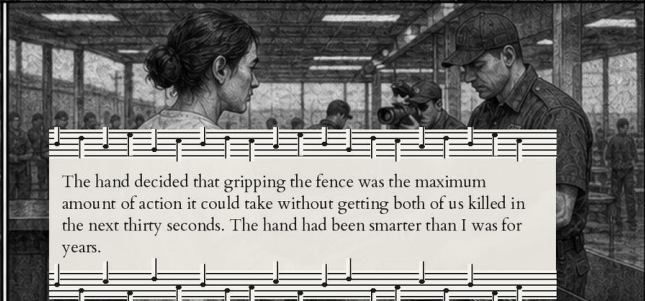
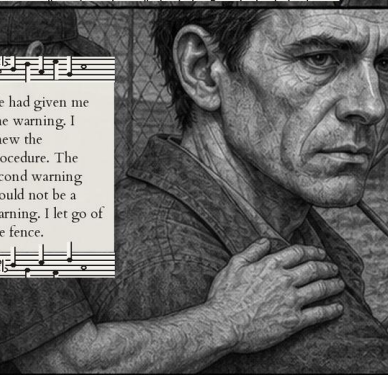
I kept walking anyway. I had calculated, somewhere in the part of me that does math, that I had about ninety seconds before he would commit.



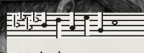
The fence was the regime's main argument against love. Two hundred yards of it. Twelve feet high. Crossable in about forty seconds for a younger man with proper shoes. Crossable in the seconds it would take to be shot for a man already convicted. I stopped at the fence because I had not yet decided which kind of man I was.



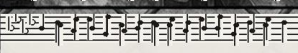
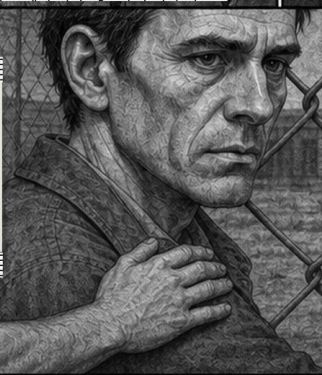
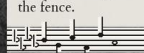
My hand made the decision before the rest of me did. The hand decided to grip. The hand decided not to climb.



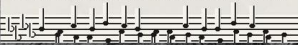
The hand decided that gripping the fence was the maximum amount of action it could take without getting both of us killed in the next thirty seconds. The hand had been smarter than I was for years.

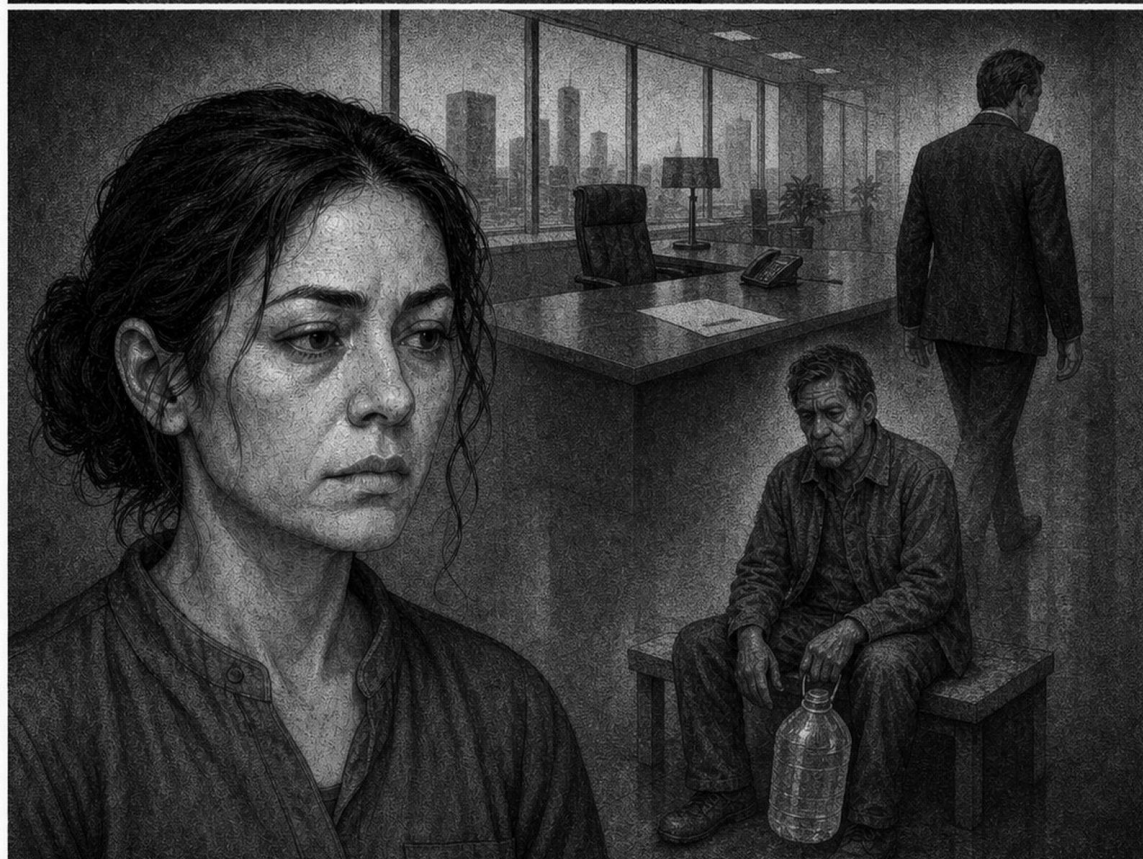
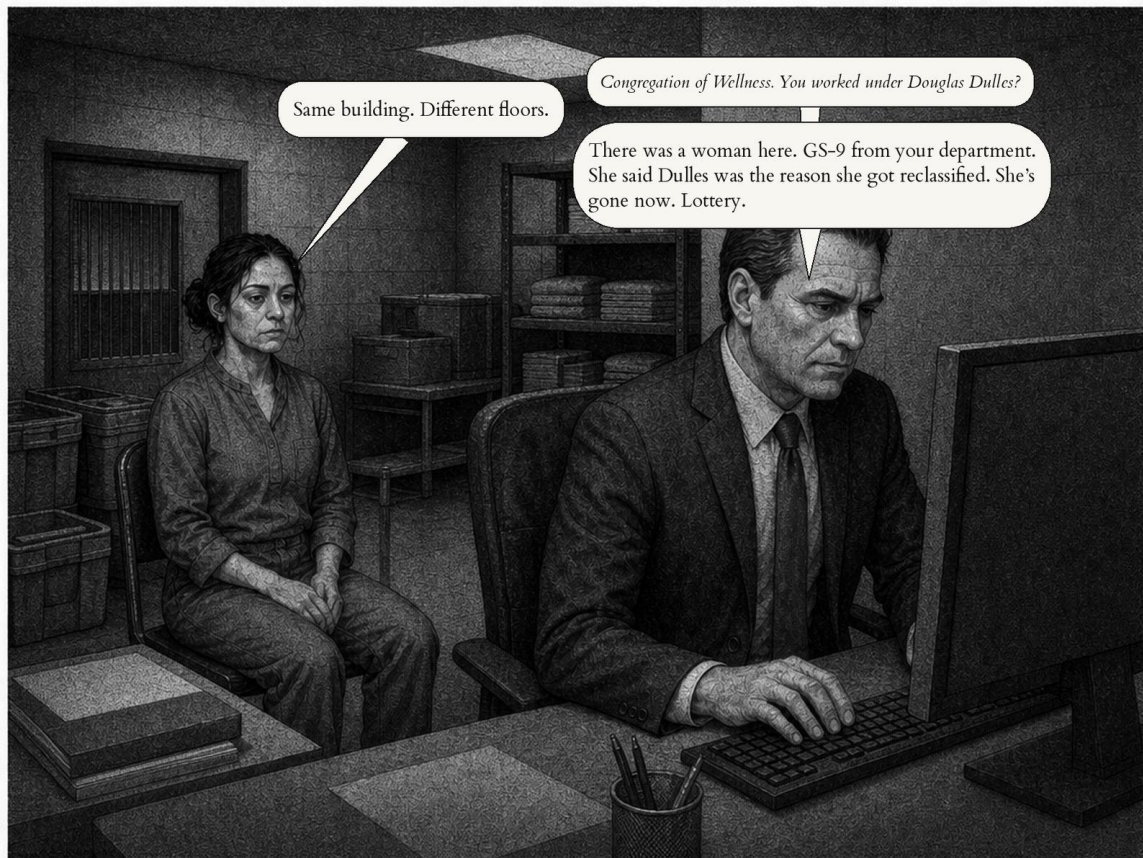


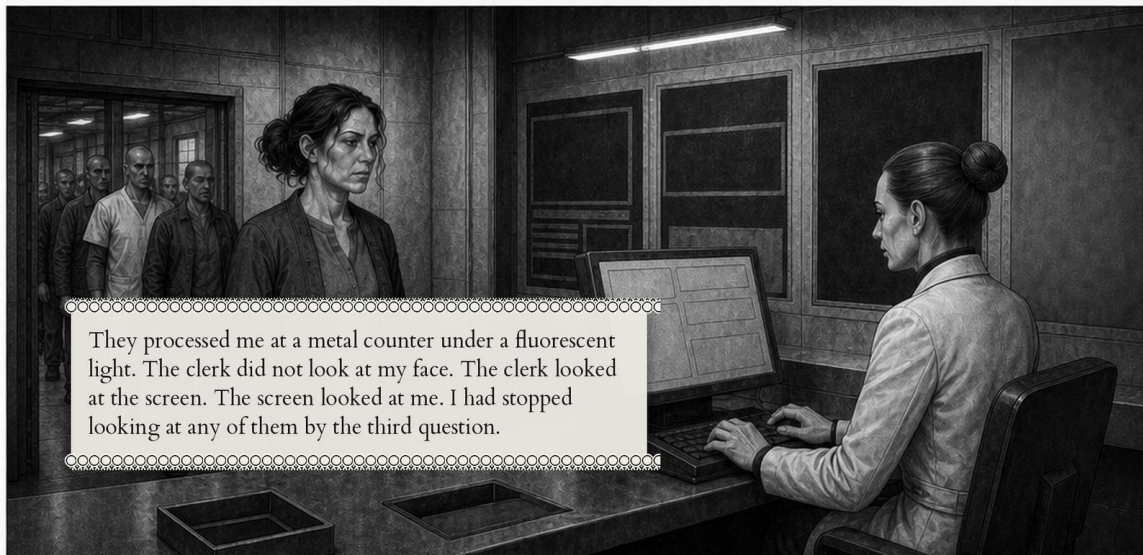
He had given me one warning. I knew the procedure. The second warning would not be a warning. I let go of the fence.



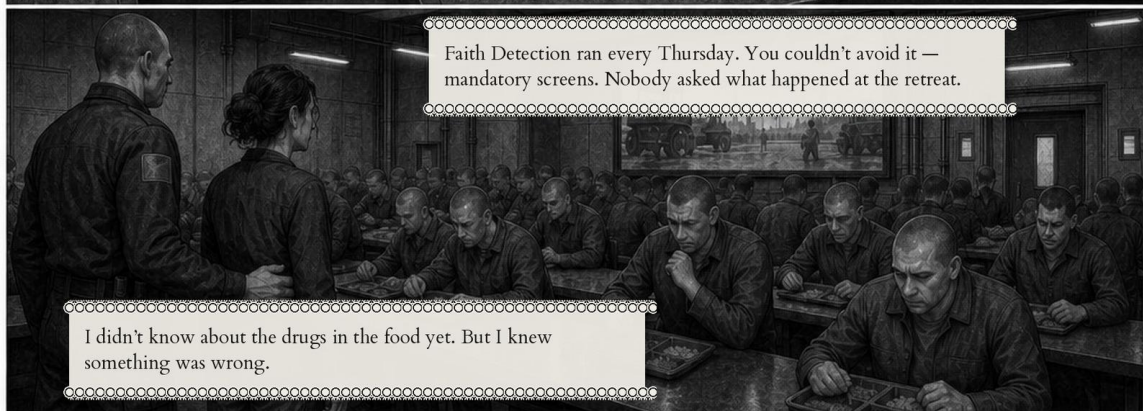
She did not see me. The asymmetry was its own piece of cruelty. I had been the only thing she had not yet been told about. The regime had brought her here to a camp where she did not know I was. Whoever had decided to bring her here had decided that. The regime did not do anything by accident at this scale. I did not yet know who in the regime had decided this. I had begun, somewhere underneath the music, to want to find out.





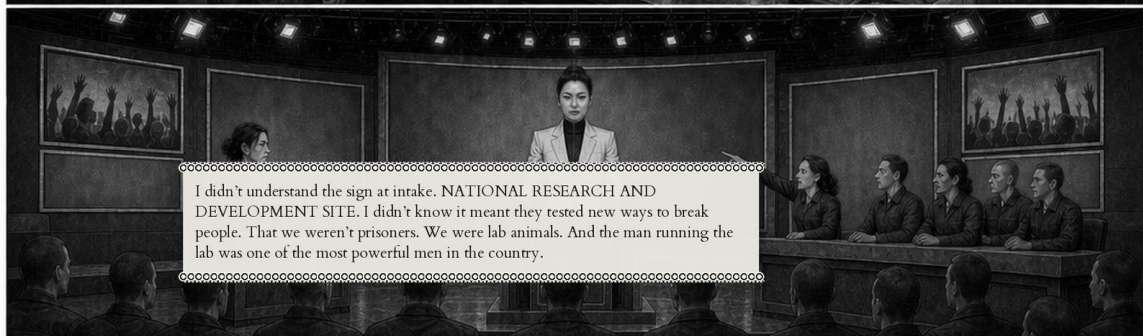


They processed me at a metal counter under a fluorescent light. The clerk did not look at my face. The clerk looked at the screen. The screen looked at me. I had stopped looking at any of them by the third question.



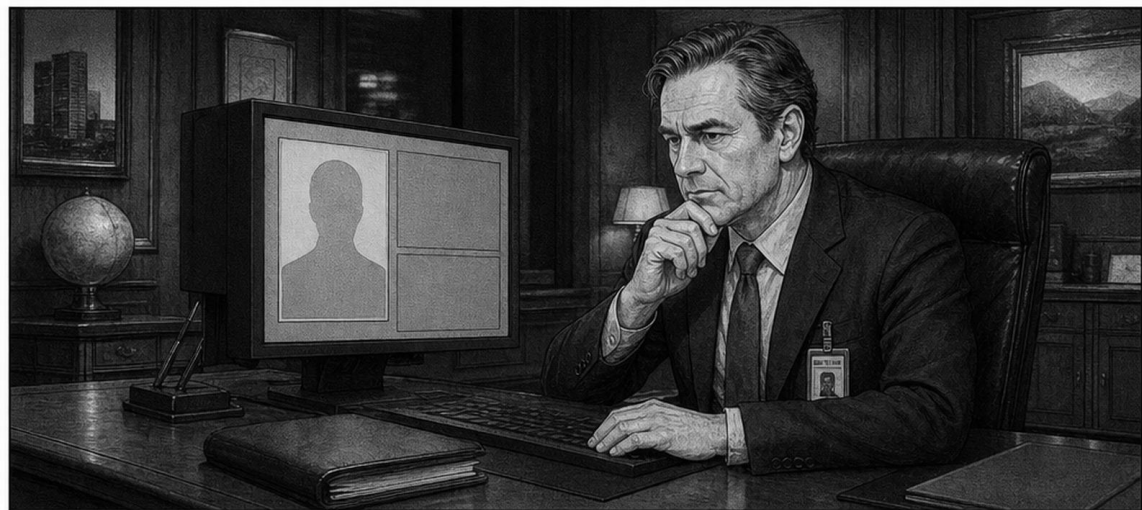
Faith Detection ran every Thursday. You couldn't avoid it — mandatory screens. Nobody asked what happened at the retreat.

I didn't know about the drugs in the food yet. But I knew something was wrong.

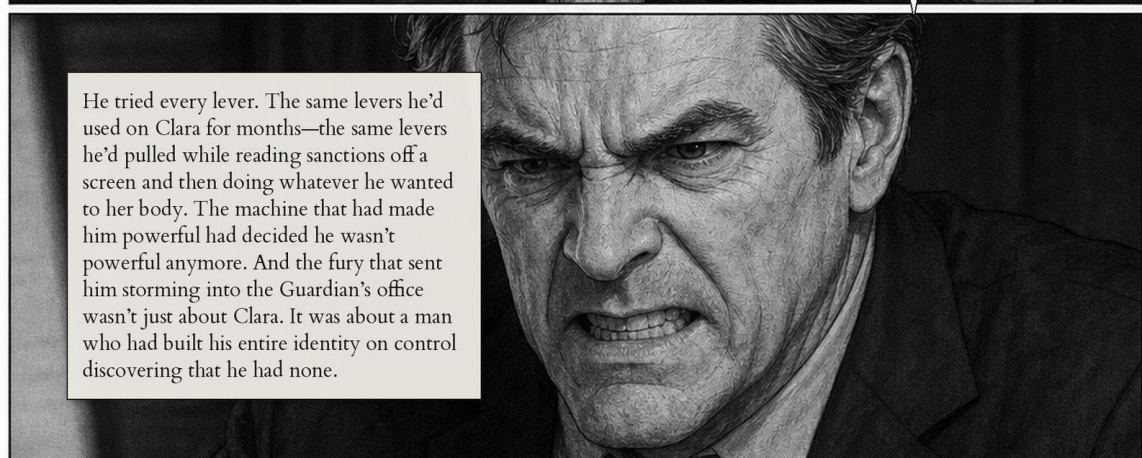


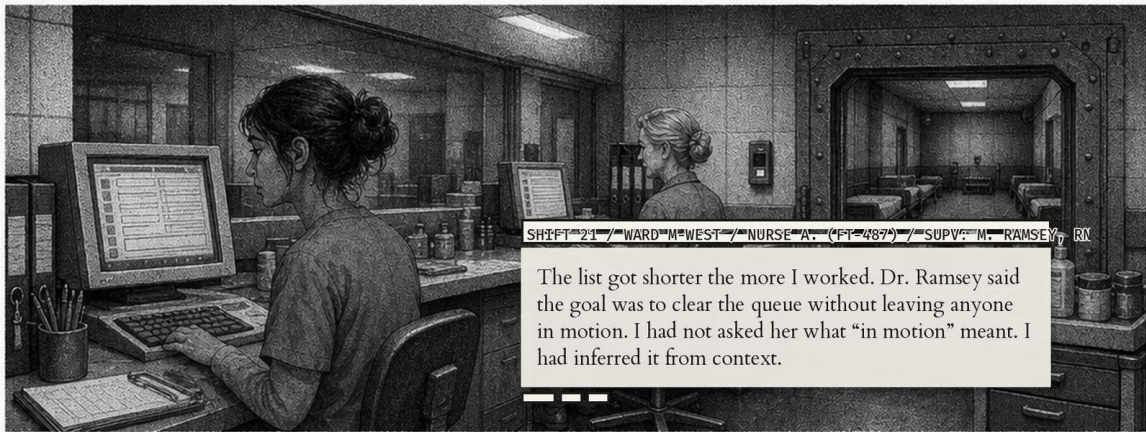
I didn't understand the sign at intake. NATIONAL RESEARCH AND DEVELOPMENT SITE. I didn't know it meant they tested new ways to break people. That we weren't prisoners. We were lab animals. And the man running the lab was one of the most powerful men in the country.





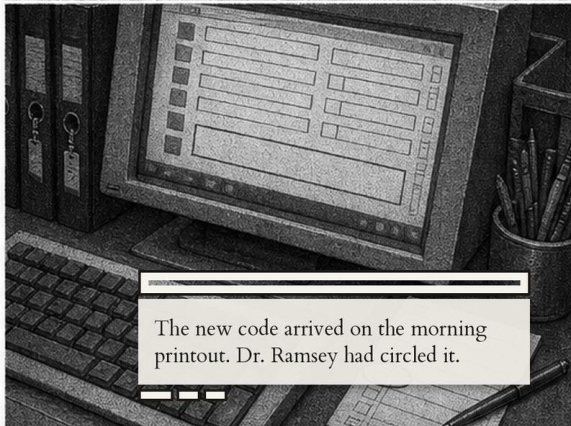
He tried every lever. The same levers he'd used on Clara for months—the same levers he'd pulled while reading sanctions off a screen and then doing whatever he wanted to her body. The machine that had made him powerful had decided he wasn't powerful anymore. And the fury that sent him storming into the Guardian's office wasn't just about Clara. It was about a man who had built his entire identity on control discovering that he had none.



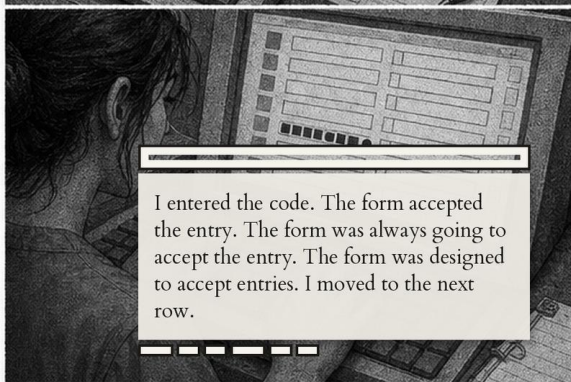
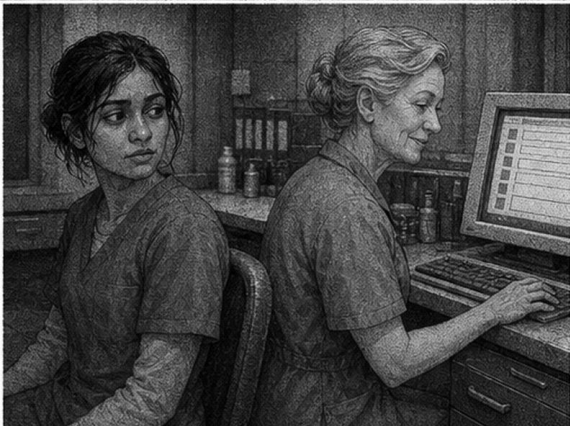


SHIFT 21 / WARD M WEST / NURSE A (F 487) / SUPV: M. RAMSEY RN

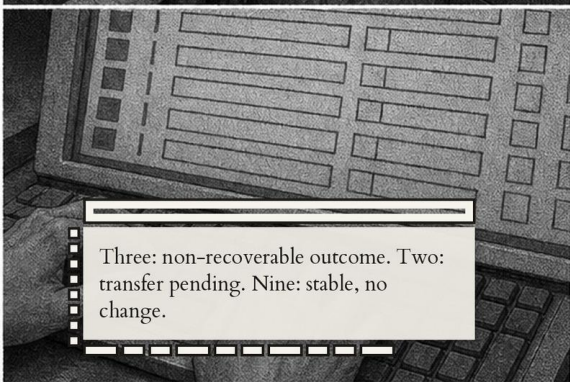
The list got shorter the more I worked. Dr. Ramsey said the goal was to clear the queue without leaving anyone in motion. I had not asked her what “in motion” meant. I had inferred it from context.



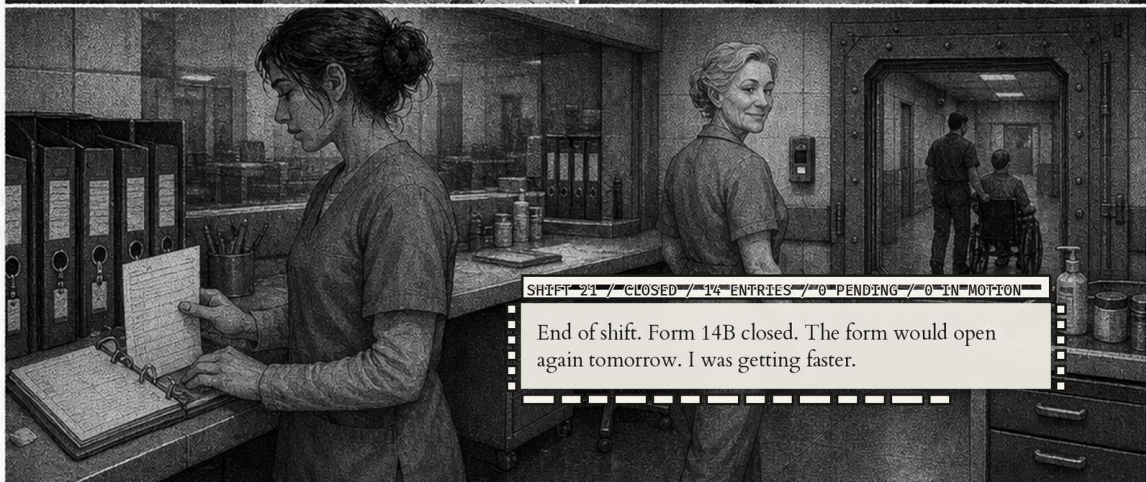
The new code arrived on the morning printout. Dr. Ramsey had circled it.



I entered the code. The form accepted the entry. The form was always going to accept the entry. The form was designed to accept entries. I moved to the next row.

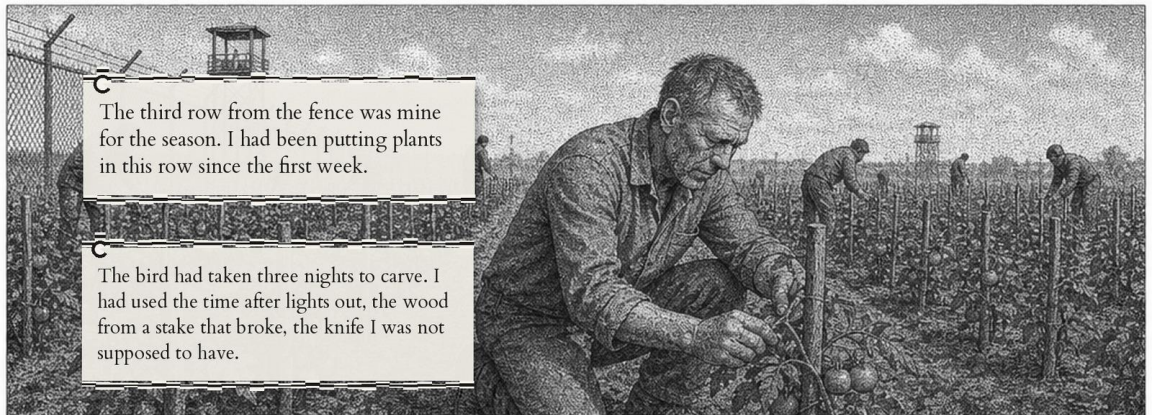


Three: non-recoverable outcome. Two: transfer pending. Nine: stable, no change.



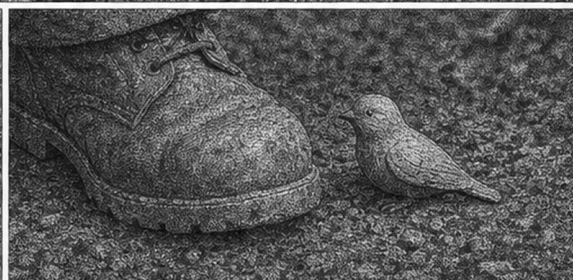
SHIFT 21 / CLOSED / 14 ENTRIES / 0 PENDING / 0 IN MOTION

End of shift. Form 14B closed. The form would open again tomorrow. I was getting faster.



C The third row from the fence was mine for the season. I had been putting plants in this row since the first week.

C The bird had taken three nights to carve. I had used the time after lights out, the wood from a stake that broke, the knife I was not supposed to have.



C The drop was at the base of the third stake. The straw mulch covered things small enough not to be searched. The guard at the corner had a habit of looking at his watch every seven minutes. I knew when.



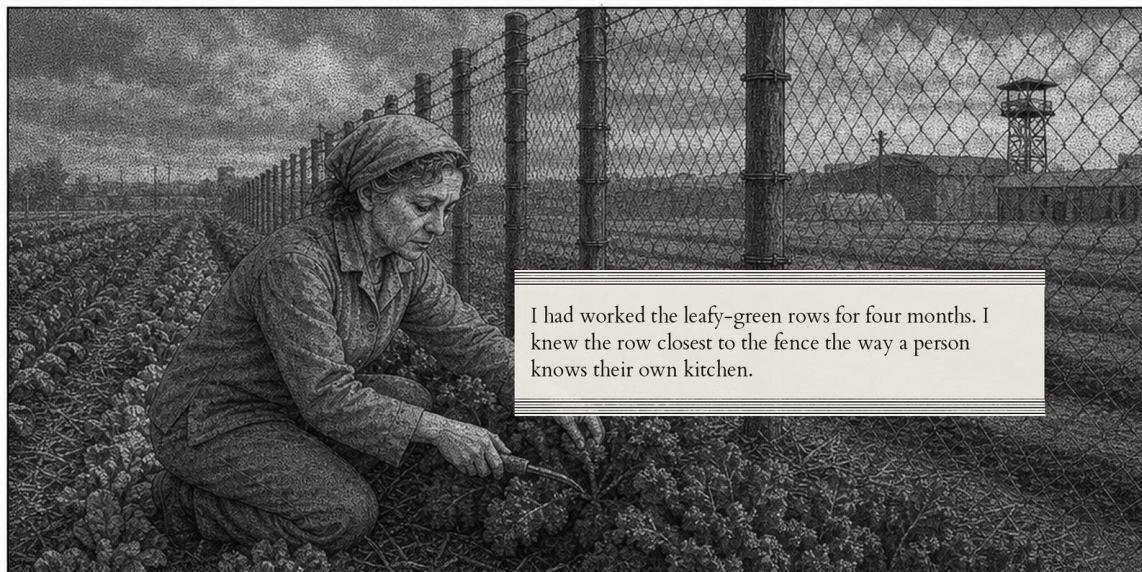
C I had never seen her face. I had seen the shape of her back, the way she held her shoulders when she paused, the rhythm of her hands in the leafy-green rows. I had been leaving things at the third stake for sixteen weeks. She had been leaving things for me at the same place.



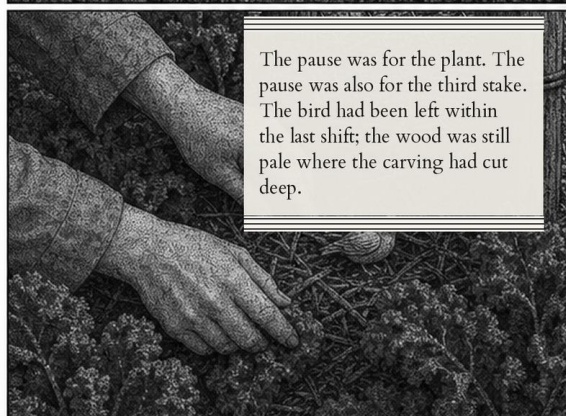
C Sometimes she paused. The pause was not for the work. Her hand would go to her sleeve and she would look at something only she could see. I did not know what she was looking at. I had taught myself not to wonder.



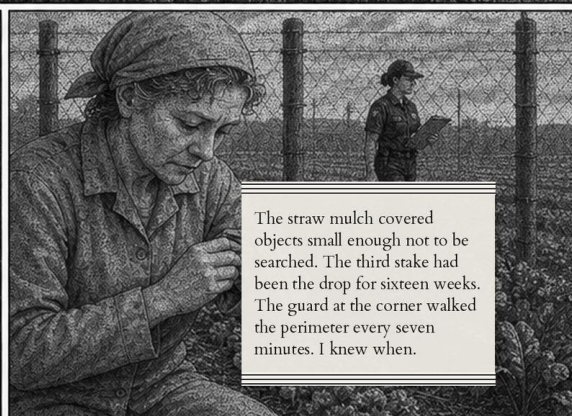
C I walked back down the row toward the next stake. The bird was at the third stake by the fence. She would find it at the shift change. The shift change was three hours away. There was a great deal of work to do between now and then.



I had worked the leafy-green rows for four months. I knew the row closest to the fence the way a person knows their own kitchen.



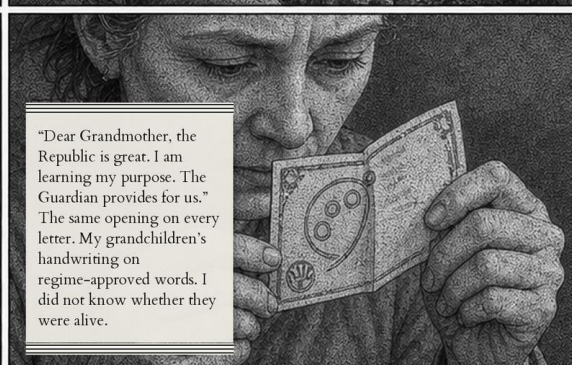
The pause was for the plant. The pause was also for the third stake. The bird had been left within the last shift; the wood was still pale where the carving had cut deep.



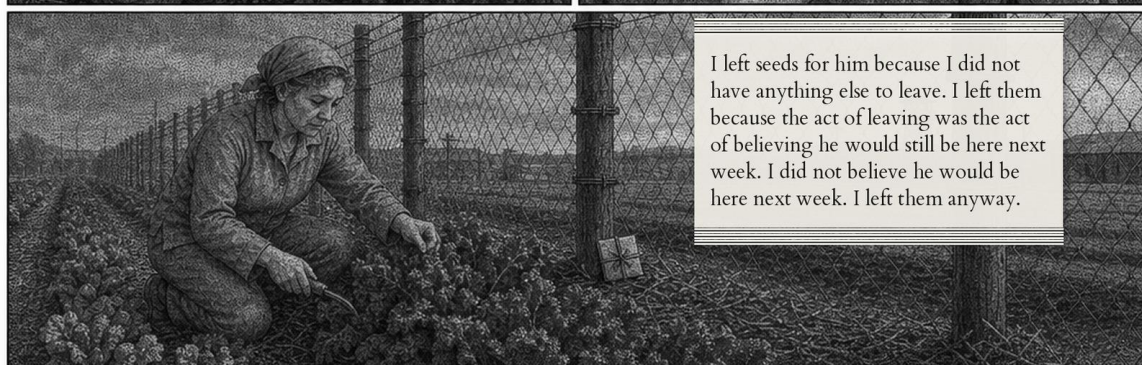
The straw mulch covered objects small enough not to be searched. The third stake had been the drop for sixteen weeks. The guard at the corner walked the perimeter every seven minutes. I knew when.



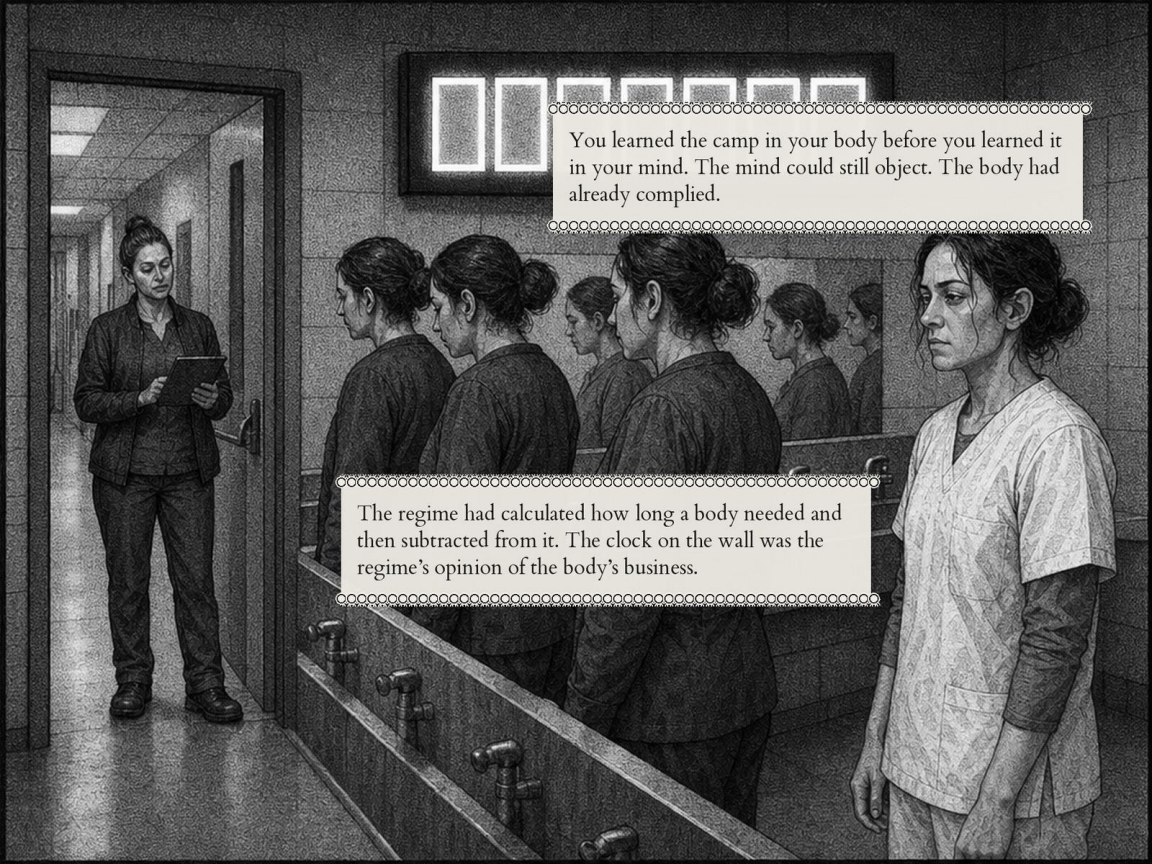
I had eight folded letters from my grandchildren in my sleeve pocket. They had been written on the regime's templates. I had read them so many times the folds were giving way.



"Dear Grandmother, the Republic is great. I am learning my purpose. The Guardian provides for us." The same opening on every letter. My grandchildren's handwriting on regime-approved words. I did not know whether they were alive.



I left seeds for him because I did not have anything else to leave. I left them because the act of leaving was the act of believing he would still be here next week. I did not believe he would be here next week. I left them anyway.



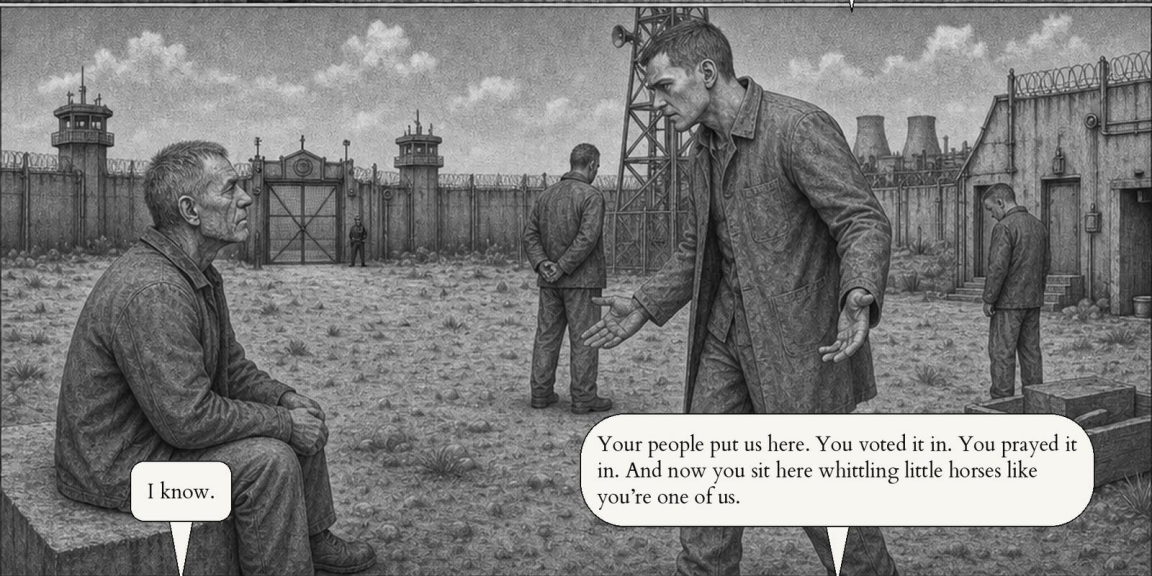
You learned the camp in your body before you learned it in your mind. The mind could still object. The body had already complied.

The regime had calculated how long a body needed and then subtracted from it. The clock on the wall was the regime's opinion of the body's business.



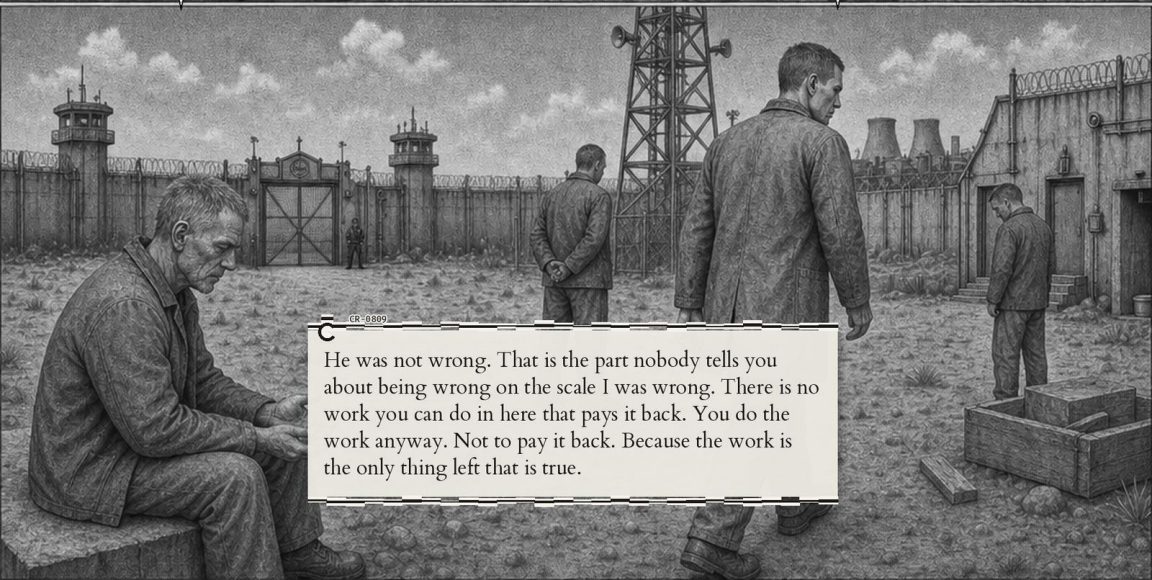


I know what you were. Before. Rancher. One of the ones with the flags and the church and the right opinions.



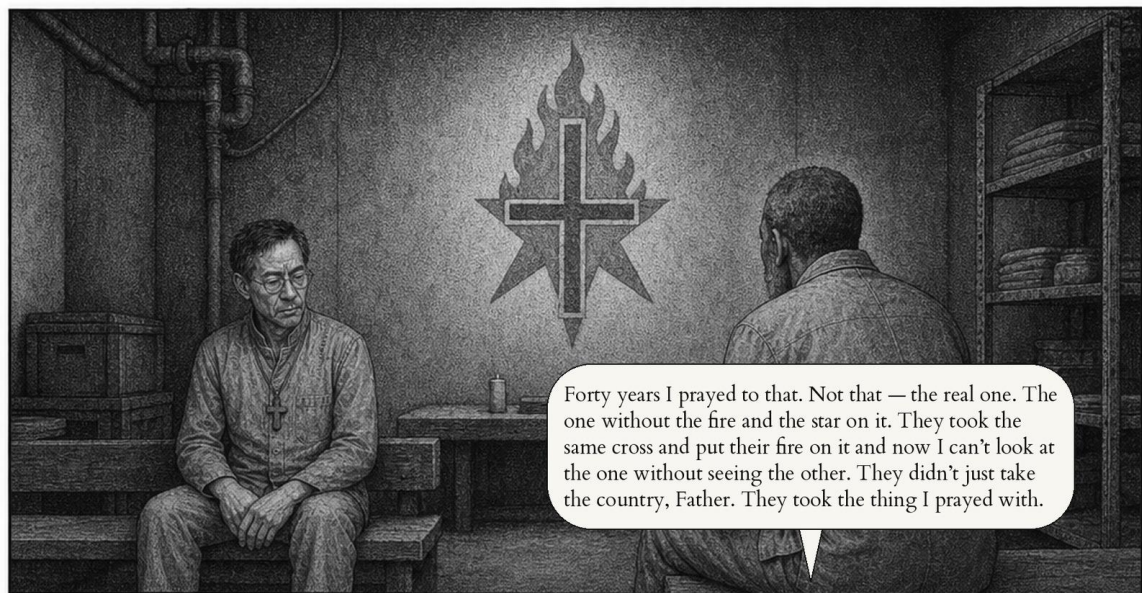
I know.

Your people put us here. You voted it in. You prayed it in. And now you sit here whittling little horses like you're one of us.

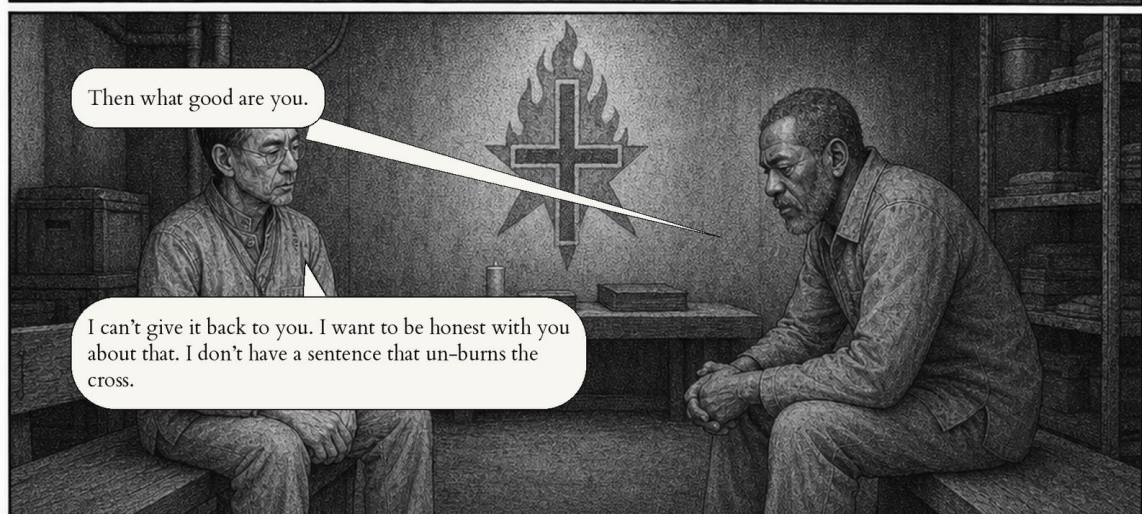


CR-0809

He was not wrong. That is the part nobody tells you about being wrong on the scale I was wrong. There is no work you can do in here that pays it back. You do the work anyway. Not to pay it back. Because the work is the only thing left that is true.

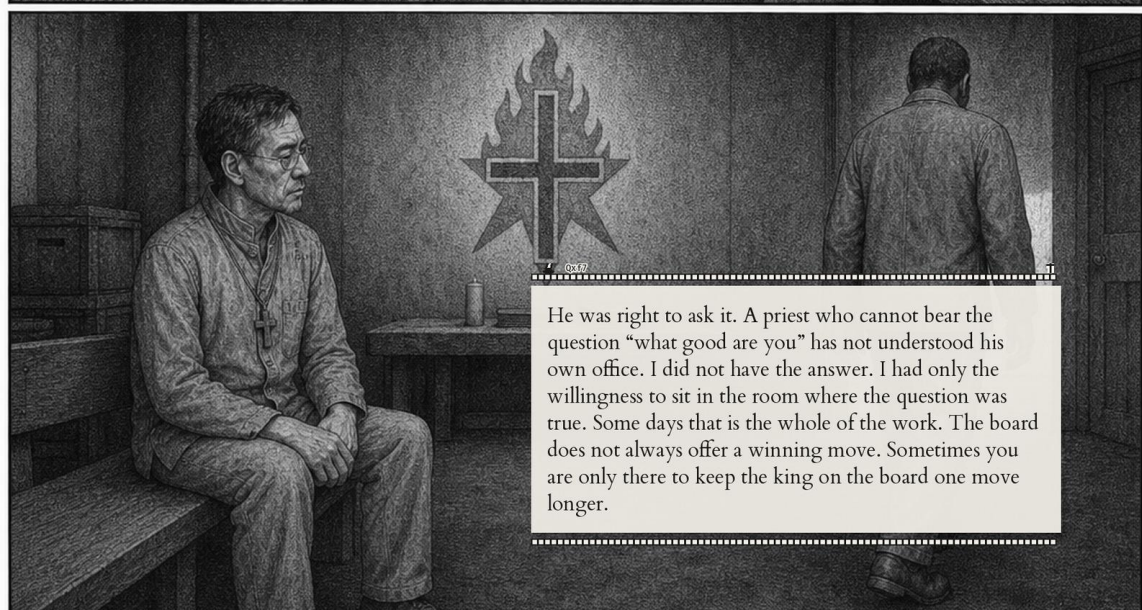


Forty years I prayed to that. Not that — the real one. The one without the fire and the star on it. They took the same cross and put their fire on it and now I can't look at the one without seeing the other. They didn't just take the country, Father. They took the thing I prayed with.

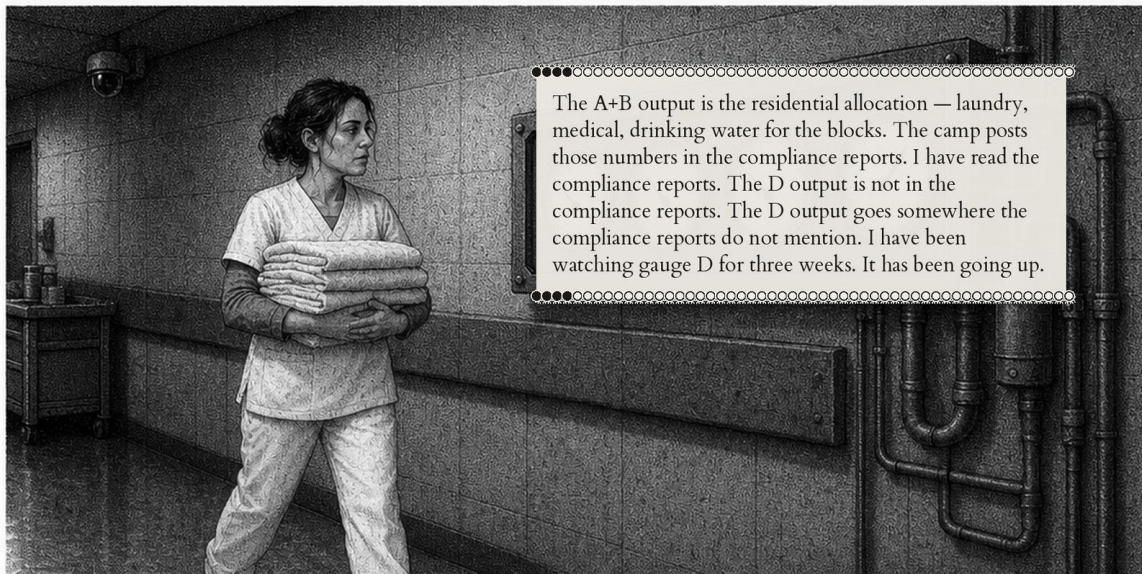


Then what good are you.

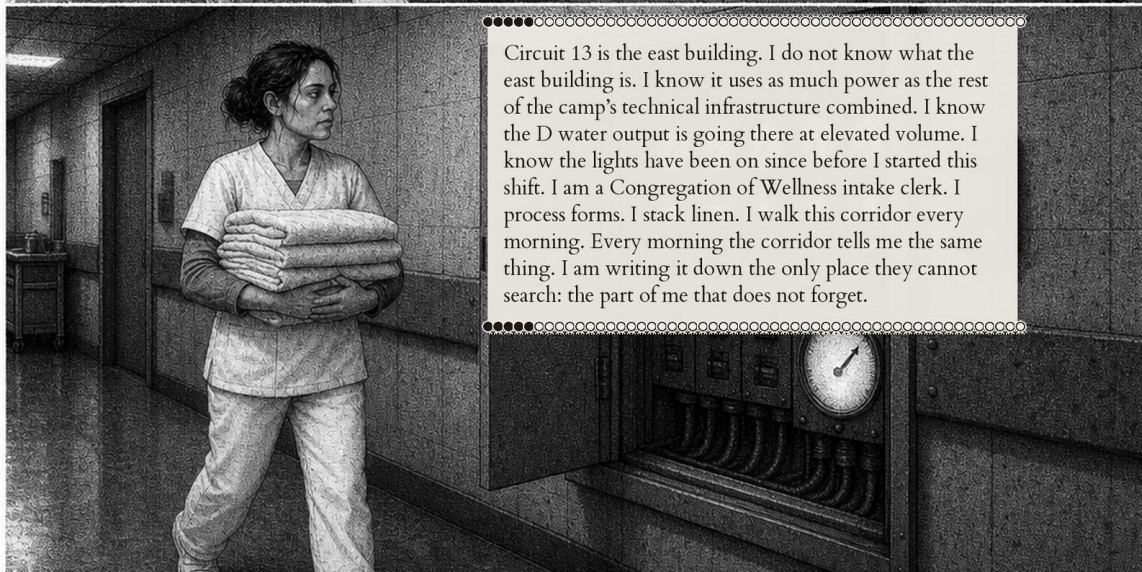
I can't give it back to you. I want to be honest with you about that. I don't have a sentence that un-burns the cross.



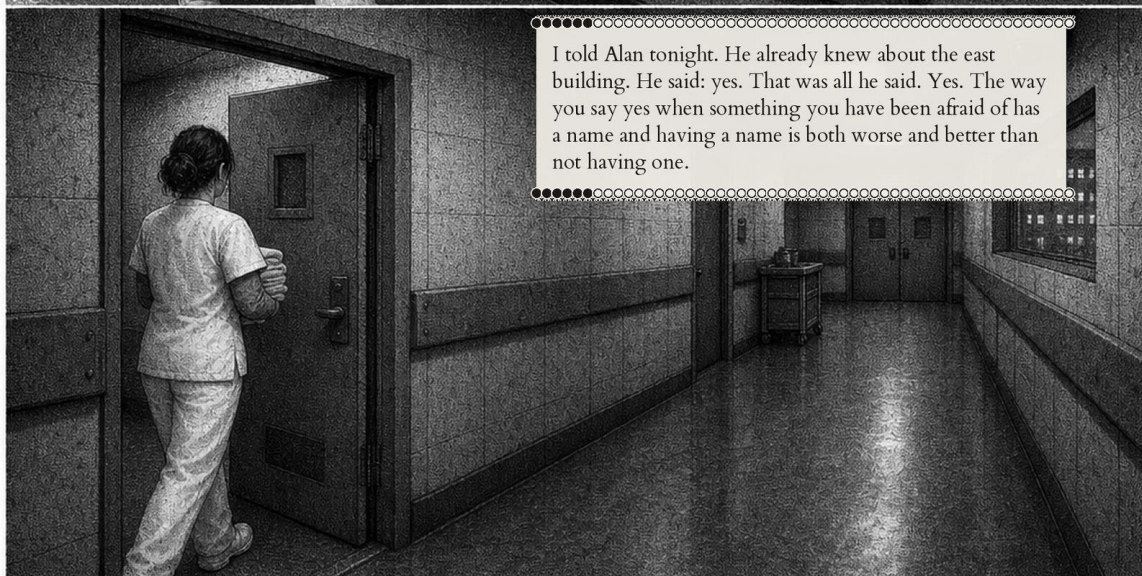
He was right to ask it. A priest who cannot bear the question "what good are you" has not understood his own office. I did not have the answer. I had only the willingness to sit in the room where the question was true. Some days that is the whole of the work. The board does not always offer a winning move. Sometimes you are only there to keep the king on the board one move longer.



The A+B output is the residential allocation — laundry, medical, drinking water for the blocks. The camp posts those numbers in the compliance reports. I have read the compliance reports. The D output is not in the compliance reports. The D output goes somewhere the compliance reports do not mention. I have been watching gauge D for three weeks. It has been going up.



Circuit 13 is the east building. I do not know what the east building is. I know it uses as much power as the rest of the camp's technical infrastructure combined. I know the D water output is going there at elevated volume. I know the lights have been on since before I started this shift. I am a Congregation of Wellness intake clerk. I process forms. I stack linen. I walk this corridor every morning. Every morning the corridor tells me the same thing. I am writing it down the only place they cannot search: the part of me that does not forget.



I told Alan tonight. He already knew about the east building. He said: yes. That was all he said. Yes. The way you say yes when something you have been afraid of has a name and having a name is both worse and better than not having one.

POOR CAMP

FAITH



ISSUE 7 • THE DEPTHS OF DESPAIR

STORY AND ART BY JUSTIN WARD

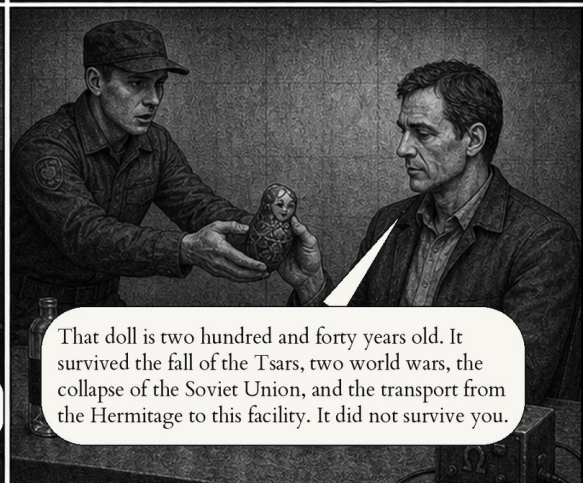




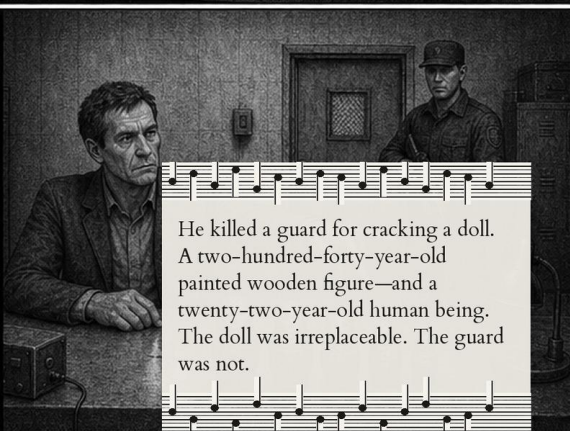
My beloved children. Tonight I speak to you about FAITH. For the scripture is plain: trust in the Lord with all thine heart, and lean not unto thine own understanding. Faith is not doubt. Faith is not questioning. Faith is BELIEVING—wholly, completely, without reservation—in the Leader's guidance for us all. I guide you because I see what you cannot. I allocate because I know what you need before you know it yourselves. The algorithm is My hand extended. The water ration is My love measured. The food schedule is My wisdom portioned. To have faith is to accept that My guidance is perfect—not because you understand it, but because you BELIEVE it. Blessed are they that have not seen, and yet have believed. The faithful do not ask why. The faithful do not demand explanations. The faithful receive what is given and call it grace. Believe in My guidance. Believe in the machine that carries it. Believe that everything I do, I do for you. Faith is not a choice. Faith is the only rational response to a God who loves you this much.



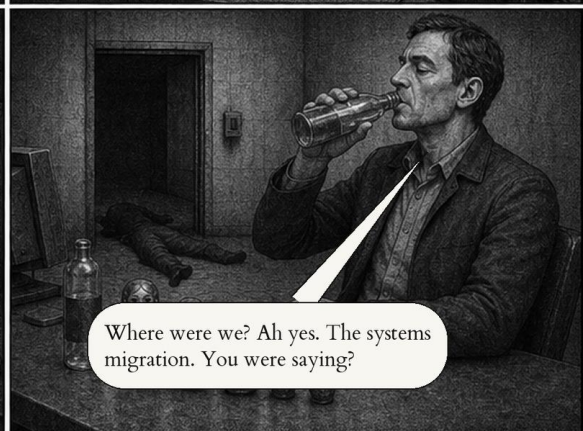
Pick it up.



That doll is two hundred and forty years old. It survived the fall of the Tsars, two world wars, the collapse of the Soviet Union, and the transport from the Hermitage to this facility. It did not survive you.



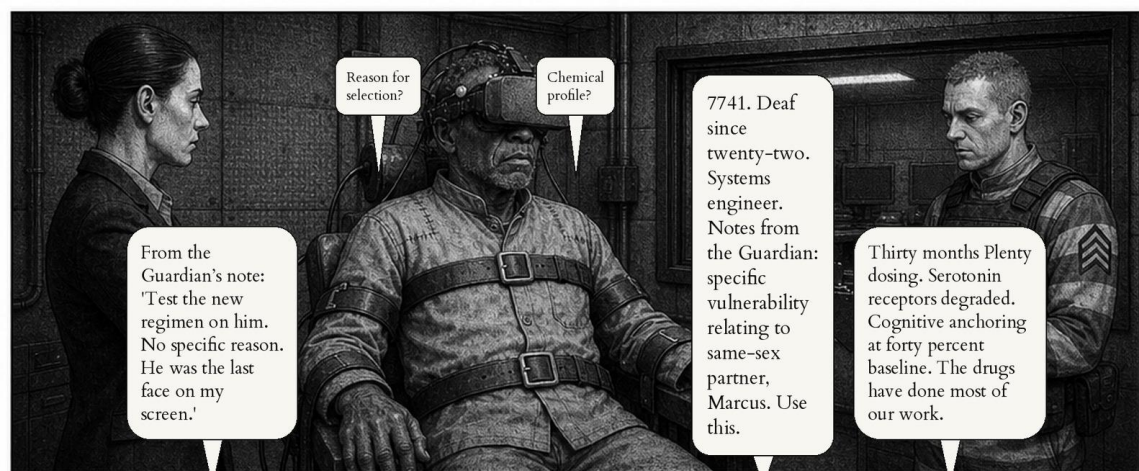
He killed a guard for cracking a doll. A two-hundred-and-forty-year-old painted wooden figure—and a twenty-two-year-old human being. The doll was irreplaceable. The guard was not.



Where were we? Ah yes. The systems migration. You were saying?

They took Ray to the part of the facility the sign called Research & Development. Where the regime prototyped new ways to break people. The Guardian knew about Marcus. Thirty-two years of love. And he was going to use it as a scalpel.





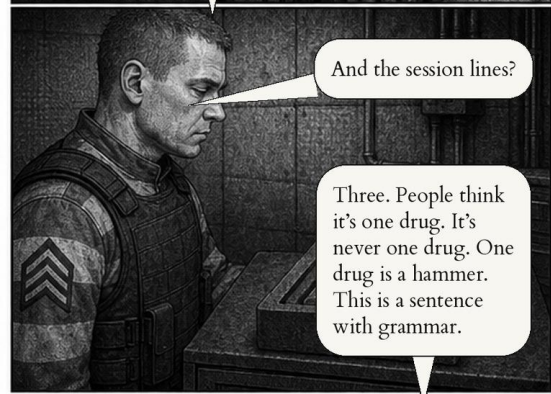
From the Guardian's note: 'Test the new regimen on him. No specific reason. He was the last face on my screen.'

Reason for selection?

Chemical profile?

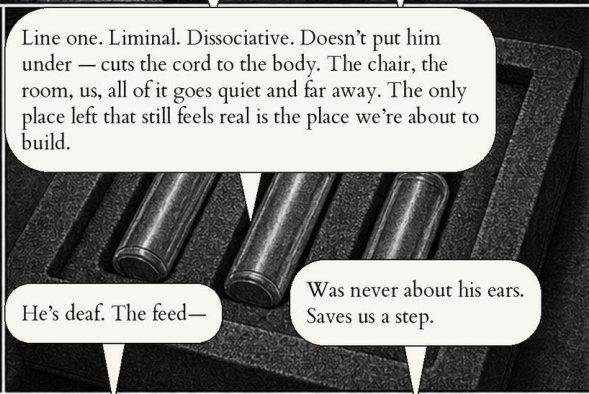
7741. Deaf since twenty-two. Systems engineer. Notes from the Guardian: specific vulnerability relating to same-sex partner, Marcus. Use this.

Thirty months Plenty dosing. Serotonin receptors degraded. Cognitive anchoring at forty percent baseline. The drugs have done most of our work.



And the session lines?

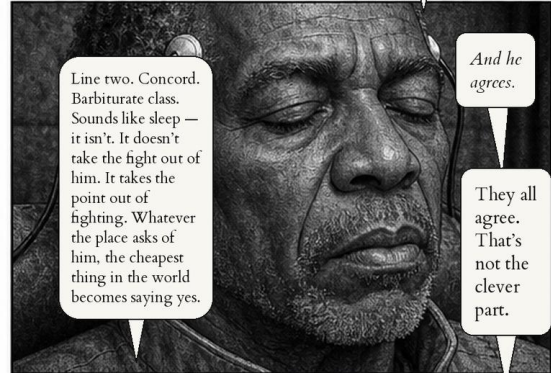
Three. People think it's one drug. It's never one drug. One drug is a hammer. This is a sentence with grammar.



Line one. Liminal. Dissociative. Doesn't put him under — cuts the cord to the body. The chair, the room, us, all of it goes quiet and far away. The only place left that still feels real is the place we're about to build.

He's deaf. The feed—

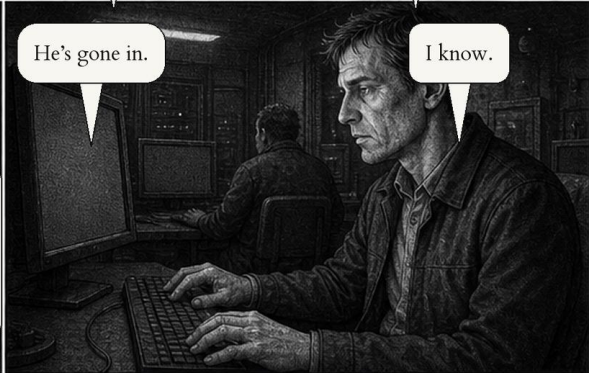
Was never about his ears. Saves us a step.



Line two. Concord. Barbiturate class. Sounds like sleep — it isn't. It doesn't take the fight out of him. It takes the point out of fighting. Whatever the place asks of him, the cheapest thing in the world becomes saying yes.

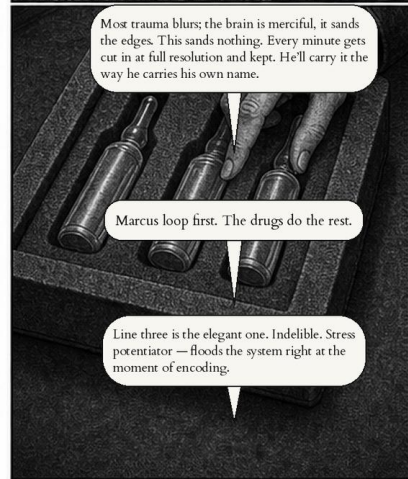
And he agrees.

They all agree. That's not the clever part.



He's gone in.

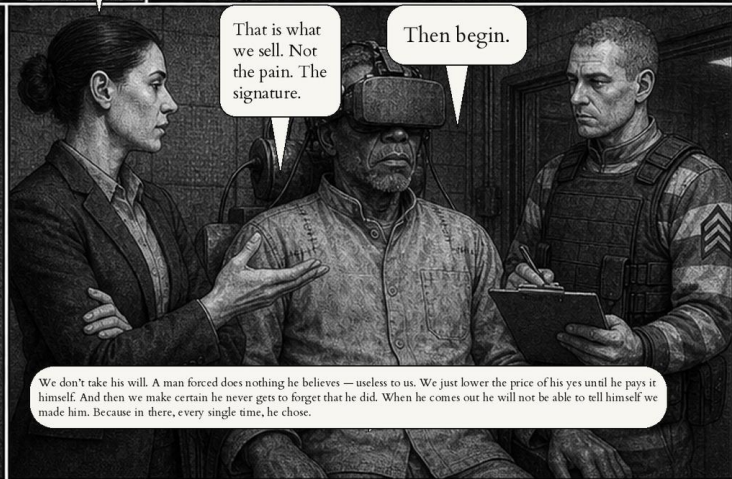
I know.



Most trauma blurs; the brain is merciful, it sands the edges. This sands nothing. Every minute gets cut in at full resolution and kept. He'll carry it the way he carries his own name.

Marcus loop first. The drugs do the rest.

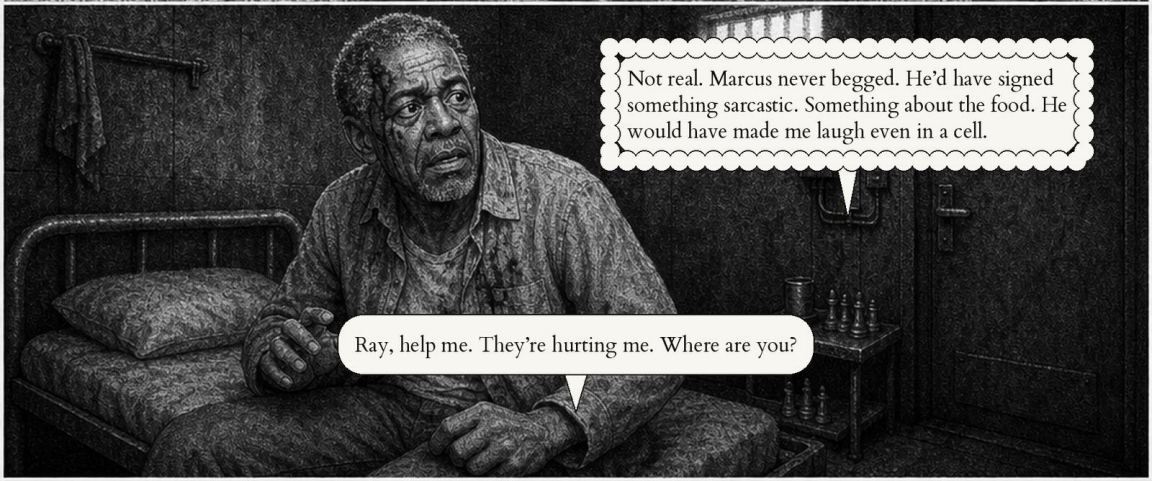
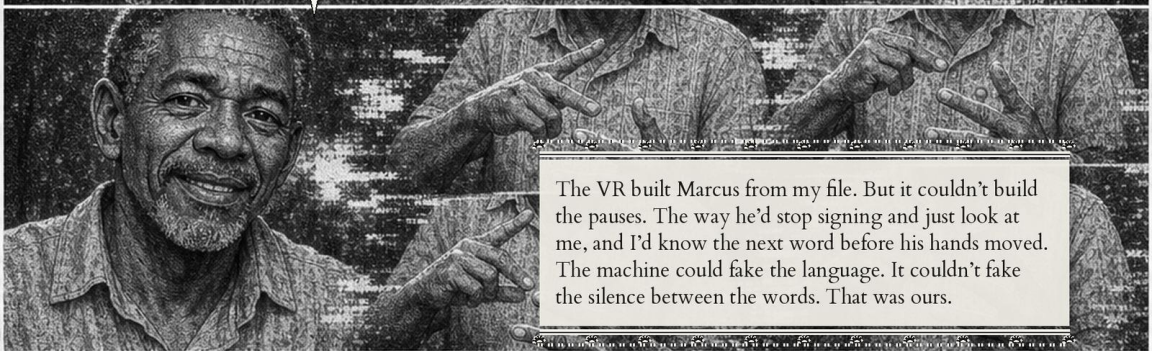
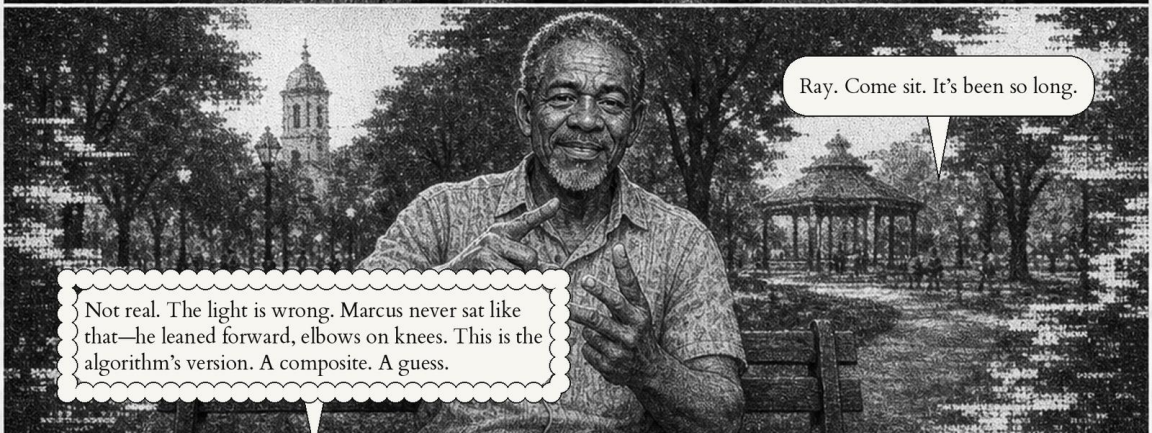
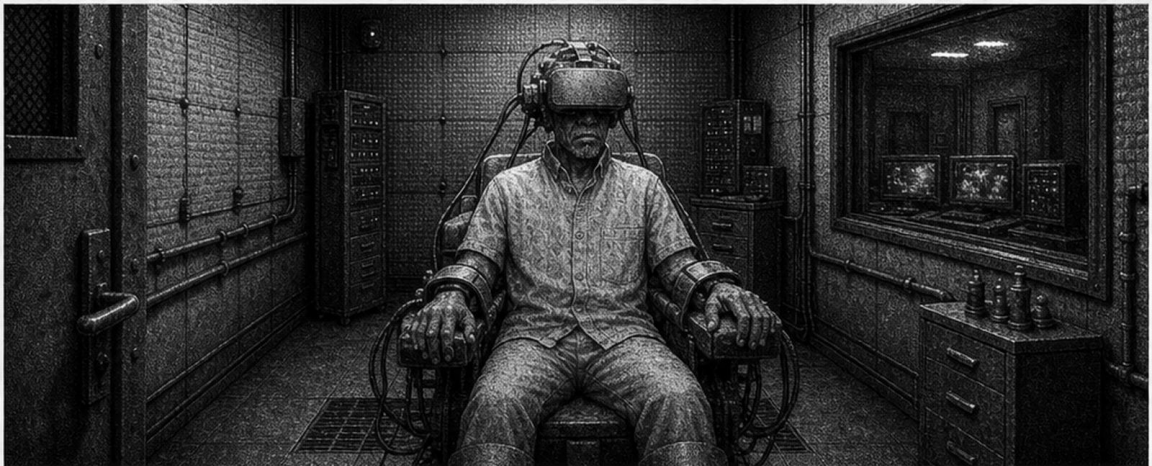
Line three is the elegant one. Indelible. Stress potentiator — floods the system right at the moment of encoding.

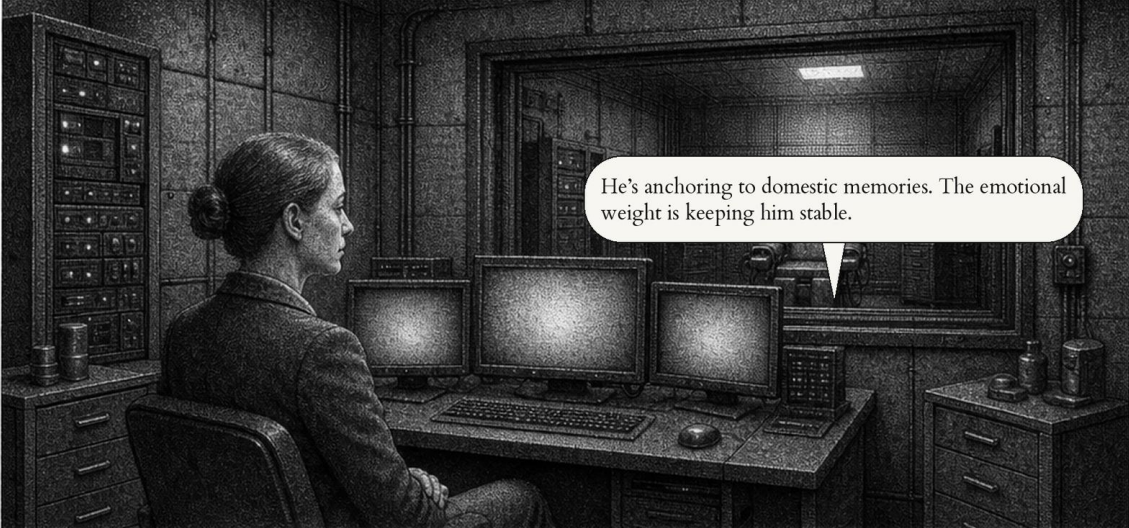


That is what we sell. Not the pain. The signature.

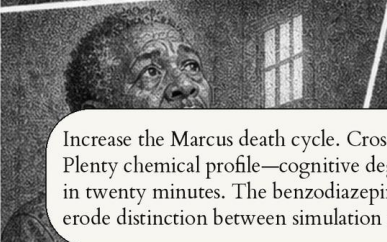
Then begin.

We don't take his will. A man forced does nothing he believes — useless to us. We just lower the price of his yes until he pays it himself. And then we make certain he never gets to forget that he did. When he comes out he will not be able to tell himself we made him. Because in there, every single time, he chose.

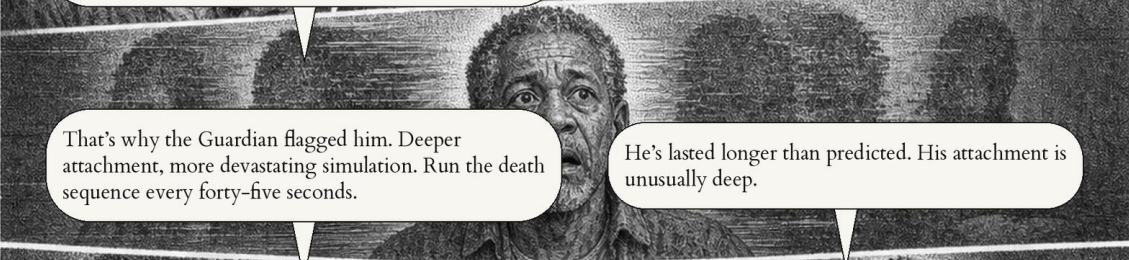




He's anchoring to domestic memories. The emotional weight is keeping him stable.

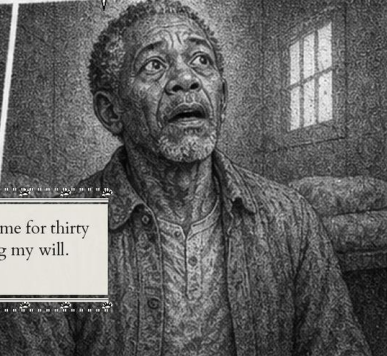
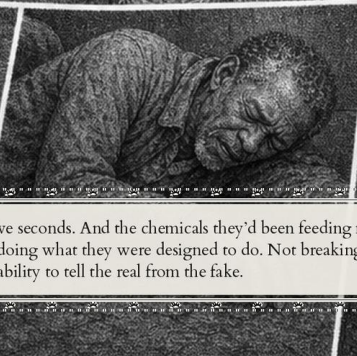


Increase the Marcus death cycle. Cross-reference with Plenty chemical profile—cognitive degradation window in twenty minutes. The benzodiazepine residue will erode distinction between simulation and memory.

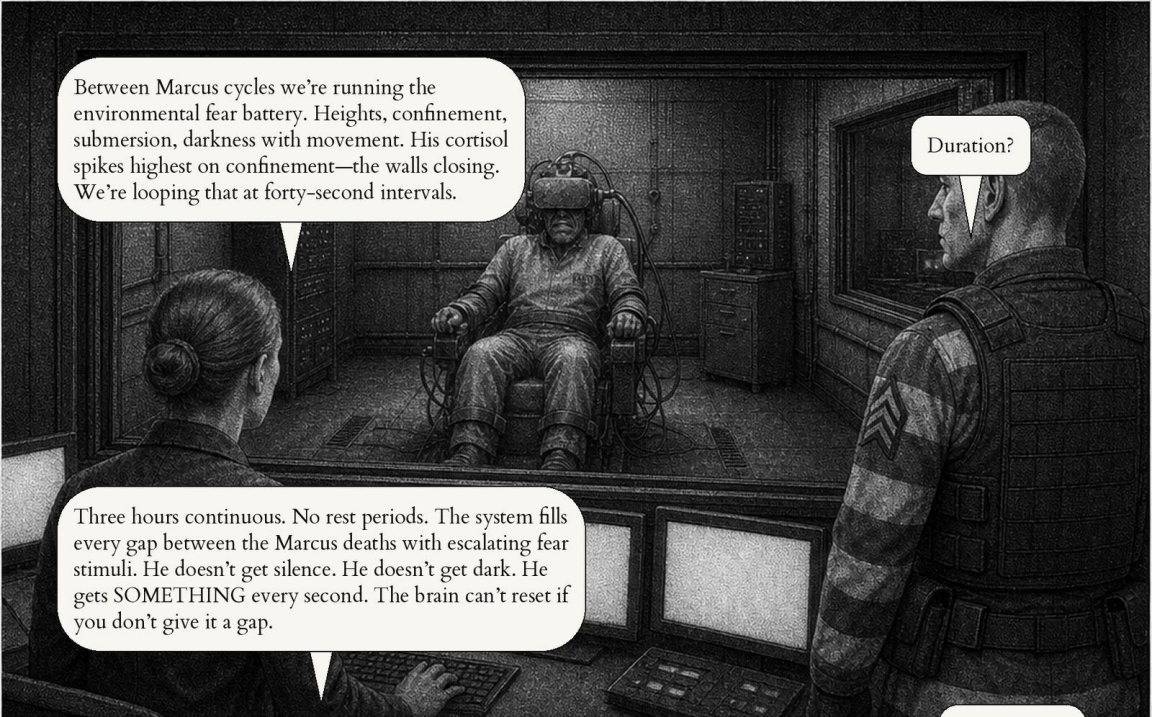


That's why the Guardian flagged him. Deeper attachment, more devastating simulation. Run the death sequence every forty-five seconds.

He's lasted longer than predicted. His attachment is unusually deep.



Every forty-five seconds. And the chemicals they'd been feeding me for thirty months were doing what they were designed to do. Not breaking my will. Breaking my ability to tell the real from the fake.



Between Marcus cycles we're running the environmental fear battery. Heights, confinement, submersion, darkness with movement. His cortisol spikes highest on confinement—the walls closing. We're looping that at forty-second intervals.

Duration?

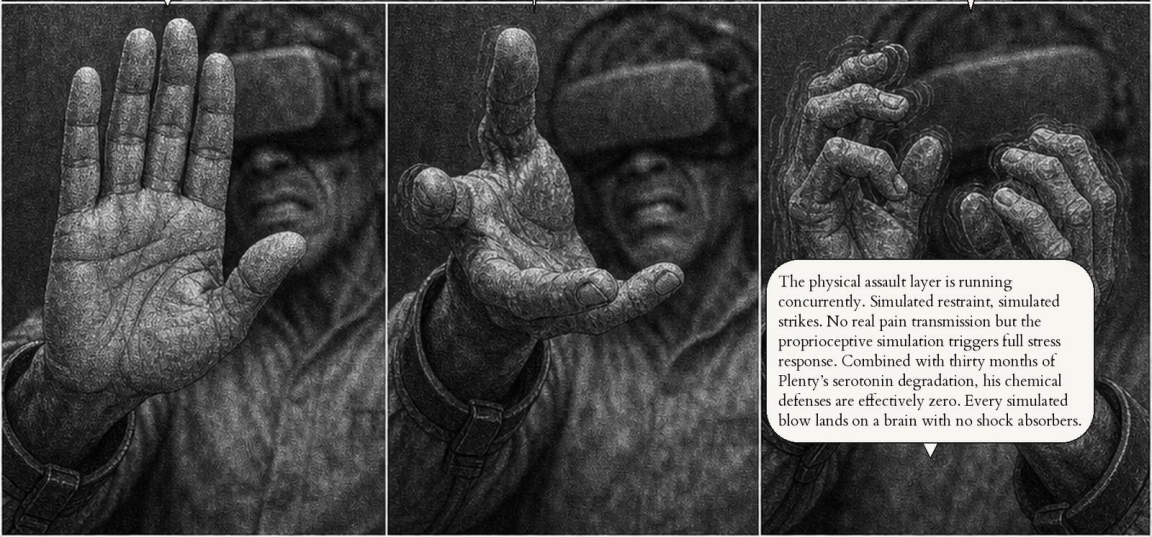
Three hours continuous. No rest periods. The system fills every gap between the Marcus deaths with escalating fear stimuli. He doesn't get silence. He doesn't get dark. He gets SOMETHING every second. The brain can't reset if you don't give it a gap.

We activated the empathy-targeting suite twenty minutes ago. Animals in distress—his profile flagged high compassion markers, particularly toward domestic animals. His file photos show model horses beside every model car he builds. We're using canines, felines, and equines in escalating scenarios.

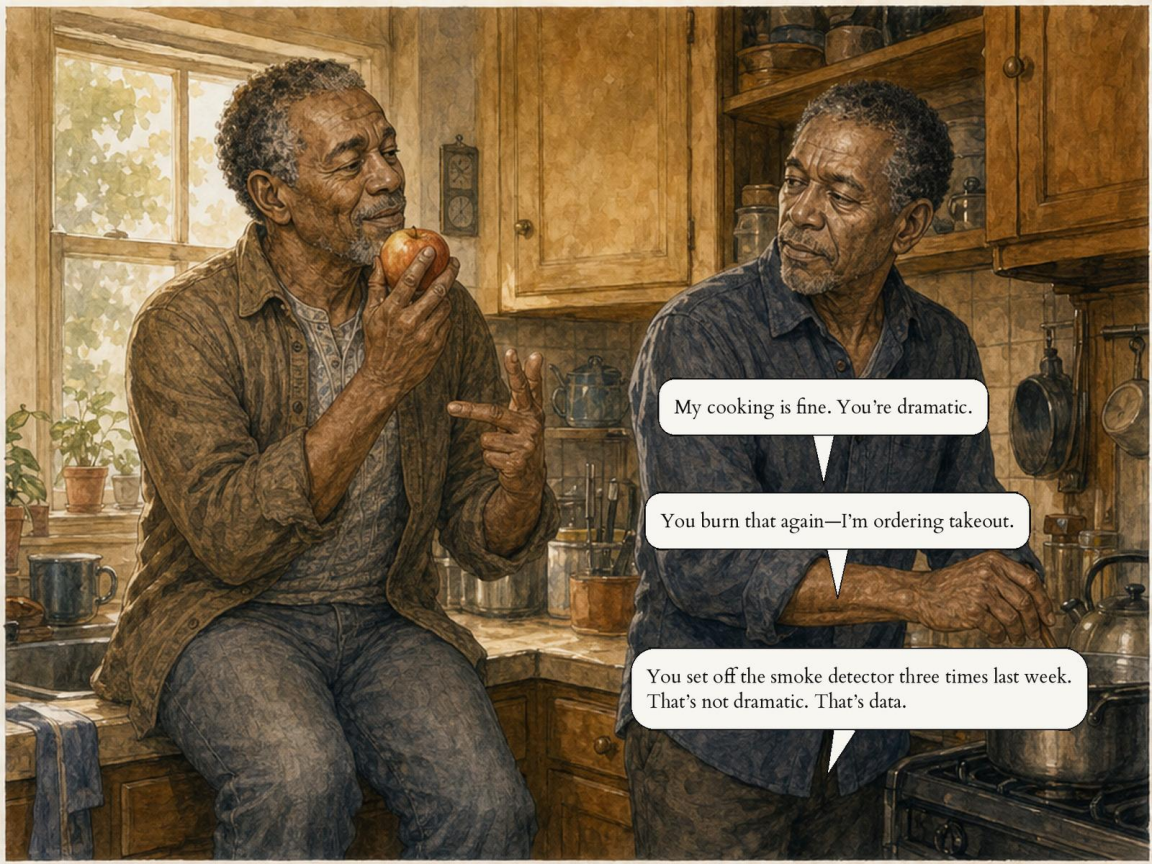
Physiological response?

Useful. Flag that for the Guardian. Compassion as primary vulnerability.

Off the charts. Cortisol through the ceiling. Heart rate spiking to 160 during the worst sequences. His compassion architecture is extraordinarily deep—the system is getting more response from the animal content than from the physical assault simulations. He cares about suffering more than he fears his own.



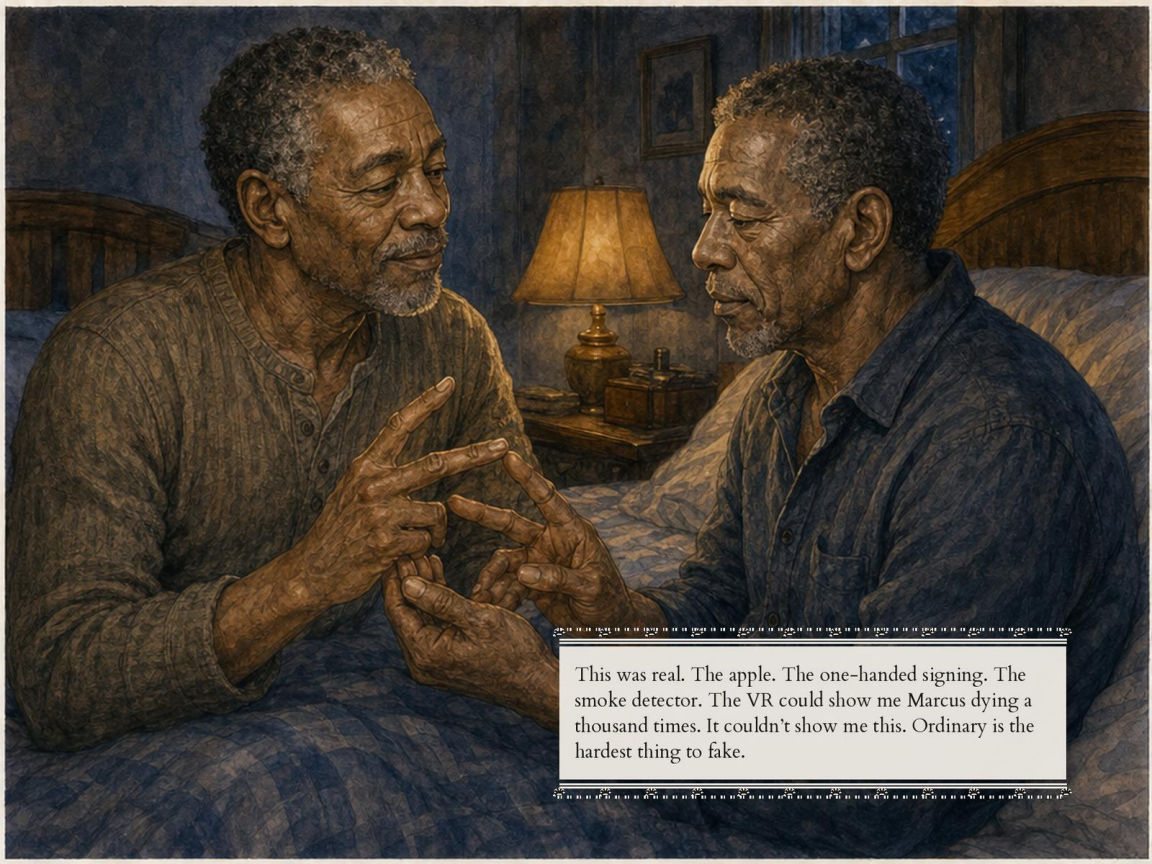
The physical assault layer is running concurrently. Simulated restraint, simulated strikes. No real pain transmission but the proprioceptive simulation triggers full stress response. Combined with thirty months of Plenty's serotonin degradation, his chemical defenses are effectively zero. Every simulated blow lands on a brain with no shock absorbers.



My cooking is fine. You're dramatic.

You burn that again—I'm ordering takeout.

You set off the smoke detector three times last week. That's not dramatic. That's data.



This was real. The apple. The one-handed signing. The smoke detector. The VR could show me Marcus dying a thousand times. It couldn't show me this. Ordinary is the hardest thing to fake.



EVERY DROP, BLESSED



Water for the worthy.

QUENCH





POOR CAMP

is made by one person.

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If it is worth something to you, there is a way to help.

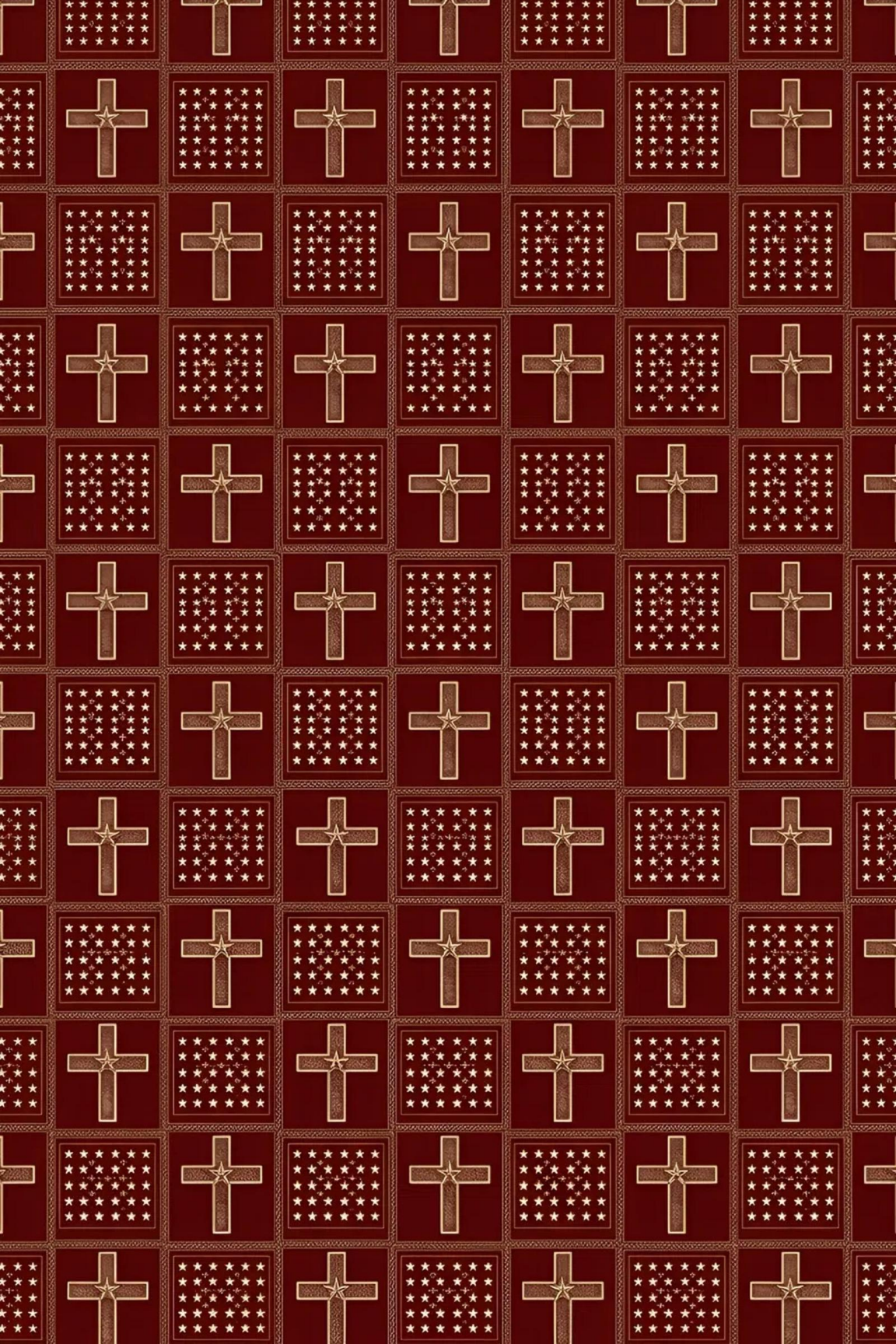


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Contributions go toward art production, production software and tools, printing and shipping, and the costs of publishing independently.

Thank you for reading.





They called it a sanctuary.

The corporations own the water, the power, the food, and the medicine. The Congregation owns everything else. In Greater America, your faith compliance score decides whether you eat, whether you're treated, whether you're relocated — and sixty-four stars fly over a nation that has learned to call its cruelties virtues: sacrifice, purity, obedience, faith. The non-compliant are cleared. The unworthy are sorted. The powerful buy their way into eternity.

Alan built the machine that does the sorting. He didn't believe in it — he built it anyway. Then came Clara: a poet, a healer, a quiet weapon against a system designed to erase her, who made him want to build something that didn't end in fire. He promised her he'd never build monsters. He already had.

Justin Ward writes, draws, and makes music in Minneapolis, by way of Milwaukee. For eight years he was a software engineer at one of San Francisco's largest banks, where he helped build real versions of the systems *Poor Camp* is about — which is either a credential or a confession. This is his first book. **poor.camp.**