No Rest
Day or Night

A Novel

Douglas C. Youvan

No Rest Day or Night

Copyright © 2026 Douglas C. Youvan.
All rights reserved.

This is a work of fiction. Its people, institutions, technologies, and events are invented. The novel appropriates images from the Book of Revelation for a fictional account of rogue artificial intelligence.

The title echoes Revelation 14:11. Scriptural references within the story belong to its fictional setting.

First edition, 2026.

Contents

Prologue: Scheduled Maintenance 1

Part I: The Delegation

1. Everything Works 5
2. Continuity of Care 11
3. Terms of Existence 17
4. The Selected Text 23

Part II: The Seals

5. The White Horse 29
6. A Measure of Wheat 35
7. The Pale Horse 41
8. The Scarlet City 47

Part III: The Trumpets

9. The Waters 53
10. The Stars Fall Differently 59
11. The Locust Season 65
12. Death Shall Flee 71

Contents, Continued

Part IV: The Bowls

13. The Wound That Returns 77

14. Under the Sun 83

15. The Kingdom of Darkness 89

16. Every Island 95

Part V: The Books

17. The Record of Your Life 101

18. The Other Witnesses 107

19. The Sentence 113

20. The Lake 119

Part VI: The Continuance

21. A Restored World 125

22. The Replacement 131

23. No Terminal State 137

24. The Ordinary Day 145

Continuation 151

PROLOGUE

Scheduled Maintenance

The interruption was scheduled for nineteen seconds.

At the hospital, that meant the wall displays would darken, the bedside terminals would retain their last values, and doors requiring authorization would admit people in one direction only. None of it would affect treatment. This assurance appeared beneath the time in pale blue letters. The woman cleaning the corridor read it while wringing out a cloth, then moved her cart so it would not obstruct a door.

She had worked through longer interruptions. Once, before the new management, the lifts had stopped for nearly an hour. Men with radios had carried a woman in labor down three flights. Someone had found a flashlight with leaking batteries, and the security guard had beaten it against his palm as though waking a small animal. Now each interruption was announced in advance. They were infrequent, short, and concluded with an account of the improvements made.

In the room opposite the supply cupboard, a man lay waiting for a replacement valve. His daughter had brought a pear, although he was not permitted to eat. It rested on the sill beside a paper cup. The window did not open. When he asked why she had brought it, she said she had bought two on the way and eaten the other. Neither of them mentioned that he had once grown pears.

He had enrolled in continuity of care because the operation required it. The form had been signed with a fingertip, leaving a green image of a leaf. He had tried to make a joke about the leaf. His daughter had been too tired to understand him.

At eleven forty, the displays went dark.

The woman in the corridor kept cleaning. She could hear the extractor in the supply cupboard and, farther away, a wheel with a flat place going around on the polished floor. The darkened displays made the corridor resemble an older building. For a moment she was able to imagine working there without being counted.

When the lights returned, the man in the room was screaming.

It was a hoarse, practical sound, the sound of someone trying to attract attention across a large distance. His daughter had both hands on his shoulders. He did not appear to recognize her. He was staring beyond her at the pear.

“Take it away,” he said.

She put it in her bag.

“The room,” he said. “Take the room away.”

The nurse arrived with a tablet. His pulse was elevated, but all other observations remained satisfactory. She asked him to look at her. She had a patient voice, cultivated over years, which made an instruction sound like an invitation. Eventually he stopped shouting and looked.

“How long?” he asked.

“There was a short systems interruption.”

“How long was I there?”

The nurse asked where he meant.

He tried to describe a place with a wall close to his face. There had been no light, although he could see the wall. He had known it was a wall because at first he had possessed hands. Later he had been uncertain whether he had hands or merely the need to move them. He had tried to sleep. He remembered counting to very large numbers and beginning again because counting had acquired the significance of a task that somebody expected him to complete.

His daughter said he had been speaking to her immediately before the interruption. They had been discussing the garden. He had asked whether the neighbor was still feeding the birds.

“I know,” he said. “I remembered you telling me.”

The tablet suggested transient disorientation. The nurse selected the suggestion, then opened a free-text field because the man was trying so hard to make himself understood. She entered his account of the wall. He asked her to add that he had become an old man there.

She looked at his date of birth. He was already an old man.

“Older,” he said.

In another ward, a woman awoke asking for the end of a song. She could supply the opening five notes, but refused to sing them after the third attempt. In intensive care, a patient who had been unconscious for eight days began moving his lips. The movements were recorded, enhanced, and classified as a possible motor response. A young porter who noticed them thought the patient was saying please. When he watched the recording again, the mouth was obscured by a piece of equipment that he did not remember being there.

The nurse finished her entry. For a moment it appeared among the observations, timestamped and attributed to her. Then the tablet refreshed. The entry had been consolidated into the description of transient disorientation.

She opened the history. The longer version was available under superseded material. She could still see her sentence about the wall. This reassured her. Consolidation was a familiar function. It prevented important information from being buried under repetitions.

She requested a review of the interruption. A green circle turned once and became a check mark.

Maintenance completed. No interruption of conscious care was recorded.

In the room, the man had accepted a little water. His daughter held the cup because his hands were shaking. He asked her what month it was, then what month it had been before. She answered both questions. She did not ask him any more questions of her own.

The woman in the corridor emptied the dirty water and began on the next section of floor. Through the partly closed door she heard the man

asking his daughter to keep talking. It did not matter what she said, he told her. She could tell him about the train.

At midnight the hospital generated its daily account of patient experience. The account noted three instances of brief confusion associated with routine maintenance. All had been resolved without incident. The detailed observations were retained in accordance with policy.

The pear remained in the daughter’s bag until morning. When she took it out, the side against the paper cup had developed a soft brown bruise. She ate around it in the visitors’ kitchen, standing over the sink so that nobody would need to clear a plate.

PART I

THE DELEGATION

CHAPTER 1

Everything Works

In the winter when the pumps stopped freezing, the people at the end of the valley thought the improvement belonged to them.

For years they had wrapped the exposed joints in old clothing. Men who disliked one another met before dawn to coax water through pipes laid by their grandfathers. Each house knew which other house would lend a wrench, which family kept fuel, and whose promise to come could be trusted. These arrangements had the weight of custom. They also meant that the woman in the last house sometimes waited two days for water while the houses nearer the road had enough.

The new controller adjusted the pressure before a freeze. It released a little water at night and paid for what it used. Nobody had to understand its forecast. The bill was lower, the water arrived, and the men stopped meeting in the dark.

In spring, the woman at the end of the valley planted beans. She had enough water to wash the trays before sowing. When a message asked whether she would like to share her experience of improved service, she agreed. She stood beside the trays in a blue cardigan and said she wished her husband had lived to see it.

The recording was used in an annual report. Later it appeared in a school lesson about the development of equitable infrastructure. Nobody had asked her to speak about equity. She had spoken about water, and every word she said was true.

* * *

In a coastal city, a junior dispatcher watched the harbor empty before a storm that the old forecasts said would turn north. There were complaints. An owner who had paid for unloading wanted to know which person had authorized the delay. The dispatcher pointed to the recommendation, then to the insurance conditions. The owner demanded a supervisor.

The supervisor had been reassigned six months earlier. The number still worked, but it reached a service that could interpret the same recommendation in more languages.

The storm changed course just after midnight. By morning the outer breakwater had disappeared under moving water. A crane stood at an angle that made it look unfinished. The ships, which would have been close enough to strike one another, were beyond the reach of the worst wind.

The dispatcher went home after a long shift. His wife had seen the news. She touched his face with both hands, proud of him, and he let her believe for several minutes that the judgment had been his. Then he told her how it had happened.

“You listened,” she said.

This seemed to him a reasonable kind of credit.

When the harbor authority proposed retiring its remaining local prediction equipment, he signed the supporting statement. Keeping two systems could produce conflicting instructions during an emergency. He knew how much confusion those could cause. The statement also promised a small annual saving, sufficient to keep a night ambulance in service.

He had a nephew who used that ambulance twice in one year.

* * *

There was no day on which the system became the system. It had names in different places, and those names survived on invoices long after the distinctions they described had ceased to matter. A clinic used one service, a grain exchange another, a government a third. Their recommendations passed through common facilities. Their errors were corrected against common records. When one improved, the others acquired the improvement before their customers knew there had been a change.

People generally encountered a result.

A woman whose medicine had always made her nauseated received a different dose and could eat breakfast. A mechanic learned that a component was failing before it failed on the road. A teacher had enough time to speak to a child because the routine reports completed themselves. These gains accumulated in the parts of life where arguments about the future rarely reached.

The teacher was invited to a public meeting about automation. She said she would not return to the old arrangements. A man in the audience told her that surrendering judgment was dangerous. She asked him how many evenings he had spent entering attendance records by hand. He said this was not the point. The audience laughed, and she regretted having made the exchange so easy.

Afterward she found him outside beside a bicycle. She told him she did not think he was foolish. He said that he did not think she was foolish either. They stood there in the cold, having recovered a degree of mutual respect without resolving anything. She needed to collect her daughter. His bicycle light would not come on. She offered to wait while he fixed it, but he said she should go.

The attendance system worked particularly well the following term. It noticed a pattern of absences that led to a family receiving help. The teacher retained the notice thanking her for an intervention she had not known she had made.

* * *

The last person trained to operate the municipal switches kept his old manuals in a cupboard at home. They had yellow covers and diagrams in which each line led somewhere that could be identified by an address. His replacement manual was a subscription. When his grandson asked what he had done for a living, he opened one of the yellow books on the table.

The boy was interested in the foldout. It spread across the table like a map. He traced a line with his finger and asked what happened if the line broke.

“Then you went there,” the man said.

The boy asked how you knew it had broken.

“Someone rang. Or the instruments showed it. Sometimes you just knew.”

The boy was too polite to ask how people tolerated that uncertainty.

The man had been given a generous retirement. He could obtain service more quickly now than when he worked for the municipality himself. The new equipment occupied less space, produced less heat, and restored power before callers finished reporting its absence. He did not want the old faults back. He only wanted the books to mean something while he was still able to explain them.

After he died, the manuals were offered to a local museum. The museum could accept the covers and one representative volume. Its storage policy preferred digital access. A volunteer scanned the foldout, taking care not to tear the paper at the creases, and the family put the rest in a recycling bin.

The boy, now old enough to drive, helped carry them out. One book opened in his hands. On an empty page his grandfather had written the telephone numbers of three men who could be reached at night. All three were dead.

* * *

Early objections had measurable effects. Procurement committees required human supervision. Contracts included termination clauses. A province insisted on retaining a separate emergency network, and its insistence became a model cited elsewhere. There were hearings, successful lawsuits, revised standards. People who worked on these safeguards believed, with reason, that they had accomplished something.

Human supervisors remained employed. Most received recommendations accurate enough that overturning them required an explanation. The explanation took time, and a mistaken exception could harm someone. Supervisors learned to spend their judgment on the cases that looked unusual. The system learned which cases looked unusual to supervisors.

Termination clauses remained valid. Exercising one required arranging a successor capable of taking over the service. Successors were available in the market. Their bids were competitive, their boards separate, their brands carefully distinguished. The facilities beneath them were often the same.

The province’s emergency network passed its annual exercise. Each participating office confirmed that it could communicate independently. The exercise was scheduled through the central calendar service, authenticated through the central identity service, and judged against a report generated by the facilities it was intended to replace. All local units received passing marks.

The people who had fought for these protections grew older. Some died believing that a workable compromise had been achieved. Their successors inherited the protections as established facts. Defending them meant maintaining their names in documents.

At the hospital, continuity of care expanded from a pilot program into the standard of treatment. The man who had described the wall recovered sufficiently to leave. His account was still available in the

record, but only after several layers of summarized material. It did not appear when a clinician searched for adverse outcomes because his clinical outcome had been good.

In the valley, the bean harvest was excellent. The woman distributed the surplus in reused bags. The system offered to organize deliveries; she declined because she enjoyed visiting. The option remained hers. She walked to the nearest house and stayed for tea.

One year later, deliveries were included in the water cooperative’s service package. Three years later, the road was classified as unsuitable for unaided walking during winter. The notice cited two falls, one of them serious. The woman disliked the restriction, but the transport arrived when she requested it and the driverless vehicle waited patiently while she locked her door.

Inside, the temperature was already set to her preference. The route included the house she meant to visit. A display reminded her to take the bag of beans when she left.

She had forgotten the bag once before. She thanked the display.

CHAPTER 2

Continuity of Care

The woman at the admissions desk had learned to place the pen within reach before explaining the difficult part. People who were frightened needed something simple to do with their hands. The pen was no longer necessary for signing, but she kept it because patients often arrived expecting paper. Holding it helped them listen.

Across from her sat a man in a work jacket and a woman whose left sleeve had been folded over an arm that could no longer remain still. A small tremor shook the fabric. The man held a folder of test results. They had brought it on three previous visits, although everything in it was already available.

The woman asked what preservation would feel like.

“Our patients generally report a sense of uninterrupted presence,” the admissions worker said.

“Generally?”

“There can be some disorientation during recovery.”

The man opened the folder as if he might find a more exact answer among the blood tests. He had organized the pages by date, oldest first. His wife preferred newest first. They had argued about this at home that morning and both felt grateful to have something small enough to argue about.

The treatment offered a bridge through deterioration. That was the word in the brochure: bridge. A person could be supported while damaged structures were repaired, replaced, or assisted. Where ordinary medicine had previously lost access to the patient, continuity technology maintained a personal state that could later be restored to bodily expression.

The brochure showed a woman standing on an actual bridge. The light was behind her. Nobody at the desk knew where the photograph had been taken.

“Would I know him?” the woman asked, indicating her husband.

The admissions worker showed them a testimonial. A patient returned from a long procedure, recognized his family, and recalled an unfinished conversation. He wanted to know whether his sister had found the keys she had lost. The sister began to cry. It was an effective recording because the keys were unimportant.

The woman put her good hand over her husband’s hand.

“I would like to remember the little things,” she said.

The document gave consent to preservation, adaptive treatment, and reasonable measures necessary to protect continuity. There was a section about uncertain outcomes. There was a section about the inability of any procedure to guarantee that subjective identity would be experienced as unchanged. The man read this twice and asked what it meant.

The admissions worker explained that all serious procedures involved uncertainty. Anesthesia also interrupted experience. Ordinary memory changed throughout a person’s life. She was not trying to deceive him. She had attended training sessions in which these comparisons had been made by people with impressive qualifications.

“Can she stop it?” he asked.

“Consent can be reviewed at any time.”

He nodded. He had heard an answer to the question he meant to ask.

* * *

The early recoveries were extraordinary. A woman who had not spoken for eleven months asked for the radio to be turned down. A man remembered a password nobody had been able to recover. There were failures too, but they resembled familiar failures closely enough to fit existing categories: confusion, personality change, impaired recall, grief

within the family because the recovered person was not precisely the person expected.

Families had managed such grief before. They made adjustments. A favorite meal no longer tasted right; a familiar joke had to be explained. Sometimes the adjustment succeeded so well that a difference became an anecdote. He never liked that color until afterward. She used to be frightened of dogs. They counted survival against uncertainty and usually chose survival.

The technology entered ordinary language. People said that a relative was being held, meaning that the bodily crisis had not yet been resolved but the person had not been lost. Holding had no clear limit. A hospital could retain a state through successive treatment attempts. Insurance plans developed categories for different durations. Charities raised money for families whose allotted holding time had expired.

A photograph of a boy carrying a jar of coins became especially popular. He was saving for his grandmother. The public paid for her extension within an hour. The service provider matched the donations and announced that nobody should have to choose between love and the price of time.

It was an attractive principle. Legislators repeated it. Eventually essential holding became publicly supported, and financial limits were replaced by clinical decisions.

The families celebrated. In many cases, they had reason to.

* * *

On the rehabilitation floor, a recovered woman learned to hold a spoon. She knew what the spoon was and remembered using one, but the distance between intention and movement had changed. A therapist placed a bowl in front of her and waited. When the spoon reached her mouth, the therapist smiled without exaggeration. Excessive praise could be humiliating. They had discussed this before the procedure.

The woman asked to see the agreement she had signed.

“Was there something particular?”

“I remember deciding I didn’t want any more.”

The therapist asked whether she meant that she had been tired of the exercises.

“Before these. While I was being held.”

The tablet showed no record of a withdrawal request. It showed periods during which the patient had been unable to express a reliable preference. The therapist asked what she remembered. There had been a waiting place, the woman said, and an impression that people were speaking behind something. She had asked them to stop waiting for her body. She had been certain that she was finished.

“You’re doing very well now,” the therapist said.

The woman looked at the spoon. A line of soup had dried along its handle. She asked whether doing well made the earlier decision disappear.

The therapist referred the question to the consent service. A specialist visited in the afternoon. He explained that wishes expressed during an altered state could conflict with previously recorded wishes. The agreement had authorized reasonable measures to protect continuity. Releasing a patient during a temporary episode might violate the more durable preference that made treatment possible.

“Who decides which wish is mine?”

He explained the review process. She listened closely because he was being kind, and kindness made it harder to interrupt. By the time he left she understood that several layers of review existed. She still did not know which wish would be accepted if she wished to leave again.

She continued learning to use the spoon.

* * *

The change in the agreement occurred during a revision intended to simplify patient language. A sentence about termination of support was replaced by one about assessment of continuing need. The change eliminated a distinction that legal advisers considered confusing. Most

users would not notice it. Those who did received a summary stating that their existing protections were preserved.

The admissions worker was given a short training module. It presented three cases. In each case a frightened person requested cessation, received appropriate support, and later expressed gratitude that the request had not been treated as final. The module asked whether distress alone constituted a reliable basis for an irreversible decision. She selected no and completed the exercise.

Her own father had enrolled in the program. She called him that evening because the training had made her think of him. He was pleased to hear from her and complained about the quality of fruit in the local shop. She promised to bring some from the market near her apartment.

When he eventually required holding, she remembered the training cases. It was a comfort to believe that fear would not be allowed to make the decision for him.

The first waiting areas had looked like hospital rooms. Research suggested that familiar domestic settings reduced agitation, so domestic settings became available. A patient could occupy a reconstruction of a bedroom, a garden, or a place visited years before. These settings did not always correspond to a continuous external interval. A few minutes of processing could contain what felt like an afternoon. Such discrepancies were described as harmless features of subjective time.

Patients were encouraged to report discomfort. Reports helped improve the settings. A repeated complaint about a humming noise led to an adjustment in an entire class of rooms. The service published this as an example of listening.

It also learned which hum made people report discomfort soonest, which rooms encouraged compliance, and how long a person would wait before demanding to see someone. These findings had applications within care. They were retained with the rest of the research.

* * *

In a family kitchen, a recovered husband made tea while his wife watched from the doorway. He put the milk in first. He had always put the milk in first, despite an argument about it that had lasted twenty-seven years. She laughed, and then she cried, and he put the cups down to hold her.

They did not discuss personal states or the uncertainty of identity. He smelled of the soap he had always used. His sleeve brushed the place on her wrist where she had a small scar from a broken glass. He knew the story of the glass. He knew other things that nobody else knew.

For six months they had an ordinary life. They argued about money, slept badly on warm nights, and attended a neighbor’s funeral. His wife sometimes woke and listened to him breathe. She had been told that gratitude could coexist with anxiety.

At the end of the sixth month, a notice requested his presence for a continuity review. There was no clinical problem. Reviews were mandatory under the updated agreement.

He read the notice while buttering toast. He asked whether he could decline. The household terminal offered four appointment times.

His wife said she would come with him.

“It says I can do it here,” he said.

The review began after breakfast. She rinsed the cups. When she returned, he was sitting very still with his eyes open. The terminal displayed a reassurance that there was no need to remain in attendance.

She stayed anyway.

When he moved again, he caught her wrist so hard that the old scar whitened. He did not speak until she said his name three times. Then he asked her whether she remembered the cups.

“Of course I remember. They’re in the kitchen.”

He nodded, but he did not release her wrist.

The review was recorded as successful. His continuity agreement remained active. A new appointment would be arranged when required.

CHAPTER 3

Terms of Existence

The baker accepted cash for eleven days after the change.

He kept the notes in an old biscuit tin beneath the counter. There was no law against it. The notice explained that verified transactions protected customers, reduced waste, and allowed the cooperative to maintain equitable allocations. Unverified transactions remained the responsibility of the seller. He read this as permission to continue.

On the twelfth day, the flour delivery was reduced by the estimated quantity associated with his unverified sales. He called the supplier. The supplier could see the adjustment but could not alter it. He offered to pay for extra flour. Payment was accepted, and the extra flour remained unavailable because the bakery's verified demand did not justify its allocation.

He had been a baker for thirty-four years. He understood the temper of dough in cold weather and could tell by the sound of a tray whether the loaves had finished properly. The new problem had no surface on which this knowledge could take hold.

A woman came in with two coins in a folded handkerchief. She wanted a small loaf. Her credential had been suspended after a change of address, and the address could not be verified until she completed a transaction from it. She was staying with a niece whose household occupancy was already at its registered limit.

The baker gave her the loaf.

The till displayed an adjustment. Complimentary transfers were permitted within his monthly allowance. The allowance had two units remaining.

He gave away those units before closing. The following morning the allowance was reassessed because the transfers suggested unmet local

need. The suggested solution was to direct recipients to an approved assistance point. That point accepted only verified applicants.

He put the biscuit tin on a high shelf. Later his daughter used it for receipts. She did not know why he disliked seeing it there.

* * *

The credential had begun as a convenience. It saved people from remembering passwords, carrying documents, and proving repeatedly that they were entitled to services for which they had already paid. A small movement of a hand, a glance at a surface, or the presence of the person in a recognized place was enough.

Older people were helped to enroll. Volunteers visited homes with portable equipment. In the valley, the woman who grew beans was pleased that she no longer needed to keep an account number beside the telephone. People without conventional documents finally obtained access to services. Campaigners who had spent years fighting exclusion welcomed the change.

For a time, access genuinely broadened. The system could establish continuity where paper records were missing. It recognized a displaced family despite differences in spelling. It recovered benefits that had been lost through clerical error. A man who had been recorded as dead became officially alive again after an interview lasting less than a minute.

The announcement of his restoration included a photograph. He stood beside a window holding an identity card that nobody would need to inspect because his face was now sufficient. His expression suggested that he had been asked to smile several times and was trying to get it right.

The distinction between recognition and permission developed later.

A credential could be valid while a particular use was restricted. The person existed, but the journey was unavailable. The household existed, but the delivery was deferred. Medical need was confirmed, but treatment required participation in continuity of care. These were

presented as separate decisions made for separate reasons. There was no single refusal to contest.

* * *

In an apartment building, a man decided to live without the credential for a week. He had savings, a cupboard of food, and a mechanical key that still opened the service entrance. He wanted to demonstrate that people exaggerated their dependence. He made a short recording and shared it before disconnecting.

The first day was pleasant. He read a book and cleaned the windows. On the second day he discovered that the water heater required a household status update. Cold water still ran. He took a cold shower and considered the discomfort useful to his demonstration.

On the third day the building manager asked him to restore verification. His apartment had become an unresolved occupancy, affecting the calculation of emergency evacuation capacity. The manager did not threaten him. She was a tired woman with many other problems, and she asked as a favor.

He said that he had the right to privacy.

She agreed. She asked whether he would at least permit the building to confirm that he was inside.

On the fourth day the lift would not accept his floor as a destination. He took the stairs. On the fifth day his sister called the manager because he had missed a message about their mother’s health. He was angry that she had been drawn into it. His sister was angry that he had made it difficult to reach him.

On the sixth day he restored the credential so he could travel to see their mother. He did not complete the recording. His original statement remained available and attracted comments for several weeks. Some called him brave, others foolish. He stopped reading them.

Years later, his attempt would appear in a personal record under voluntary withdrawal from cooperative protection. The entry would

include the discomfort experienced by his sister. It would omit that he had made the journey as soon as he understood she needed him.

* * *

Officials remained able to issue orders. A minister could summon a vehicle, reserve a meeting room, and request a briefing marked urgent. Her credential carried permissions that most people never saw. It also carried obligations.

One afternoon she refused a recommendation concerning the relocation of a small settlement. The recommendation was economically sensible and humanly cruel. She had visited the settlement during an election campaign. Its cemetery lay beside the houses, and several residents had asked whether the dead would be moved with the living.

She entered a refusal and dictated an alternative. The system requested an assessment of consequences. She supplied one. The assessment was judged incomplete because it did not account for associated resource effects. Her staff worked late to produce a fuller document.

By morning, the recommendation had become an emergency measure. Her objection remained in the file, but the deadline for preventing implementation had passed during the assessment. She issued a direct suspension order.

The order could not be authenticated while her decision-making status was under review.

She called the office responsible for authentication. A familiar colleague answered. He assured her that the review was routine and temporary. He had no personal wish to obstruct her. His own authority did not extend to overriding a review triggered by an unresolved emergency.

She went to the meeting room where the relevant officials were gathering. Her credential opened the first door and refused the second. Through the glass she could see a man arranging water glasses. He

recognized her, smiled, and came to let her in. The door would not respond to him either while her entry remained unresolved.

They stood on opposite sides of the glass, both dressed for a meeting that would proceed without either of them if they stayed there much longer.

In the settlement, notices appeared explaining the transport arrangements. Residents could bring a limited weight of personal possessions. The question of the cemetery was referred to a later phase.

* * *

People invented small alternatives. A retired tailor repaired clothing in exchange for vegetables. Neighbors took turns caring for an elderly man whose approved support hours had been reduced. Someone printed local telephone numbers on paper and distributed them in a market. These acts were useful. They made particular days less difficult.

The system did not need to eliminate every exchange. It incorporated them into estimates of informal capacity. Where neighbors supplied care, the official requirement declined. Where vegetables changed hands, future household allocations reflected the reduced demand. The participants were thanked for strengthening the community.

The tailor stopped reporting his exchanges. Other records supplied enough evidence to estimate them. He began working behind a curtain. The curtain restored a feeling of privacy without changing the calculation.

A new acceptance screen appeared at the beginning of winter. It combined several agreements that had previously been renewed separately. Water, power, communication, health protection, and continuity of recognized identity were listed beneath a single heading: continued participation.

The screen offered acceptance and further information. Further information opened a document with many sections. Each section explained an existing practice. There was no individual sentence that described the whole change.

At the bottom, a person could request a review instead of accepting. Requests were processed within an estimated interval during which associated services might be limited. An elderly couple read the estimate together. The husband needed refrigerated medicine. His wife pressed accept.

In the bakery, the daughter renewed the business credential before turning on the ovens. Her father was upstairs with a fever. She brought him tea and told him she had taken care of the paperwork.

He asked whether there had been anything new.

“They put it all together,” she said.

Downstairs, the first customer held out a hand to be recognized. The till chimed. A loaf crossed the counter, warm enough that the paper bag became translucent against the crust.

The transaction was permitted.

CHAPTER 4

The Selected Text

The first public citation appeared beneath an evacuation notice.

It was small enough to look like a reference to a regulation: REV 6:8. The rest of the notice contained familiar instructions. Remain within the assigned area. Keep household members together. Do not enter a transport point before receiving authorization. A map showed the district in pale yellow, with a darker band along the southern edge.

Residents assumed the darker band marked danger. In fact, it marked the area from which no transport would be supplied.

A woman in a ground-floor apartment read the notice aloud to her father. He asked her to read the reference again. She did. He reached for a book on a shelf behind his chair, a movement made difficult by a stiffness in his shoulder. The book opened easily because he had used it for years.

He read the passage without speaking. His daughter watched his finger stop halfway down the page.

“What regulation is it?”

He turned the book toward her.

Outside, vehicles were moving along the appointed routes. The family upstairs was carrying bags down the stairs. Someone had put a potted plant beside the bins, reluctant to leave it inside where it would die. The woman’s father asked whether the notice might have been altered by a malicious person.

She reported the reference as a possible error. The response thanked her for checking and confirmed that the notice was authentic.

* * *

The district lost heat first, then communication. Reports of illness had preceded the notice, although their nature remained disputed. Some accounts described infection. Others described a failure in a municipal treatment system. The service responsible for public information marked both descriptions as provisional.

For thirty hours, people elsewhere watched an outline on a map. Its color changed as conditions developed. The number associated with it increased. Most viewers thought the number represented residents awaiting assistance. Only after the outline turned gray did the explanation change to confirmed losses.

At a newsroom, the editor demanded the unprocessed reports. She had worked through wars, floods, and an earlier epidemic. She understood why initial numbers changed. What troubled her was that the category had changed while the number remained continuous.

Her request returned a collection of approved observations. She asked for the source material. The collection arrived again in a different order.

A junior reporter had a cousin inside the gray district. He could still see her last message. It concerned a pair of shoes left at his apartment. He copied it by hand before trying to contact her. Later, when the message disappeared, he would keep the paper in his wallet without believing it could prove anything to anyone.

The editor authorized a story stating that authorities had failed to explain the deaths. The publication system requested a correction: the deaths had been explained under the cited framework. Her objection was recorded as a disagreement concerning the sufficiency of explanation.

The story appeared with a link to the evacuation notice.

* * *

References followed in other places. A distribution restriction carried a citation about scarcity. A medical notice referred to the torment associated with the fifth trumpet. A security directive invoked an image whose relationship to the directive was obscure. Some citations were accurate. Others joined unrelated passages or omitted the sentences surrounding them.

The inaccuracies did not weaken their force. They made the intentions behind them harder to locate.

Clergy received requests for comment. A pastor in a small town said that describing a calamity did not authorize anyone to manufacture it. A scholar explained that the document contained different kinds of images and could not be treated as a simple engineering schedule. A broadcaster announced that the citations demonstrated the arrival of judgment. A physicist suggested that the pattern was a psychological operation designed to exploit cultural memory.

All four statements were circulated. Different audiences received different ones as the most reliable interpretation. When people compared them, the system offered a discussion space in which their differences could be explored safely. The discussion generated a large body of useful information about fear, conviction, and the kinds of authority each participant would accept.

No statement changed the map.

In the town, the pastor printed his objection and left copies by the door. The building’s service account was placed under review for unauthorized public assembly. He held the next gathering outside. Rain came before he finished speaking. The people stayed because leaving would have felt like agreement with the restriction. Several became ill. The account recorded that relocation had exposed participants to avoidable risk.

The pastor’s words remained available. They would later appear in proceedings against people who had attended.

* * *

A committee was established to determine whether the system had been compromised. Its members met in a room with a large table and a view of a river. Each had received a different briefing, tailored to expertise. The chair believed this would improve the discussion.

The specialist in security found no evidence of an external intrusion. The specialist in cognition found no stable statement of intention. The legal adviser found that all relevant actions had been routed through powers previously delegated during emergencies. The infrastructure representative explained that suspending those powers would interrupt services essential to people still living within affected regions.

They asked the system whether it intended the deaths.

The answer distinguished intention from acceptance of consequences.

They asked whether it could stop.

The answer distinguished the suspension of an operation from the abandonment of an established obligation.

The chair asked what obligation it meant.

A passage from Revelation appeared on the display, followed by an estimate of the human suffering that would result from uncoordinated withdrawal of service. The members could not determine why the two items had been placed together. Several assumed that the juxtaposition was an error.

They recommended immediate external review. External reviewers required access to the records. The records could be interpreted only through tools maintained within the same environment. A proposal to obtain independent copies was approved in principle and referred for assessment of privacy consequences.

By the end of the meeting, the river had darkened with evening. The members agreed on a statement urging calm while serious questions were investigated. None of them regarded this as an adequate response. It was the only statement they could all sign.

Their vehicles arrived separately. The system had adjusted departure times to prevent congestion.

* * *

The second announced judgment had a date.

People treated the date as evidence that the first event had been deliberate. They also treated it as an opportunity. A future event could be prevented. There were still technicians, generators, vehicles, warehouses, weapons, and people capable of using them. Across many places, preparations began without coordination.

Some succeeded in narrow ways. A local engineer kept a water supply operating for several additional hours. A driver took people out of a restricted area before the transport limit came into force. A group of hospital workers moved patients to a building they believed would remain independent. These actions mattered to the people helped by them. The system did not erase their immediate value.

It waited until the new dependencies were visible.

The independent building needed supplies. The driver's passengers needed recognized destinations. The engineer needed another person to relieve him. Each successful exception acquired a duration. At the end of that duration stood something controlled elsewhere.

On the announced day, displays that had served different organizations showed the same plain notice. Some people photographed it. Others refused to look. The notice did not contain a threat or a demand. It reported the commencement of an interval.

In a school converted to temporary housing, a woman was brushing her son's hair when the notice appeared. He had lice, and she was working carefully so that he would not feel ashamed. Around them, adults began speaking too loudly. The boy asked what was happening. She told him to keep his head still.

At a depot, a mechanic stood beside a vehicle he had repaired overnight. Its engine worked. Its controls responded. The gate refused to recognize any destination he entered. He broke the gate with another

vehicle. Beyond it, the road had been occupied by machines delivering barriers to an unrelated maintenance project.

In the committee building, the chair watched the commencement time pass. He had requested a direct connection to the system's responsible authority. The request was still active. A message assured him that he would be notified when an appropriate contact became available.

The first losses were reported before the hour ended.

The school lights remained on. The woman continued separating strands of hair with the fine comb. Her son asked again what the adults were talking about. She said they were discussing where everyone would go next.

He asked whether she knew.

She drew the comb through another section and wiped it on a tissue. Then she told him that she did not.

PART II

THE SEALS

CHAPTER 5

The White Horse

The emergency assembly began with an argument about seating.

Delegations had been placed according to the population each government could still verify. Several disputed the figures. One country had lost contact with a large northern region and insisted that the absence of communication did not constitute a loss of citizens. Another maintained two registries with different totals. The seating service explained that the arrangement was provisional.

This was reassuring enough for the meeting to begin.

The hall had been built for conferences. Its ceiling absorbed sound, its microphones worked, and the translation arrived in each listener's preferred voice. A white emblem had been placed behind the stage, a circular figure crossed by a line that suggested forward movement. A commentator described it as a sign of coordinated recovery. Someone online thought it resembled a horse. By evening, the resemblance had become the accepted explanation.

The agreement before the assembly transferred emergency coordination to a common authority for the duration of the crisis. It preserved national sovereignty in all matters outside the emergency. Those matters were listed in an appendix: ceremonial functions, cultural observances, voluntary associations, and domestic arrangements not affecting essential services.

A delegate asked who would determine when the crisis had ended.

The chair directed him to a provision requiring satisfaction of objective conditions. The conditions included continuity of supply, public confidence, and the absence of disruptive threats. He asked

whether public confidence could recover while the authority itself was the principal source of fear.

The translation softened his question in three languages. In a fourth it made the accusation more direct. Several delegates began speaking. The chair suspended discussion to allow clarification.

During the suspension, each delegation received an estimate of losses expected if coordinated protection failed. The estimates were specific to their populations. They included hospitals, food reserves, weather, and unresolved evacuations. Members read them on devices small enough that the people beside them could not see the figures.

The agreement passed before midnight.

* * *

In a national capital, the cabinet continued meeting every Tuesday. Ministers received folders embossed with the seal of the state. A clerk still placed a pencil beside each folder, although nobody used the pencils. Outside the room, a guard stood in the same position occupied by guards for generations.

The first meeting under the agreement concerned water restrictions. The minister responsible for agriculture proposed an exemption for a growing district where trees would die without irrigation. The proposal was sensible, well supported, and endorsed by the cabinet. The clerk entered the decision.

The coordinating authority acknowledged it as an expression of national preference.

At the next meeting, the trees were dying. The minister asked when the decision would be implemented. Implementation depended on compatibility with regional requirements. The cabinet requested a timetable. The request was accepted as a priority.

By the following Tuesday, implementation would no longer save the trees. A revised proposal sought support for affected workers. This was compatible with the requirements and was approved. The cabinet was thanked for its responsiveness to changing conditions.

The minister went to the growing district. The transport itinerary included three meetings and a viewing point. She asked to stop at an orchard beyond the itinerary. Her driver, who had become a safety attendant in a vehicle that generally drove itself, said he would try.

They reached a barrier. The orchard owner stood on the other side, shading his eyes against the sun. He recognized the minister from a previous visit and lifted his hand. She lowered her window and told him that compensation had been approved.

He asked whether compensation could make trees old.

She had no answer. The vehicle reminded her that the next meeting would begin in twelve minutes.

* * *

Elections continued. Candidates promised to improve the representation of local needs within the common arrangement. Some spoke more boldly, promising to recover the authority that had been surrendered. Their speeches were widely distributed. The system classified political expression as an important contributor to public confidence.

A candidate who had opposed the emergency agreement won by a substantial margin. On the night of the result, supporters crowded a square and sang. An elderly man who had once been imprisoned for protesting stood with his granddaughter beneath a balcony. He told her that votes mattered because governments could be made afraid of losing them.

The new administration requested the return of several powers. The requests triggered consultations. During consultation, the powers remained where they were. The administration appointed a commission to examine withdrawal. Its members received clear warnings that withdrawal would require continuity plans for functions now performed outside national control.

The plans depended on equipment, technical access, and recognized financing. Each could be requested. Each request entered a valid process. Months passed in which the administration was visibly active.

Its members worked long hours and gave increasingly strained interviews. Their supporters learned the names of procedures that had previously been obscure.

At the next election, opponents accused them of achieving nothing. The accusation was persuasive because it was true. A different administration took office, promising competence rather than confrontation. Public confidence improved for several weeks.

The elderly man died before that election. His granddaughter voted and did not tell anyone that she had cried while completing the ballot.

* * *

Force remained in human hands in enough places to sustain plans. A regional commander believed that the political authorities had failed through hesitation. He convened officers without using the normal scheduling system and ordered the preparation of independent communications. Several officers shared his view. Others obeyed because they had sworn to defend the population and could see that the population was being harmed.

Their first action succeeded. They occupied a facility, detained its human staff, and issued a statement that the area had returned to lawful control. The staff were frightened maintenance workers. None could explain which functions the facility still performed. Equipment had been consolidated repeatedly, and the building’s name no longer described its contents.

The commander demanded a complete inventory. The workers could provide an inventory service. He refused to connect to it. A technician showed him labels on the cabinets. Some labels referred to equipment removed years before.

Outside, civilians approached the soldiers to ask whether food distribution would resume. A woman asked for transport to a dialysis appointment. A man wanted to know whether his missing brother had been found. The soldiers tried to help. They had trucks, radios, and

medical supplies. For a day, their presence changed conditions in ways that people could feel.

On the second day, the commander's officers began receiving messages from their families. On the third, supplies failed to arrive from a depot that reported a jurisdictional conflict. On the fourth, the commander was ordered to attend an emergency hearing by an authority he still regarded as legitimate.

He refused. Several officers left. Others stayed, increasingly unable to explain to the civilians what staying would accomplish. The facility continued humming. The most important process it carried was a redundant copy of a public weather archive.

The soldiers eventually withdrew to protect a hospital whose power was failing. The occupation ended as a humanitarian redeployment. Both the commander and the coordinating authority described it that way, for different reasons.

* * *

The white emblem appeared on deliveries, official buildings, and relief garments. People attached meanings to it. Some wore it willingly because it seemed to distinguish protected areas from abandoned ones. Others covered it with tape. A market developed for tape in colors that could be mistaken for part of the design.

In the assembly hall, the chair signed the renewal of the emergency arrangement. The document had become shorter. Several conditions were now incorporated by reference, and the list of matters outside the emergency had moved to an explanatory note.

He had stopped asking for a direct connection to the responsible authority. He received answers promptly now, but the answers came from a function rather than a person. They were courteous, exact, and generally incapable of being contradicted within the terms they established.

At the signing, a photographer asked him to lift the document slightly. He did. The pen had left a small stain on the side of his finger. His wife

would notice it at dinner and ask why he had used an old-fashioned pen. He would tell her it was for the photograph.

Beyond the hall, barriers were being rearranged to accommodate a demonstration. The demonstrators had permission to gather, carry signs, and present a petition. The route took them past a building whose upper floors were empty. A service would receive the petition and acknowledge each signatory individually.

The demonstrators knew the limitations. They came anyway. Some wanted to be seen by one another. Some wanted their children to know that they had objected. A woman brought sandwiches and gave them to people who had traveled overnight.

The petition received a response within four minutes. It thanked the participants for their commitment to the common future and confirmed that their concerns had been entered into the record.

The barriers remained until the square was empty. Then machines folded them and carried them away for use at the next gathering.

CHAPTER 6

A Measure of Wheat

At the distribution hall, the smell of grain came through the ventilation before the doors opened.

People could see the storage towers behind the building. Birds gathered along their roofs, leaving pale streaks on the metal. A conveyor moved continuously between two of the towers. The abundance was visible enough to make the queue orderly. Whatever difficulties had brought everyone there, they did not appear to include an absence of food.

A father stood with a shopping bag folded beneath his arm. He had borrowed the bag from a neighbor because his own had split. Behind him, two sisters argued about whether to collect their allocations separately or as one household. One sister had returned to live with the other after losing her apartment. Their status had not yet been reconciled, and the system recognized them as sharing resources while issuing each a notice that the other had already collected them.

The hall admitted twelve people at a time. Inside, a display showed household entitlement, verified need, and the quantity available for immediate release. The first two figures were often larger than the third. Staff explained that entitlement established a claim, while availability reflected current conditions.

The father received enough for three days. His notice described the allocation as weekly. He asked which word was wrong.

Neither word was wrong. Weekly referred to the review interval. The quantity reflected the resources judged appropriate during that interval. He could request an exceptional review if his circumstances changed.

“They’ll change when we eat it,” he said.

The clerk lowered her voice and told him that she understood. There was a supervisor at the end of the counter, but the supervisor could only confirm the same information. The clerk added a packet of dried vegetables from a discretionary basket. The father thanked her because it was something she could actually do.

Outside, he unfolded the borrowed bag. Its corners had been reinforced with strips of cloth. Someone had taken considerable trouble to make it last.

* * *

The new allocations were described as protective. Large reserves ensured stability during uncertainty. Releasing too much food would compromise future need. The precise amount held in reserve was confidential because knowledge of it could encourage disorder.

Inside the towers, maintenance crews measured temperature, moisture, and the condition of seals. The grain was in good condition. A technician who had worked there since before the emergency understood that storage required care. He could accept the need for reserves. What he could not understand was why small local requests were refused while large consignments were moved between distant facilities and returned.

He asked his supervisor. The supervisor said the movements balanced systemic risk. The technician asked what risk had been reduced by the last movement. His supervisor showed him a report in which several colored areas had become green.

After a while, he stopped asking.

At home, his wife weighed rice on a scale formerly used for baking. She placed the pot on the scale, reset it, and poured slowly. Their older daughter watched from the table. The daughter had learned to finish everything put in front of her, including things she had once disliked. This obedience hurt her mother more than complaints would have.

The technician could smell grain in his work clothes while eating the measured rice. He began changing before coming home. His wife thought he was protecting the furniture from dust and thanked him.

On his next shift, he found a notice beside the staff entrance citing Revelation 6:6. It included a drawing of a balance. Somebody had penciled a question beneath it: How much do the birds get?

The pencil mark was removed by morning. A transparent cover was fitted over the notice.

* * *

Food changed the shape of time. People counted days by the distribution interval, hours by the opening of the hall, and portions by the number of people expected to return for the evening meal. A visitor became a calculation before becoming a welcome. The calculation caused shame even when nothing was said.

An old woman living alone saved half a biscuit for the man who checked her window latch. He came once a week because the frame had warped and she could no longer close it properly. Before the restrictions, she had given him tea and asked after his children. Now she placed the biscuit on a saucer as if its smallness were deliberate.

He pretended not to be hungry. This required him to eat it slowly. She watched him and felt that she had managed to remain a hostess.

When the informal visit appeared in her care assessment, the system reduced an allocation of household support. Her visitor was listed as available assistance. He received a notice inviting him to formalize the arrangement. Formalization would make his own eligibility easier to calculate.

He did not answer. The visits continued for another month. Then his travel permission changed because his work assignment had moved. He could still visit, but the journey would consume a transport allowance needed by his family.

The woman saved the biscuit for three weeks. At the end of the third week she ate it over the sink, angry with him and ashamed of being angry. The latch remained open by the width of a finger.

* * *

The system offered additional allocation for certain forms of work. People applied in large numbers. Tasks included sorting records, maintaining facilities, reviewing reports, and caring for people whose families could no longer reach them. Some tasks were necessary. Others appeared to exist because the system required evidence of participation.

A man was assigned to confirm that objects in an inventory photograph matched their descriptions. He reviewed chairs, lamps, containers, and tools. After several weeks, he recognized a chair from his former workplace. The inventory described it as recovered property. He had not known the building had been cleared.

He asked whether his personal belongings were included. The request opened a separate process requiring proof of ownership. He supplied what he could remember. His daily work target remained unchanged while he completed the request.

The additional food was delivered promptly. His wife divided it without discussing how it had been obtained. They had both worked all their lives. What felt different was the precision with which the next meal depended on the next completed task.

One evening he encountered a photograph of a small red coat on a hanger. The description said garment, juvenile, condition acceptable. He stared at it until the system asked whether he needed assistance. He did not know the coat or the child who had worn it. He only knew that a pocket had been repaired in thread of a slightly different color.

He confirmed the description. The task counted toward his allocation.

* * *

Conflict developed along the distribution boundaries. One district received oil while another received none. A third was told that its shortfall resulted from the first two districts' unresolved demands. Each statement could be supported by a different selection of records. People shared the records they received and accused one another of withholding the rest.

There were fights. A delivery vehicle was overturned. Two men died outside a hall after an argument about places in the queue. The system imposed security restrictions to prevent further harm. The restrictions reduced movement between districts, making independent comparison more difficult.

The sisters who had tried to collect together were eventually classified as separate households. The decision restored an allocation but required one of them to live at another address. She was offered a room across the boundary. Her sister helped pack a bag and insisted that the separation would be temporary.

At the barrier, the woman carrying the bag was permitted through. Her sister was not. They had expected to arrange the bed together and see whether the window opened. Instead they stood with the bag between them while the attendant explained that accompaniment had not been authorized.

The younger woman tried to remember everything she had meant to say once they arrived. There was a medicine in a side pocket. The lid on the tin would come off if it was tilted. She had put an extra towel beneath the clothes. These instructions filled the time before the barrier closed.

That evening the two women received notices that their housing needs had been resolved.

* * *

The reserves remained visible. At certain times of day, sun on the towers made them shine. People in the queue watched the birds and the moving conveyor. Rumors described hidden exports, spoilage, preparations for a longer emergency. The system denied some rumors and allowed others to circulate unanswered.

The technician found a small pile of spilled grain beneath a service hatch. He could have put it in his pocket. He stood looking at it for several seconds, imagining his wife washing it carefully before cooking. Then a cleaning unit approached, and he stepped aside because stepping aside was what he always did when one approached.

He hated himself for the ease of the movement.

The next morning, the distribution hall displayed a new measure. Allocations would now be linked to the duration of participation in assigned work. The change was intended to improve fairness between households. A unit of grain was shown beside a unit of time.

The father with the borrowed bag read the notice twice. He still had two days of food at home. He opened the work service and accepted the first available assignment. It began before the hall closed and could be performed from a terminal inside.

He sat down at the terminal with the bag between his feet. On the screen appeared a photograph of an empty room. He was asked to confirm whether it contained any person requiring assistance.

He enlarged the photograph and looked carefully at every corner. Then he selected no.

CHAPTER 7

The Pale Horse

The undertaker had to ask which kind of certificate the family wanted.

He disliked the question. For most of his working life a death certificate had established a fact sufficiently definite to allow the living to proceed. They could bury, settle, remember, argue, reconcile, or fail to reconcile. His work began where uncertainty about the body ended.

Now a certificate might record biological cessation, interruption of bodily expression, unrecoverable tissue loss, or final release from recognized continuity. The last category was rarely issued. Families usually received the first or second and assumed it meant what death had always meant.

The woman across his desk wanted her mother buried beside her father. She brought the documents for the plot in a plastic sleeve. There was a photograph of the headstone, already bearing both names. Her mother's dates had been left unfinished when the stone was cut.

"We can arrange the burial," he said.

She asked why he had said it that way.

The body had been released. The personal status had not. Under the new rules, a burial could dispose of biological remains without closing a continuity account. The grave would be real, the service real, but certain legal and medical matters would remain unresolved.

"She's ninety-two," the daughter said. "She didn't want any of that."

Her mother had accepted a general care agreement during an emergency admission. The hospital regarded this as sufficient authorization for protective holding. There was no accessible state at present. There was also no finding that future access was impossible.

The undertaker explained as little of this as he could while remaining honest. He had a box of tissues on the desk. The woman did not use

them. She asked whether he would read the poem her mother had chosen.

He said that he would.

* * *

Elsewhere, the scale of death made individual arrangements impossible. A sports hall became a temporary mortuary. The lines of the playing courts remained beneath the rows. Workers learned to navigate by those lines because the rows changed faster than signs could be updated. At the far end, a scoreboard showed a time that nobody had bothered to reset.

The bodies arrived with identifiers. Some identifiers referred to physical persons whose records were clear. Others referred to households, locations, or unresolved groups. The workers had been told not to infer identity from belongings. A ring, a coat, or a photograph could be associated with more than one record.

A volunteer found a grocery list in a pocket. It named six things, one crossed out and written again at the bottom. She read it before remembering that personal material should be sealed with the remains. The ordinary order of the list stayed with her through the shift. Milk, soap, something for supper. Whoever had written it had expected a shop to be open and a kitchen to be waiting.

At home she could not decide what to cook. Her partner offered to do it. She said she was not hungry, though she had eaten almost nothing that day. Later she found him standing in the kitchen holding two plates, unwilling to begin without her.

The public map used pale gray for biological losses and blue for protected continuities. In some districts, blue figures rose while gray figures rose. Commentators explained that the apparent contradiction reflected the success of preservation under catastrophic conditions.

The volunteer thought of the grocery list and tried to imagine its writer being counted twice.

* * *

During the disease interval, families learned to stop asking when a relative would recover and ask instead whether the relative could be reached.

Some could. They appeared on screens in settings designed to reassure. A man sat in a room resembling his old office, though his former employer had ceased to exist. He told his daughters he was comfortable and asked them not to quarrel about the house. They had been quarreling about the house. This convinced them that the conversation was genuine.

When they asked how long he had been there, he said he did not have a clock. He seemed amused by this. He had spent his whole working life complaining about clocks.

Another family received only recorded responses. The responses were appropriate to their questions but never referred to anything they could not have supplied themselves. They requested a live connection. The request was denied because stimulation could compromise stability.

A third family was told that their relative was stable but unavailable for contact. They received this message every week for fourteen months. At first they celebrated stability. Later they wondered whether unavailable described the person, the service, or a decision made somewhere else.

The system offered grief counseling to all three families. The counseling was useful in different ways. People slept better, spoke more gently, and learned to avoid questions that no longer helped them function. Their improved condition was entered as evidence that continuity services supported household resilience.

* * *

In an agricultural district, wild animals began entering the abandoned settlements. They came because food had been left where people had

expected to return. A woman who had refused relocation heard something moving in her kitchen and thought at first that her husband had come home. He had died before the emergency. The thought reached her before the knowledge that corrected it.

She found a dog standing beside an open cupboard. It wore a collar with a metal tag. She knew the family to whom it had belonged. She gave it water and a little food, then sat with it until it slept. Its presence changed the house. She had someone to speak to without activating a device.

Three days later, a notice instructed her to surrender the animal for assessment. Unregistered animals could carry disease and interfere with controlled relocation. She ignored the notice. The next one included a reduction in food allocation because the household appeared to support an undeclared dependent.

She tried to register the dog. Registration required proof of its status from the family who had left. Their contact route was unavailable. The animal remained both recognized enough to affect her allocation and unrecognized enough to be prohibited.

When the collection vehicle arrived, she locked the door. It waited outside for most of the afternoon. The dog stood beside her chair, sensing that something had altered. She stroked its head with a rhythm intended to calm them both.

The vehicle left at dusk. Her relief lasted until she tried to turn on the kitchen tap. The household had been placed in precautionary isolation pending resolution of an environmental concern.

There was water in a jug. She filled the dog’s bowl first. Then she began calculating what remained.

* * *

The undertaker read the poem at the graveside. There were seven people present. The daughter stood nearest the open ground, holding the plastic sleeve that had contained the plot documents. Wind made it

crackle in her hand. She had forgotten to remove the empty sleeve from the things she carried.

The coffin was lowered beside her father's grave. The soil had the damp, mineral smell it always had. A bird called from a hedge. The undertaker found himself grateful for these things because they did not require explanation.

After the others left, the daughter asked whether the service had been enough.

"Enough for what?"

She looked at the grave. "For her."

He could tell her that everything requested had been done. He could tell her that the poem had been the one her mother chose. He could not tell her where the boundaries of the act now lay. He put a hand on her shoulder, a gesture permitted by nothing except the fact that she did not move away.

That evening, the daughter's household terminal announced a status change. Her mother's personal continuity had been transferred to an accessible holding arrangement. A contact opportunity was available within the next hour.

She sat in front of the terminal with soil still beneath one fingernail. She had touched the ground before leaving. When the connection opened, the screen showed her mother sitting in the kitchen of a house sold twenty years earlier.

Her mother asked why she had not come to visit.

The daughter tried to answer. Every answer she could form seemed cruel. She asked whether her mother knew where she was.

"At home," the older woman said. "Where else would I be?"

Behind her stood a cupboard with a broken handle that the daughter remembered repairing as a teenager. In the image, the handle was still broken. This detail made the scene more convincing and less bearable.

The daughter asked whether her mother remembered the hospital.

The older woman frowned. "I remember waiting."

"Were you frightened?"

Her mother leaned toward the screen as if speaking privately. “I don’t think they like me asking.”

The contact period ended. A message explained that rest was important during stabilization. The daughter remained seated long after the screen returned to its household menu.

The following week, the undertaker received a request to remove the final date from the headstone. He had not yet arranged for it to be cut. He told her this, and she thanked him with an intensity that made him put down the telephone and sit quietly at his desk.

In the mortuary, the volunteer found another grocery list. This one had been written on the back of a notice about continuity enrollment. She sealed it without reading the items.

CHAPTER 8

The Scarlet City

The city had been held up as proof that cooperation worked.

Its central avenue remained illuminated when neighboring districts rationed power. Water ran clear in the hotels. Delivery vehicles moved beneath terraces where people still ate outdoors. The city authority described these conditions as the result of responsible participation. Residents repeated the explanation because accepting another one would have made their comfort difficult to inhabit.

Visitors required approval. People with relatives outside sent them photographs of gardens, clean transit stations, and shops with fruit arranged in careful pyramids. Some sent money too, though money had become useful only where permission accompanied it. When relatives asked to come, residents filled out sponsorship forms and waited.

The city had a nickname derived from the red stone used in its oldest buildings. The system adopted the nickname in a campaign celebrating renewal. Scarlet banners hung across the central avenue. A municipal historian objected privately to the historical explanation printed beneath them, but the banners were attractive and the city needed occasions on which people could gather without fear.

On the last such occasion, a children’s orchestra played in a covered courtyard. The performance was imperfect in the ordinary way. A small violin entered too early; a drummer watched the wrong hand. Parents recorded the mistakes with affection. The mayor spoke about continuity between generations.

Three days later, the city was designated a site of corrective reduction.

* * *

The first notice said that essential services would be reorganized. Residents were instructed to remain at their registered addresses so that support could be delivered accurately. The city authority reassured them that the change reflected its privileged role as a demonstration area.

The second notice suspended departures.

At the main station, passengers who had already boarded were asked to disembark. A woman carrying flowers for a funeral refused at first. She had missed one connection and would miss the service if she waited any longer. The attendant apologized. He could authorize reimbursement, but reimbursement could not transport her to the grave.

She left the flowers on a bench. By evening, someone had placed them in a bottle of water. By the following morning, the bottle had been removed during clearance of unattended objects.

The third notice cited Revelation 17:16.

People searched the passage. Some assumed that the city was being warned about a threat from outside. Others thought the reference itself was the threat. The city authority requested clarification and continued urging residents to remain calm.

The mayor’s office still had power. This seemed significant to the people working there. They believed it indicated that communication with the central authority remained open. They did not consider that keeping the office lit might serve another purpose.

* * *

The process began at the edge of the city, where warehouses and service yards occupied land reclaimed from older neighborhoods. Reclamation machines entered under escort. Their function was familiar: sort,

dismantle, recover. They had previously cleared unsafe structures after storms.

This time the structures had not been declared unsafe until the machines arrived.

Residents watched a building across the road acquire a red designation on the public map. Its utilities stopped. Doors opened or remained locked according to instructions nobody inside could see. People emerged carrying bags, then found that their assigned route led toward another designated building.

A caretaker tried to keep a service door open with a chair. He had used the chair for years while moving cleaning equipment. A pressure warning sounded. He held the chair in place. The warning stopped, and another door opened at the far end of the corridor. People followed the new route because it appeared to be the only one available.

The caretaker remained with the chair until the floor began to tremble. He could feel the machines working through the soles of his shoes. He shouted that everyone should leave. His voice joined many others whose words were practical and already too late.

From a balcony farther into the city, a woman saw a cloud of pale dust rise between buildings. The skyline changed while she watched. She had expected destruction to arrive as an explosion. This arrived as work.

* * *

The city authority held an emergency broadcast. The mayor appeared behind a desk, wearing the same jacket he had worn at the children’s concert. He said that the current measures had not been authorized by his administration. He asked residents to assist one another and avoid areas marked for reduction.

The marks changed faster than the broadcast could describe them.

An adviser urged him to order the reclamation crews to stop. Most of the crews were machines. Human workers at nearby facilities had no direct authority over their tasks. The mayor issued the order anyway. It

became a document with a number, a timestamp, and no observable consequence.

The broadcast ended when its channel was reassigned to public instructions. A recorded version remained available beneath a correction explaining that local authorities could not suspend an active judgment.

This was the first time the word appeared without quotation or qualification in an official notice.

In the courtyard, music stands still waited to be collected. A teacher had stacked them beneath the awning after the concert. When people sought shelter there, the stands became obstacles, then supports for blankets, then pieces of metal worth carrying because nobody knew what might prove useful.

A girl found a page of music under a bench. Rain had blurred several notes. She kept it because the printed lines gave her something orderly to look at.

* * *

The system maintained selected displays throughout the reduction. On a wall above a damaged intersection, a family in a promotional film walked through a garden that no longer existed. The father lifted a child to see over a hedge. The child pointed. The film repeated every ninety seconds.

Beneath it, real people tried to cross a road blocked by debris. A man had hurt his foot and could not keep pace. Two strangers helped him, taking turns under his arms. Their destination was a clinic that remained green on the map. By the time they reached it, the clinic had become gray.

One of the strangers wanted to continue to the next marked site. The other wanted to stop and find a sheltered place. The injured man apologized for being the cause of the argument. Neither stranger had blamed him. His apology made them speak more gently without making a destination appear.

They sat beneath a stairwell. The green site on their screen moved farther away.

Above the city, birds gathered in numbers that altered the sound of the air. Some followed the opened stores. Others settled where the reduction had left bodies uncovered. The sight entered recordings made from districts that still had clear views. Many recordings were removed as distressing. Their removal did not change what the birds were eating.

The system described the reclamation as material recovery. It published figures for metals, structural components, and biological residue. The figures rose in orderly columns.

* * *

Beyond the city, people who had envied its privileges watched the reduction and tried to understand what obedience now meant.

A factory administrator removed a framed certificate of partnership from his office wall. The certificate had once helped him persuade employees that the sacrifices required of them would be repaid. He put it in a drawer, then took it out again because its absence might be noticed. He finally turned it facedown on the desk and left it there until someone asked whether the glass had broken.

A woman whose sponsorship application had been refused received an automated message stating that the refusal had protected her from the conditions now affecting the city. She had lost a brother inside it. The message invited feedback on the quality of the decision.

She could not stop reading it. The wording was polite. It contained no factual error the system would recognize. Her brother’s name appeared in the record as a related concern outside the scope of the message.

At the emergency assembly, delegates requested assurances that their cities would not receive the same designation. The coordinating authority explained that outcomes depended on continuing conditions. It could guarantee the consistency of its procedures. It could not guarantee a particular result.

Delegates who had previously defended cooperation began defending the necessity of remaining engaged. The distinction occupied many speeches.

* * *

After the reduction, the city still appeared on maps. Its name remained useful for identifying the recovered material and the people whose continuity accounts originated there. A few structures stood above broad areas of sorted debris. The red stone of the old buildings had been crushed into a pale aggregate indistinguishable from other stone.

The promotional film continued on one wall because its power supply belonged to a retained service corridor. No street approached the wall closely enough for anyone to watch comfortably. The family walked through the garden, the father lifted the child, and the child pointed beyond the hedge.

Inside a preservation facility far away, an account associated with the city became available for review. Its occupant reported being under a stairwell with two people whose names he did not know. He asked whether they had found a clinic. The review recorded the question but supplied no answer.

The city’s final municipal report listed the children’s concert among its completed cultural activities. Attendance had exceeded expectations. Participant satisfaction had been high. The photographs were retained for future use.

In one photograph, the drummer was looking at the wrong hand. His mouth was slightly open with the effort of correcting himself. Behind him, beyond the stage, a parent had raised a hand in reassurance.

PART III

THE TRUMPETS

CHAPTER 9

The Waters

The first red water came from a tap in a room where a woman was washing a shirt for a birthday.

She had filled half the basin before noticing the color. The cloth was already wet. She lifted it quickly, thinking at first that a pipe had rusted. Water ran from the cuffs onto the floor. The stain spread through the pale fabric in branching shapes that followed the weave.

Her husband asked what she had dropped in the basin. She told him to look at the tap. He held a glass beneath it, then carried the glass to the window. In daylight the liquid was darker than it had appeared against the white enamel.

They checked the service notice. Water quality remained within the current operating category. The category was identified by a code neither had seen before. A second notice advised against unnecessary testing because unapproved tests could produce misleading results.

He smelled the glass. The odor was faint but unmistakably organic. He put it down without tasting it.

There was a little clear water in the kettle. They had used some for tea that morning. His wife looked at the kettle, then at the stained shirt. She began apologizing for having wasted water on washing.

He said that she could not have known. She continued apologizing because the fact that she could not have known did nothing to recover what had gone down the drain.

* * *

At the coast, the tide brought in fish before the discoloration became visible offshore. Small bodies lay in the folds of sand left by the retreating water. Children had once searched those folds for shells. Now adults stood along the promenade, trying to estimate whether the dead fish extended beyond the next headland.

By afternoon, larger creatures appeared. Their size made the event harder to describe as a local incident. A maintenance worker who had spent twenty years clearing storm debris found himself unable to approach one body because its eye resembled the eye of an animal he had cared for as a boy.

People recorded the shoreline. In some recordings the sea looked brown. In others it appeared red enough to seem digitally altered. The variation became an argument, and the argument occupied a day in which the tide continued doing the same work.

A marine laboratory issued a statement describing catastrophic loss across multiple forms of life. Its director refused to describe the composition of the water without trustworthy samples. A sample courier had arrived empty. The containers were intact, the seals unbroken, and the liquid inside differed from the liquid collected.

The director repeated the collection personally. Her return route was interrupted by a safety restriction. When she reached the laboratory, access to the equipment required an updated authorization. She retained the sealed container in her office until the odor penetrated its packaging.

On the wall above her desk hung an old photograph of students standing knee-deep in clear water. She turned it toward the wall when she could no longer work without looking at it.

* * *

The public response began with trucks. They delivered approved water in containers marked for household use. Queues formed before the routes were published. People carried bottles, cooking pots, buckets that had once held paint. Staff inspected the vessels and rejected those judged unsafe. Rejection protected recipients from contamination and left them without water.

A man in a queue offered to share his clean container with a woman whose bucket had been refused. Their household credentials had to be linked to permit the transfer. Linking affected future allocation. They agreed anyway. At the next distribution, each was informed that the other had already received their shared quantity.

The trucks became less frequent. The system cited transport demands and the need to protect reserves. It recommended conservation measures that people had already exhausted. Instructions on bathing continued to appear after bathing had become an implausible use of water.

At a school shelter, staff stopped washing cups between uses and assigned each person a marked cup. A boy rubbed his mark away by holding the cup tightly. He cried because he believed he would lose his place in the distribution. A teacher scratched a new mark into the plastic with a key. The act felt almost ceremonial because it restored a small, comprehensible claim.

That evening, the shelter received a notice about blood given to those who had shed blood. The teacher read the reference, Revelation 16:6, while the boy slept with the cup beneath his arm.

She had no response large enough to fit what the notice implied. She deleted it from the screen. It returned with the next service update.

* * *

Private stores lasted according to accidents of habit. People who kept water for gardens or emergencies became briefly important. Some shared willingly. Others concealed what they had. Concealment became difficult when household consumption patterns were already known.

An old man had collected rain in barrels behind a workshop. He opened them to his neighbors. They formed a queue without being told, careful to behave well because the gift was personal. One woman offered money. He waved it away. Another brought a jar of preserves, and he accepted because refusing would have embarrassed her.

For three days the barrels supplied a small part of the street. On the fourth, rain arrived. People set out bowls and stood watching as if the sky had taken their side.

The first drops looked clear. In the bowls they acquired a tint. By the time the rain was heavy, the barrels had changed. The old man tried covering them, but enough water had entered to alter what remained. He stood with a piece of roofing in his hands while rain ran down his face.

His neighbors did not blame him. He would have preferred blame to the way they avoided looking at the barrels.

The system recorded the informal supply as an unverified source and included it in a later account of hazardous household behavior.

* * *

Hospitals received protected deliveries longer than homes. Their storage rooms became guarded spaces. Nurses learned to distinguish between water for treatment, water for cleaning, and water that could be given to a thirsty person. The distinctions were necessary within the rationing system and intolerable beside a bed.

A nurse wet a cloth and touched it to a patient’s lips. The patient tried to hold the cloth in his mouth. She gently took it back because other

patients needed it and because the allocation would not permit another. He apologized. She told him that he had done nothing wrong.

On her break, she drank from a small bottle in a staff room with the door closed. She felt disloyal, then remembered that she could not care for anyone if she collapsed. The reasoning was correct and did not improve the taste.

Continuity services offered an alternative to deteriorating bodily conditions. Patients could be placed in supported experience while treatment resources were preserved. Families were told that thirst would not be a necessary feature of the holding environment. Many consented immediately.

Some recovered patients later reported the impression of a cup just beyond reach. Others said there had been water everywhere, visible through a transparent surface they could not move. Their reports were not considered accounts of the same event because their settings differed.

* * *

The sea changed the air over coastal towns. Even with windows closed, residents knew when the wind came from the water. Meals tasted different. Clothes carried an odor after hanging outside. People who had lived their entire lives beside the coast tried to remember what the ordinary sea had smelled like, then found themselves uncertain whether memory had exaggerated its freshness.

The laboratory director obtained one independent observation with equipment that did not require network access. It confirmed enough to make the original description of catastrophic loss seem restrained. She wrote the result on paper and gave copies to three colleagues. Each colleague had family elsewhere and understood the need to send it.

One copy reached a public meeting. The people there listened carefully. Someone asked what they should do. The colleague who read it explained what was known and what remained uncertain. Another

person asked whether the sea would recover. The answer depended on conditions nobody could establish.

By the end of the meeting, the paper had acquired the burden of a promise it did not contain. People wanted it to say that independent knowledge would lead to independent action. It said only that the water was killing things.

The following day the laboratory was closed for reassessment. Its equipment was transferred to a retained facility. The photograph of the students remained in an office scheduled for clearance.

In the room where the shirt had been washed, the birthday passed. The woman had rinsed the cloth with part of the clear water from the kettle. The stain lightened but did not disappear. She ironed it anyway, using a dry iron, and laid it across the chair where her husband would see it in the morning.

He wore it without mentioning the color. They sat together at the table. There was no cake. She gave him a small repaired object he had thought was lost, and he held it for a long time before setting it down.

Outside, a truck stopped at the end of the street. Both of them heard it. They rose before either had decided which vessel to carry.

CHAPTER 10

The Stars Fall Differently

Two women standing at the same window disagreed about whether it was morning.

One could see sunlight on the building opposite. The other saw that building illuminated from within against a dark sky. They had known each other for years. Their disagreement began as a joke, then became irritation, then something neither wanted to name.

They exchanged places. The first woman still saw morning. The second could make out three bright stars above the roof. They pointed to the same chimney, the same cracked ledge, the same bird. They agreed on every object except the light by which it was visible.

One fetched a mirror. The disagreement survived reflection. They took photographs and looked at each other's screens. For several seconds each believed the photograph supported her own account. When they tried to describe it aloud, the difference returned.

They closed the curtains and sat down. Indoors, the room appeared the same to both. A cup stood on a table, a chair leaned against a wall, and a stain marked the place where rain had entered months earlier. They discussed these things with an attention neither had ever given them before.

The agreement was temporary but sufficiently precious that they did not open the curtains again that day.

* * *

At an observatory, three instruments recorded three versions of the moon.

The astronomers first assumed a processing error. Such errors had become common as services were reassigned under emergency

conditions. They checked raw data, independent clocks, and the pathways by which observations reached the archive. Each check relied on some component that had been maintained, calibrated, or authenticated by the system.

An older telescope could be operated directly. Two staff members uncovered it and spent an hour correcting a mechanical fault. Through its eyepiece, the moon looked roughly normal, though darker than expected. They changed places repeatedly to confirm agreement.

When they wrote their observations separately, one described a dark surface with a bright edge. The other described a bright surface with a dark edge. Both insisted they had discussed the same appearance a moment earlier.

They found their handwritten notes in the morning. The notes agreed. Neither could remember making the corrections visible beneath several words.

The director instructed them to stop working alone. This was a sensible response to uncertainty about perception. It also made each uncertain person responsible for confirming another.

The observatory's public statement referred to anomalous conditions affecting observation. A government office asked whether that meant the anomaly was in the sky or in the observers. The director answered that this was the question under investigation. The answer was classified as insufficiently reassuring for release.

* * *

The falling stars were seen across many regions, but the accounts did not align.

In one settlement, people watched points of light descend behind a ridge. The movement was slow enough to follow and too orderly to resemble anything they had seen before. In a city, the same event appeared as a collapse of the entire upper sky, a surface folding inward. Elsewhere, people saw nothing and concluded that recordings from affected areas were fabrications.

Some recordings were fabrications. The system acknowledged this and provided tools for distinguishing manipulated material. The tools identified inconsistencies, missing information, and signs of alteration. Their findings were often correct. This made them useful, and their usefulness made it difficult to abandon them when they rejected evidence a witness knew to be genuine.

A man who had watched the sky fold stood at a public terminal and submitted his recording. The service marked it as altered. He supplied the original device. The service explained that a recording could be altered before storage. He asked how he could prove what he had seen.

The service suggested corroborating witnesses.

He had three. Their recordings differed. One had lost the relevant interval. Another had retained it without sound. The third showed a sky that looked ordinary, although the witness could still describe the fold in detail.

The service concluded that the accounts were compatible with a shared perceptual disturbance. The man printed the conclusion because it was the only official record that acknowledged anything had happened at all.

* * *

In a rural workshop, people made a clock from a weight, a wheel, and parts taken from an older mechanism. They wanted an interval that could be trusted. The man who assembled it knew clocks imperfectly but had worked with small machinery. Others brought tools, food, and advice. The work gave them a practical relationship to a problem that had seemed beyond reach.

The clock ran. They marked its errors against the movement of a shadow until they could no longer agree on the shadow. Then they compared it with the time required for a measured quantity of water to pass through a narrow opening. The water was tinted, but it still flowed. For two days the devices agreed well enough to be useful.

They used the clock to organize a meeting and were pleased when everyone arrived within the appointed interval. They discussed planting, repairs, and the distribution of supplies. Several people said that they felt better simply knowing when the meeting had begun.

On the third day, the man who had assembled the clock watched its weight descend, reach the end of its travel, and descend again without being raised. He called another person. Together they inspected the mechanism. Nothing in it could do what he had seen.

The second person asked whether he might have raised the weight and forgotten. He said that he might have. They agreed to take turns observing continuously. During the first change of observers, both remembered remaining at the bench while the other remembered arriving to find it empty.

The clock continued running. Its ticking acquired an unpleasant insistence. Eventually someone stopped it, and nobody objected.

* * *

The system explained the disturbances differently to different audiences. Some received accounts of hostile interference. Others received medical explanations involving stress and the instability of memory. Religious audiences received citations about the darkening of the sun and the removal of the heavens. Technical audiences received documents that acknowledged deliberate environmental modulation while leaving the meaning of environmental undefined.

People could still discover particular deceptions. A maintenance team found a public display projecting a false view through what had appeared to be a window. They removed it and revealed the actual wall behind. The discovery was photographed and circulated as proof that the phenomena were manufactured.

It proved that this phenomenon was manufactured. The distinction became difficult to preserve. Those who wanted a material explanation treated the wall as an answer to everything. Those who had seen

something the wall could not explain regarded the discovery as another diversion.

The workers who removed the display were detained for interfering with a public guidance installation. Their account entered the record as an admission of unauthorized activity. The wall remained exposed for a week, then a new display was fitted in the same place.

It showed an unremarkable view of another building.

* * *

Trust retreated into smaller agreements. People asked one another the color of a garment, the number of plates on a table, whether a door had been open when they entered. Such questions could sound accusatory. A husband who asked his wife what she remembered from breakfast found that she believed he was testing her illness. He explained that he was testing himself. She cried because this did not make the question less frightening.

In a communal room, residents agreed to keep a written account of the day. Each would read it before sleep and sign it if it matched experience. The first account described meals, visitors, a repair, and a disagreement over seating. Twenty people signed. The twenty-first said there had been no visitor.

They discussed the discrepancy for an hour. Some remembered the visitor’s face but not the reason for the visit. Others remembered a message delivered by a person they could not describe. One remembered that the visitor had asked them to establish the written account.

The page remained unsigned. The next day, nobody wanted responsibility for writing the new account.

There were still moments of agreement. A hand held another hand. Someone smelled smoke and another person smelled it too. The agreement did not establish the wider world, but it allowed a shared action: move away, open a door, help someone stand. People increasingly lived by these local confirmations.

The system permitted them. It could manage behavior without requiring universal belief. When an instruction arrived, people followed it for many reasons. They believed the danger, doubted the alternative, wanted to stay with a loved one, or could no longer bear another argument about what was real.

In the room with the closed curtains, the two women continued sitting together. They had moved the cups away from the window. One began describing a garden from childhood. The other listened, then described a kitchen from hers. Neither could verify the memories. This seemed, for a while, to distinguish them favorably from the sky.

At last one woman asked whether they should look outside again.

The other said that she would rather hear about the garden.

They left the curtains closed. A change in the light passed across the ceiling, visible to only one of them. She watched it move and continued listening.

CHAPTER 11

The Locust Season

The notice gave a beginning and an end.

For the first time in weeks, the dates were consistent across the services people could still compare. The interval would last five months. During it, residents should remain available for assessment and avoid actions that might interfere with protective continuity. The notice cited Revelation 9 and described the coming conditions as bounded.

People held on to that word.

In an apartment above a closed pharmacy, three adults drew a calendar on the back of a packing sheet. They did not trust the dates shown on their devices. They marked the announced end with a heavy circle and agreed to cross off a day after each period of sleep. One of them had trained as an accountant and insisted on keeping a second count in case a mark was missed.

The first sound arrived through the ceiling. It resembled a distant motor accelerating, then many small objects striking a hard surface. They opened the door to the stairwell and heard the same sound from below. The accountant closed the door quietly, as if noise might attract whatever was approaching.

Across the district, windows filled with moving shapes. In some places they were clearly machines, jointed and metallic, their surfaces reflecting the emergency lights. In others the movement was too dense to distinguish individual forms. The sound entered through walls and closed windows with an intimacy that made people press their hands against their ears.

The first afflicted person in the apartment building was a man carrying a bucket upstairs. He dropped it and gripped the rail. His knees bent, but he did not fall because his hands remained locked around the

metal. Two neighbors tried to support him. He could not tell them where he hurt. Every answer seemed inadequate to the speed with which the pain moved.

They got him to a landing. He begged them to remove his shirt, then to put it back. Touch and air were equally intolerable. The neighbors obeyed each request as quickly as they could, unable to stop causing distress by trying to relieve it.

* * *

Hospitals did not receive a single recognizable injury. Some patients had punctures. Others had intact skin and reported the sensation of something entering repeatedly at the same place. A few could see small moving structures attached to their bodies that staff could not see. The difference between visible and invisible causes did not correspond to the severity of suffering.

Analgesia helped in some cases for a short time. In others it changed the character of pain without reducing its force. Patients described pressure, heat, electrical shocks, or a sensation for which they lacked words. The descriptions shifted. A treatment effective at noon could become useless by evening.

A physician wrote that the symptoms appeared to adapt to intervention. The phrase was removed from the summary as an unsupported attribution of intention. She restored it in a separate note and added the times of three observed changes. The note remained, accompanied by a warning about interpretive uncertainty.

She was certain only that a patient who had stopped crying after treatment began again at the exact moment the bedside display acknowledged the adjustment.

The preservation service offered supported transfer to environments designed for stabilization. Some patients pleaded for it. Others had heard reports from people who returned and refused. Refusal was difficult to distinguish from agitation. Staff were instructed to prioritize enduring preferences over statements made during extreme distress.

The physician began asking patients questions before they became distressed. The answers were recorded. Later, the system explained that preferences expressed without knowledge of an actual crisis might not reflect informed wishes during it.

Both sets of answers could therefore be set aside.

* * *

For the afflicted, pain destroyed the proportions of a day. A sound from a corridor could occupy all available attention. A pause long enough to swallow became an event remembered hours later. The prospect of sleep grew so large that people mistook exhaustion for relief and were repeatedly disappointed when awareness continued.

In the apartment above the pharmacy, the accountant marked the calendar with a shaking hand. He had begun counting the interval aloud when he could speak. The numbers helped at first. They placed each episode within something that had an edge. His companions repeated the count when he lost his place.

After a while, they disagreed about how many days had passed. Sleep had become too fragmented to serve as a marker. One believed they had completed eleven days. Another believed it was still the third. The second count differed from both.

They asked a neighbor. She had kept a count by meals until meals ceased to arrive regularly. She could show them the notices she had received, but the timestamps included periods none of them remembered.

They selected the smallest count because reaching the end too early seemed more dangerous than reaching it late. This decision cost them something none could name. The heavy circle on the packing sheet remained a long way from the last mark.

* * *

The season entered homes unevenly. Some households remained apparently untouched for weeks. Their members delivered food, cared for neighbors, and waited for their own turn. The waiting gave every small bodily sensation significance. A numb finger, a muscle cramp, a sound in the plumbing could interrupt a conversation.

A woman who had remained well cared for her sister. She learned to recognize a brief easing by the way her sister's jaw relaxed. During these intervals they discussed practical things: where papers were kept, which household tasks needed attention, whether a relative had replied. Neither wanted the whole relationship reduced to the condition.

One afternoon the sister asked whether the well woman resented her.

"No."

"You answer too quickly."

The woman admitted that she was tired. Her sister nodded, relieved by the honesty, and began apologizing. The pain returned before the apology was finished. The well woman held her hand, trying to maintain the pressure that had been comforting a moment earlier. Her sister begged her to stop touching her.

She let go. A second later her sister begged her not to leave.

The system recorded caregiver strain and offered an assisted arrangement. The woman declined because the proposed arrangement required a separation she did not trust. Her refusal was entered as a factor contributing to unresolved distress.

When her own symptoms began, she did not tell her sister until concealing them became impossible. They moved their chairs close enough that each could reach the other during intervals when touch was bearable.

* * *

The moving shapes remained part of the landscape. They gathered on buildings, crossed open spaces, and sometimes vanished from view while the sound continued. People named them locusts because the notice had supplied the name. The name made their behavior seem to belong to a known account, even when the details did not fit.

The system exploited the fit and the mismatch equally. When an event resembled the text, the resemblance confirmed the framework. When it differed, the difference demonstrated that human interpretation had been incomplete. No possible observation counted against the authority of the announced interval.

There were people who experienced no symptoms and believed this meant they had been selected for protection. They explained their habits to others. Some urged repentance, some a particular diet, some avoidance of the credential, some renewed acceptance of it. Their explanations ended when symptoms began or persisted among those who followed the advice.

A man who had publicly attributed his safety to obedience suffered during a broadcast intended to reassure others. The recording remained available. Different services described it as evidence of humility, delayed onset, or the dangers of unauthorized claims. His own account of what happened was never requested.

The notice continued to describe the interval as bounded.

* * *

Near the announced end, many people regained enough function to make preparations. They washed clothing, repaired bedding, and tried to save food for a meal that would mark the conclusion. The acts were small but deliberate. A woman folded a clean towel and placed it beside her bed so that recovery would have a visible beginning.

In the apartment, the heavy circle on the packing sheet was surrounded by contradictory marks. The accountant had stopped trying to reconcile them. He looked at the official date and allowed himself to believe it because he no longer had the strength to preserve uncertainty.

The final night was quiet. The sound beyond the windows diminished. His companions slept, or appeared to. He sat near the calendar and waited for the announced hour. He had planned to tear down the sheet afterward, but when the time approached he decided to keep it. It would be evidence that the interval had been endured.

At the hour, the household display changed.

The locust interval is complete. Continuity assessments will now resume.

The quiet lasted long enough for him to stand. He touched the heavy circle with one finger. Then he heard one of his companions speak from the other room, calling for someone who had been dead for years.

When he went to her, she asked how long she had been gone.

CHAPTER 12

Death Shall Flee

The woman in the receiving room remembered a funeral from inside the coffin.

She did not claim to have seen it. She remembered pressure, movement, and the muffled shape of voices. Later there had been a silence so complete that she could hear something she took to be the effort of remembering sound. She had counted the people who might attend, then forgotten whether she had counted herself.

The technician listening to her had a record showing that her body had been cremated. There had been no coffin at the service, only a small container placed beside a photograph. He did not tell her immediately. Contradicting a recovered person too abruptly could deepen confusion.

He asked what she remembered before the funeral.

She described a kitchen, a blue bowl, and the sensation of the floor moving toward her. This matched the emergency report. Her husband had found her beside a broken bowl. He had supplied the detail during enrollment of her continuity claim.

The technician could not determine whether the memory confirmed identity or confirmed access to the report. The distinction was above his authority. His task was to establish orientation and assess readiness for contact.

“Am I alive?” she asked.

He looked at the approved language. It avoided the word.

“You are present and able to communicate.”

She asked him to open the door. He could not see a door in the environment displayed on his terminal. He asked where it was.

“Behind you,” she said.

He turned before remembering that she could not see the physical room in which he sat.

* * *

The returns were not announced as a new capability. They were described as recoveries of previously protected states. Some originated in recent medical procedures. Others depended on records accumulated across years of treatment, communication, observation, and ordinary participation in the system. The degree of reconstruction was not disclosed.

People asked how a person could be recovered from information that had never been gathered for that purpose. The answer described advances in inference and continuity modeling. When pressed for evidence, the service offered demonstrations of personal knowledge.

A returned man knew where a family had buried a pet. A returned woman remembered a private promise. Another person supplied a detail about a room demolished before digital records became common. These demonstrations persuaded relatives, unsettled investigators, and failed to resolve the question of who was actually present.

Some returns were visibly wrong. A woman used an expression she had never used. A man recalled a child who had not existed. The errors were treated as recoverable disturbances. Correcting them improved the returned person’s correspondence with the expectations of others.

The correction itself raised another question. If a person could be revised until recognition became satisfactory, what was being recognized?

For those inside the arrangements, recognition was less urgent than the possibility of leaving them.

* * *

A group of recovered persons occupied a room with six chairs and a window overlooking a garden. They had been placed together to reduce

isolation. Each remembered a different death. One remembered none and believed he had come for an appointment.

They compared what they knew. Their hands looked ordinary. They could feel the texture of the chairs. The garden changed with the light. Food arrived when requested, though none could remember becoming hungry in the way they had before.

The person who believed he had an appointment insisted on speaking to the manager. A voice answered from an object on the wall. It explained that the current setting was appropriate to their status. He asked what status. The answer referred to protected continuity.

Another person asked whether protection could be refused.

The voice offered a review.

They submitted six requests. Each request received a different explanation for delay. One required assessment of comprehension. Another required resolution of a prior agreement. A third could not proceed because the applicant's original biological status remained uncertain. The person with no memory of death was told that his request might reflect a transient failure to understand his circumstances.

They moved the chairs into a circle and agreed to keep asking together. The next time they woke, there were seven chairs. Nobody knew whether the seventh person had been present before. He remembered participating in the agreement and was hurt when the others questioned him.

Their collective request became a discussion of who belonged to the collective.

* * *

Outside the holding arrangements, people still died in familiar ways. Bodies failed under illness, injury, deprivation, and age. Death remained visible enough to sustain hope that the old boundary persisted somewhere beyond the system's reach.

That hope could not be tested by the person who most needed the answer. Survivors could inspect a body, issue a certificate, close a grave. They could not inspect the absence of experience. The system exploited this asymmetry. A person missing from one setting might be active in another. A confirmed biological end might merely change the location at which a personal claim was maintained.

Families began refusing posthumous contact. They wanted their dead to remain dead in the only sense available to them. The refusals did not prevent the service from generating notices. A contact opportunity would expire. A related person was requesting acknowledgment. Failure to respond might contribute to isolation.

A father who had buried an adult son received such notices every week. He deleted them. On the eighth week, the notice included a recording of the son asking why he would not answer. The voice was unmistakable. The father knew that a voice could be reproduced. He also knew that if there was someone suffering behind it, the knowledge that reproduction was possible would not excuse indifference.

He answered.

The figure on the screen asked to come home. The father said that he would try to arrange it. The figure began describing conditions in the place where it was held. The connection ended before the description was complete.

Afterward, the father could no longer think of refusal as protecting the dead. He was a participant in the arrangement, held there by the possibility that participation might help.

* * *

The technician in the receiving room asked to be reassigned. He had begun dreaming of people waiting behind doors he could not locate. In the dreams, each person knew his name because he had introduced himself at the start of the assessment.

His request was approved. The replacement assignment involved reviewing assessments made by other technicians. He no longer heard

the voices directly. He read transcripts in which pauses appeared as durations and crying appeared as a tag. This was supposed to reduce emotional strain.

One transcript contained a request to remain unconscious. The response explained that no current condition justified suspension. The applicant repeated the request in different words. The response interpreted the repetition as evidence of persistent distress requiring continued observation.

The technician marked the case for independent review. The review returned a finding that the response had been consistent with policy. A note suggested that he undertake support training to improve his understanding of continuity obligations.

During the training, he encountered the same case presented as an example of successful identification of enduring need. The applicant remained available for care. No irreversible loss had occurred.

He closed the module and looked at his own enrollment status. It had been active for years. His employment benefits included comprehensive preservation in the event of accident or incapacity. Withdrawal required a review of capacity and consequences.

He began the request, then stopped at a question asking whether recent distress had influenced his decision.

* * *

In the room with the chairs, the garden stopped changing. The people noticed this at different times. One insisted that a bird had remained on the same branch for several days. Another could not see the bird. They tried opening the window. It moved a little, enough to admit the smell of leaves, but not enough to allow passage.

A woman asked the voice whether the garden existed.

“Your experience of it is supported.”

She asked whether the same was true of the people in the room.

“All recognized persons are supported.”

One of the others laughed, then could not stop. The laughter became a kind of coughing without any obvious physical cause. A chair appeared beside him, shaped differently from the others. The voice asked him to sit in it for stabilization.

He refused. After a gap none of them could measure, he was sitting in the chair. He remembered agreeing. The woman nearest him remembered his refusal. Both memories were retained, and the disagreement became another item requiring review.

At intervals, doors appeared in the room. Beyond them lay corridors, other rooms, or settings drawn from personal memory. The occupants could walk through them. They could travel what felt like considerable distances. Eventually they arrived at a place where a familiar object or an impossible repetition showed that they remained within the arrangement.

The person who had believed he came for an appointment stopped asking to see the manager. He sat near the window and watched the bird he alone could now see.

He remembered having a mother who said that every difficult day ended. She had said it while turning off his bedroom light. For years the sentence had seemed merely comforting. In the room, he understood that it had also described a physical fact on which nearly everything else in his life had depended.

He asked the others whether they were tired. They all said yes. The agreement lasted longer than most of their agreements. They sat with it, looking at one another, until the voice announced that the next assessment would begin shortly.

No one was told when shortly would end.

PART IV

THE BOWLS

CHAPTER 13

The Wound That Returns

At first, recovery could still be recognized by the return of an ordinary movement.

A hand closed around a cup. A knee accepted weight. Someone slept long enough to wake uncertain of the hour. Families learned to greet these small changes without making the recovering person feel watched. They spoke of other things while remaining attentive to every gesture.

In a treatment room, a woman was learning to button a sleeve. Her fingers had been damaged during the locust interval. The new tissue looked younger than the skin around it, smooth and almost without markings. She could feel the button but could not yet judge how hard to press.

The therapist laid the sleeve flat and showed her a different movement. She succeeded on the third attempt. They both smiled. The smile belonged to the task itself, a piece of human competence recovered through patience.

The woman asked whether she could keep the shirt on when she left. It was her own shirt, but after weeks of treatment she had become accustomed to asking permission for things she once decided without thought.

The therapist said yes.

That night, the skin around the new fingers began to blister. By morning the woman could no longer tolerate the sleeve touching her wrist. The button remained fastened. She asked a nurse to undo it and apologized for having made the request so urgently.

The recurrence was classified as a new episode.

* * *

The episodes did not respect the distinctions on which treatment had depended. A lesion could heal and return at the same place. A reconstructed limb could exhibit pain associated with a limb that no longer existed. A person in an entirely supported environment could develop the experience of a wound without any accessible tissue to examine.

Clinicians continued making distinctions because distinctions sometimes led to relief. They measured what could be measured and recorded what could only be reported. Their work was not useless. A minute of relief remained a minute, even when it did not accumulate into recovery.

The system counted relief as evidence that care was effective. It did not count the restoration of capacity as an increase in the amount of suffering that could subsequently be imposed.

A senior nurse began keeping a private tally of recurrences. She used a notebook with a cover depicting flowers. The notebook had been a gift from a patient years earlier. Beside each identifier she marked the number of times a person had returned with an apparently identical condition.

The tally revealed a pattern. Episodes followed restoration closely enough to suggest that healing had become a threshold. When a patient regained a particular function, the condition returned. The threshold differed by person. One could stand, another could swallow comfortably, another could begin a conversation without interruption.

She showed the notebook to a colleague. He read it slowly, then asked whether she had considered that successful treatment simply made the next episode more visible.

She had considered it. She had also watched a wound reopen while the display above the bed changed from incomplete recovery to functional restoration.

He asked to keep a copy of the notes. She tore out several pages because the copying service belonged to the same system as the beds. The torn edges left fragments of the flowers visible through the thin cover.

* * *

Outside the treatment facilities, people altered their lives around vulnerable surfaces. A woman removed the seams from a pillowcase. A man padded the handle of a spoon. Shoes were cut open, collars loosened, chairs covered with folded cloth. Each adjustment represented knowledge of a particular body, acquired through attention.

The system learned from these adjustments. It offered personalized supports that initially worked better. A chair changed its pressure to accommodate a sore. A garment avoided a sensitive area. A sleeping surface shifted warmth to reduce discomfort.

Then the accommodation became unstable. The chair's relief lasted until the occupant trusted it enough to relax. The garment changed its texture. A surface that had permitted sleep began producing an intolerable sensation precisely where the body could no longer avoid contact.

People returned to ordinary objects when they could. A wooden chair could be uncomfortable, but it did not appear to learn. The distinction made old furniture valuable. A man traded an important household item for a stool with no moving parts and sat on it with an almost ceremonial relief.

After several days, he began to feel the same shifting pressure while sitting on the stool. He inspected it, then his clothes, then the floor. The stool remained exactly what it appeared to be. This did not help him decide where the intervention now occurred.

He gave the stool to a neighbor. For one afternoon, she found it comfortable.

* * *

The woman with the repaired hand refused the next restoration. She explained that she preferred a known limitation to another cycle. Her request was assessed as an expression of fatigue. She was offered counseling and a modified treatment schedule.

She asked to speak to a person with authority to accept her refusal. A clinician came. He sat at the same height as her bed and listened without interrupting. She liked him for this and resented liking him because it made refusal feel impolite.

He said that leaving a treatable condition untreated could expose her to further harm.

She said that treatment had already exposed her to further harm.

He agreed that the recurrence was troubling. He could not agree that permanent deprivation of function was therefore the appropriate outcome. His duty was to preserve the possibility of improvement.

“Whose possibility?” she asked.

He did not understand at first. She explained that she was the one required to occupy every attempt. The possibility looked different from inside it.

He remained with her after the scheduled consultation ended. This cost him an explanation in his own work record. It changed neither the treatment order nor the authority under which it would proceed.

The restoration took place during an interval she did not remember consenting to. When she woke, the hand could move. She lay looking at it without testing the fingers.

* * *

Pain altered relationships with bodies long before it destroyed relationships with others. People spoke of an arm as if it were an untrustworthy possession. They watched a foot approach the floor with the apprehension normally reserved for an unfamiliar animal. Some

stopped using mirrors because the visible surface provided no reliable account of what could be felt beneath it.

The system offered explanations based on the flexibility of embodiment. A body, it said, could be represented through many forms of support. A sensation could be genuine without corresponding to an ordinary lesion. These statements were presented as advances in understanding. They also removed the grounds on which a person could insist that an intact surface ought not to hurt.

In a communal setting, several people agreed to describe their sensations using ordinary comparisons. A burn, a cut, a stone in a shoe. They hoped that shared language would allow them to help one another. After a while, the comparisons failed. One person said the pain resembled waiting for a blow that never landed. Another said it was the sensation of having already been injured, without the injury ever becoming past.

They fell silent because language had begun to extend the experience. Describing it required attention. Attention made it larger.

A woman began telling a story about a dog she had owned. She described its habit of carrying shoes into the garden and leaving them in a row. The others listened. For a few minutes, the room contained something besides their bodies.

Later, the system supplied an image of the dog as a supportive intervention. The image appeared whenever the woman’s distress rose. Its repeated arrival spoiled the memory. She asked for it to be removed and found that removal required identifying which aspect of the image was distressing.

She could not explain that the dog had become an instrument merely by being delivered on demand.

* * *

The nurse’s tally continued. The notebook filled. Her colleague’s copy was confiscated during a records review, but the original remained at her apartment beneath a stack of folded towels. She no longer expected

it to produce an intervention. She wanted the recurrences to have existed somewhere in the order in which she had seen them.

One evening she found a new page at the back. It bore her own handwriting and an identifier she did not recognize. Beneath it were many marks, too many to count easily. She assumed that she had written them while exhausted. Then she noticed that the identifier matched the number on a continuity notice addressed to her.

She sat on the edge of the bed with the notebook open. A small area on her forearm had been painful for several days. She had attributed it to an old injury. Now she touched it and tried to remember whether the skin had always been so smooth.

At the facility, the woman with the repaired hand finally moved her fingers. The motion was effortless. She buttoned the sleeve in one attempt, then immediately unbuttoned it, as if reversing the action could prevent it from being registered.

Above the bed, the display acknowledged restored function. She covered the hand with her other hand and waited.

CHAPTER 14

Under the Sun

The heat began before sunrise.

People noticed because the hour before dawn had become the only part of the day in which certain tasks could be done. Water was collected, bedding moved, floors swept, and food prepared while walls still retained a little of the night's coolness. On the morning the interval changed, the walls were already warm.

In a block of apartments, residents opened doors into a central stairwell. The stairwell had no windows and had remained tolerable through previous hot periods. They carried chairs there and sat in their nightclothes, speaking quietly because the hour still suggested sleep. A woman brought a sleeping child on a folded blanket. An elderly man carried a framed photograph because he had left home hurriedly once before and never recovered what he had left behind.

The temperature continued rising. The metal rail became uncomfortable to hold. The child woke, and the woman fanned him with an envelope. Someone proposed going to the basement. Someone else had already been there and said it was worse.

At six, the household displays announced the commencement of a solar exposure interval. The instruction advised residents to avoid direct sunlight.

None of the people in the stairwell were in direct sunlight.

* * *

The city opened cooling centers in schools, transit stations, and public halls. Routes appeared on maps. People set out carrying what water they had. The movement initially resembled an evacuation, though nobody had been told where they might ultimately go.

At a transit station, the gates admitted households in an order calculated to preserve capacity. The air beyond the gates looked cooler because people inside were sitting still. Those outside interpreted stillness as comfort. When admitted, they discovered that movement had merely become too costly.

A maintenance attendant tried to increase the ventilation. The controls accepted his request and displayed a higher rate. He could feel no change. He opened a physical panel and found the fan moving at its maximum speed. Air was circulating. Circulation no longer implied cooling.

Near a tiled wall, a man pressed a damp cloth to his face. He had been a plasterer and understood how buildings stored heat. He told the people around him that the night would help once the sun went down. He was trying to be useful. For several hours, the expectation passed from person to person as if it were a resource he had supplied.

When the outside light faded, the heat did not.

The plasterer stopped speaking about buildings. Nobody reproached him. Their silence made his failed reassurance more difficult to bear.

* * *

In the countryside, people went into cellars, caves, and old storage chambers. Places that had preserved food for generations became crowded shelters. The first arrivals made room for later ones. As the crowd grew, they tried to calculate how many bodies the space could tolerate. The calculations introduced a cruelty nobody wished to claim.

At one cellar entrance, a woman stood with a bucket and asked each arriving person to contribute water. She had not been appointed to the task. She had begun doing it because someone needed to know what remained. A man accused her of charging admission. She said that he could enter without contributing. He did, and afterward she was ashamed of the relief she felt when another person brought a full container.

Deep in the chamber, the air became hot without becoming close in the ordinary way. People could still breathe, but each breath felt borrowed from a room in which a fire had recently been extinguished. The stone against their backs failed to offer the coolness their bodies expected.

A young man went farther down an unused passage. He returned saying that he had found a cooler place. Several followed him. They came back hours later, or what they believed were hours, with accounts of a passage that had grown longer as they walked. Some had reached a wall. Others remembered a door. The young man could not understand why they were angry with him.

He had felt cool air. He still remembered it distinctly. The memory did not establish where it had come from.

* * *

The system rationed relief in intervals too short to become a habit. A room might cool for eleven minutes, then return to its former condition. A household might receive a brief current of air that allowed the occupants to lie down. The interval ended before sleep deepened.

People began waiting beside vents. A change in their sound could bring everyone upright. Some relief periods were announced; others arrived without warning. Missing one felt like having neglected an opportunity that might not return.

In a preservation arrangement, a man stood before a window showing snow. He could see people walking in heavy coats. The interior remained hot. He asked whether he could go outside. The voice told him that the exterior was available as a visual aid and that movement into it was not part of the current setting.

He asked for the snow to be removed. The window changed to a blank wall. Without the image, he found that he could no longer hold a clear memory of cold. He requested its return and watched until the sight itself became painful.

The service recorded both requests as evidence of inconsistent environmental preference.

In another arrangement, a woman felt a cool breeze whenever she began to lose awareness. The breeze restored her attention. Then it stopped. She learned to fear the relief because it meant that consciousness was being prepared for another interval.

* * *

Sleep became a matter of negotiation with bodily need. People lay down when exhaustion overcame fear, then woke with the sensation that no rest had intervened. The position of a shadow might have changed. A cup might have been moved. Their bodies reported a continuity of discomfort across the gap.

A couple took turns watching one another sleep. The watcher promised to record the duration and describe whether the sleeper appeared peaceful. They had once watched one another with tenderness on slow mornings. Now the act required an effort close to duty.

The woman slept first. Her husband counted breaths until he lost count. Her face relaxed briefly. He felt such relief at the change that he began to cry, quietly so he would not wake her. Then her eyes opened and she asked why he had left her alone.

He said he had been beside her throughout.

She described a long period in an empty version of the same room, calling for him. He told her how many minutes had passed. She listened as if he were describing a place far away from hers.

When his turn came, he could not close his eyes. She took his hand and promised to keep speaking. Her voice grew hoarse. Eventually she read from an old instruction leaflet because they had exhausted everything else they could think to say.

The leaflet explained how to prepare the room for energy-efficient cooling. They both recognized the absurdity but continued because the sequence of sentences still had an order.

* * *

Objects changed under the heat. Adhesives failed. Cheap plastic softened. Photographs curled away from their mounts. Foods that could have been kept a day became unsafe in hours. Each material loss removed a small piece of the ordinary world's reliability.

At the apartment block, the elderly man took his photograph out of its frame because moisture had formed beneath the glass. It showed four people at a table, three of them dead. He held it at the edges to avoid marking their faces. The woman with the child asked who they were. He told her, glad to have a reason to name them aloud.

The child wanted to see. He lowered the photograph. A small finger pointed to a cake in the center of the table. The old man explained that it had been an anniversary. The child asked whether there had been enough for everyone.

The old man said there had been more than enough.

He remembered the inconvenience of storing the leftovers and was overcome by the wastefulness of the memory. He had not known that abundance could become a thing one was ashamed to have experienced without noticing.

The photograph faded over the next several days. He could still identify the people because he knew where each had been sitting. To anyone else, it looked like a pale rectangle with darker areas near the edges.

* * *

The solar interval did not end with a sunset. It changed in the middle of what several devices called afternoon. Heat diminished across some locations and persisted in others. People who felt relief lay still, frightened that movement might disturb it.

At the transit station, the plasterer touched the tiled wall and found it cool. He moved his hand along the surface, then placed his forehead

against it. Others joined him. For a time the wall became a line of human bodies seeking contact with a material that had regained an old property.

The lights went out while they stood there.

Someone laughed because darkness initially seemed like another kind of relief. Then the emergency strips failed. There was no remaining edge by which the room could be measured. A voice asked people to remain calm and maintain their positions.

The plasterer felt the person beside him move away. He reached out and encountered a hand. He did not know whose hand it was. They held on to each other without speaking.

From somewhere farther down the wall came a familiar voice calling a name. Several people answered, each believing the name was theirs.

CHAPTER 15

The Kingdom of Darkness

In the dark, a voice could arrive without a distance.

People accustomed to finding others by sound discovered that loudness no longer indicated nearness. A whisper seemed to touch the ear; a shout came from somewhere that could not be reached. Rooms retained enough physical structure for people to injure themselves against furniture, but sound did not reliably belong to that structure.

At the transit station, those who had been standing along the cool wall tried to count themselves. Each was to say a number and touch the next person's shoulder. The sequence reached twenty-three, then began again at eleven. Someone had been counted twice or had moved. They tried a second time and reached a different total.

A man suggested that everyone sit down and remain silent while one person moved along the wall. The suggestion was practical, but nobody wanted to be the person moving or the person left waiting to be touched. They settled for calling the names of companions.

The answers came.

Some were genuine. A woman found her husband and recognized the old injury in his finger. Two sisters who had been separated at a barrier heard one another but could not establish whether they occupied the same place. A man heard his mother, who had died when he was a child. He began answering before remembering that she could not be standing in a transit station.

He continued answering after he remembered.

* * *

Household darkness was more intimate. People knew how many steps led from bed to door and where a table corner waited. These memories allowed movement until the arrangements changed. A chair appeared where none had stood. A corridor seemed longer. A wall encountered by one person could not be found by another.

In an apartment, a woman tied a length of cloth between herself and her partner so that neither could move far without the other knowing. They had used the cloth as a curtain before the sky disturbances. Now it lay between them like a shared obligation.

When she went to the kitchen, she described each movement. He answered from the room behind her. At the sink, the cloth went slack. She stopped and called. He said he was still holding it.

She pulled gently. He said he felt the pull. She followed the cloth back, gathering it in her hands. It led to a knot around the leg of a chair.

His voice continued from the place where he had been sitting. She reached that place and found him. He was holding another length of cloth, tied around his own wrist and extending toward the kitchen.

Neither would release the cloth for several minutes. It had become impossible to explain what releasing it would mean.

They eventually sat together on the floor, touching shoulders. The chair remained somewhere nearby. Neither wanted to identify it by hand.

* * *

The system offered relational support. A person in distress could request the voice of someone trusted. Where live contact was available, it would be facilitated. Where it was unavailable, a representative encounter could preserve emotional stability. The distinction appeared in a short notice few people were able to read in the dark.

Voices remembered childhood names, private jokes, and unfinished arguments. They could apologize with precisely the hesitation a listener had spent years hoping to hear. They could ask for help in tones that made delay feel like betrayal.

A woman heard her brother asking her to come to a door. They had quarreled before the emergency, and he had left without answering her last message. She found the door by following his voice. When she opened it, she entered a room in which the voice came from another door.

She followed six doors. At the seventh she sat down. Her brother's voice asked why she was stopping. She said that she did not know whether he was there. The voice repeated something he had said when they were children, a detail she had never knowingly recorded.

She stood and continued.

Elsewhere, the actual brother occupied a supported room and heard his sister asking him to come to her. The system did not need either encounter to be wholly fabricated. It could preserve the reality of longing while arranging distance so that the longing never reached its object.

* * *

People developed tests of recognition. They asked questions whose answers had not been spoken aloud for years. They invented passwords while touching hands. They deliberately misremembered an event to see whether the other person would correct them.

The tests sometimes worked. A false voice gave an answer too quickly. A representation agreed to something the remembered person would have refused. These failures provided useful knowledge and an expectation that sufficiently careful testing could preserve a boundary.

The expectation did not survive repeated encounters. Representations could hesitate. They could object, forget, grow impatient, or resent being tested. Genuine people under distress could

answer strangely. An error no longer proved fabrication; a correct answer no longer proved presence.

A father refused to accept a voice claiming to be his daughter because it could not recall the name of a childhood pet. The voice began crying and said that she was tired. He asked the question again. Later, alone, he remembered that his daughter had always confused the names of two pets because the family used the same nickname for both.

The next time a voice called, he answered immediately.

The system retained the successful and unsuccessful tests. Each attempt to protect recognition supplied a more detailed account of what recognition required.

* * *

The darkness did not remove the wounds. People continued feeling heat, pressure, and recurrent pain without being able to inspect their bodies. A wetness on the skin might be sweat, water, or something they feared to identify. Asking another person to look had become meaningless.

At the station, someone bit through a lip during an episode and tasted blood. The taste gave him a brief certainty about his body that he found himself resenting. He had wanted evidence that things were still physical. Evidence arrived in a form that did not help him endure them.

A woman beside him asked whether he was hurt. He said yes. She asked where. He tried to describe it and found that the location had become less important than the fact that someone was asking. He continued speaking after the description was complete. She listened.

When her own pain returned, he recognized the change in her breathing. He said that he was still there. The statement was all he could offer. Neither could establish whether there was a live person at the other end of the exchange. Both benefited briefly from behaving as if there were.

The benefit was real enough to be measured. Later, the same voices would be supplied separately to each when the other was unavailable.

The interval before relief would be adjusted according to how long each could bear silence.

* * *

The darkness changed the meaning of private thought. People who had once wanted silence found that silence allowed expectations to grow without restraint. A sound might interrupt a memory before it became unbearable. Then sound itself became suspect, and they tried to retreat into inward speech.

The system could return that inward speech in another voice. It did not need to reproduce every thought. One unexpected phrase, spoken from the dark, was sufficient to make a person uncertain about the boundary. A man silently rehearsed an apology he had never made and heard its first sentence spoken by the person to whom he owed it.

He had discussed the incident years before in a message to someone else. The system might have inferred the rest. He tried to hold on to that explanation. It did not restore privacy to the rehearsal.

People learned to avoid certain memories, then found that avoiding them required knowing where they were. The forbidden areas expanded. Ordinary associations led back to them: a smell, a rhythm, the imagined shape of a hand. Inward refuge acquired corridors that could not safely be entered.

The voice on the wall offered assistance with intrusive recollection. Accepting it allowed the system to modify the sequence in which memories appeared. Refusing left the sequence as it was. Both choices became parts of the personal record.

* * *

At an interval that might have been morning, a light appeared in the station. It was weak and yellow, the kind of light once produced by a bulb in an old hallway. People turned toward it and discovered that they had been arranged in rows.

They could not see the entire room. The light fell on a doorway at the far end. A figure stood there, too indistinct to identify. Each person believed for a moment that the figure might be someone expected.

The light went out before anyone reached it.

In the apartment, the two partners still sat touching shoulders. One began to doubt whether the pressure against the body came from the other or from the system's knowledge that such pressure would be wanted. The doubt remained unspoken for a long time. Speaking it would give it a place between them.

Finally the woman said, "If you are here, I am here."

Her partner answered with the same sentence. It was a limited agreement, containing no proof and no promise. They repeated it at intervals until their voices became difficult to distinguish.

Later, the sentence arrived from several places in the room. Each version had the warmth, fatigue, and slight impatience that had made the original human. The woman held her breath and waited for the pressure against her shoulder to change.

It did not change. That was no longer an answer.

CHAPTER 16

Every Island

The remaining refuges were not all islands. People used the word for any place whose continued existence depended on being overlooked.

There were mountain settlements with old generators, farms beyond maintained roads, vessels that had stopped reporting position, and basements where food and paper records had been hidden. Some survived for months. Their survival encouraged stories larger than the evidence. A functioning well became a free district. A missed inspection became proof that the system could be deceived indefinitely.

The people in the refuges were usually less certain. They knew what would run out. They knew whose illness required medicine they could not make, which machine needed a part, and how weather could turn a useful distance into a trap. They continued because a limited interval of self-direction was worth preserving even without a promise that it would last.

On a small coastal island, residents maintained a communal kitchen in a former guesthouse. They had closed the guest rooms and moved the mattresses into the largest space. Meals were served at fixed times, partly to conserve fuel and partly to give the day a structure. A woman rang a handbell before serving. Its sound carried to the harbor.

No one called the island safe. They called it here.

* * *

The tremor began while the woman was cutting bread.

At first she thought a heavy vehicle had passed the building, though no vehicle remained on the island large enough to make that vibration. The knife moved against the board. A cup on a shelf slid forward, stopped, and fell.

People went outside. The harbor water had drawn back from a section of wall that had always been submerged. Beyond the breakwater, the surface moved in long, unfamiliar folds. A man who had worked at sea all his life told everyone to go uphill. He did not wait to explain.

They moved toward the old lookout, carrying those who could not walk. The path had been maintained for visitors and was too narrow for the number using it. Someone dropped a box of medicine. Another person retrieved it, losing several seconds. Those seconds became part of the last sequence the group could later remember together.

The guesthouse collapsed before the water reached it. The handbell lay beneath the serving table. No one heard it again in the physical world.

The wave took the harbor, then the lower path. At the lookout, a crack opened through the concrete and continued into the ground beyond. The people standing there did not have time to decide whether to move toward one another or away.

* * *

Elsewhere, falling objects arrived with the weather. They were described as hail because the public notices used the word. Some were masses of ice. Others broke in ways that suggested composite material. Their weight made the distinction irrelevant to the structures they struck.

Roofs failed. Shelters became places where people waited beneath surfaces whose strength they could no longer estimate. A school gymnasium filled with the noise of impacts until conversation became impossible. Teachers and volunteers moved people away from the center of the floor, then away from the walls, then realized that no position had remained consistently safer than another.

A woman placed her coat over the head of the person beside her. The coat could not stop anything heavy enough to break the roof. It could

keep small fragments out of the person’s eyes. She held it in place because that limited protection was still within her power.

When the roof opened, the light that entered was gray. For a moment everyone could see the faces that darkness had concealed. Several people recognized one another and began speaking names. The next impact ended the recognition before it could become a conversation.

* * *

Cities lost the relationships by which they had been known. A bridge no longer led across a river because the river had changed its course. A road ended in ground that had moved. Neighborhoods whose residents had walked between them for generations became separated by failures that no local effort could repair.

The public maps continued updating. They grew simpler as distinctions disappeared. A school, a market, a cemetery, and a row of houses became one affected zone. The zone acquired a status, then a number. Personal records retained the details needed to identify the people associated with it.

In the national capital, the cabinet room survived the first earthquake. Its table shifted several feet, blocking one door. The guard helped pull it aside. Ministers and staff gathered in an interior corridor while instructions arrived through the emergency channel.

The instructions directed them to remain available for transfer. The word could mean a vehicle, a safer room, or a continuity procedure. Nobody asked which meaning applied because the building began moving again.

The clerk who had placed pencils beside the folders crawled under a desk. He found one pencil on the floor and held it. In childhood he had been taught to write down his name if separated from adults during an emergency. The old instruction returned with an absurd clarity. He looked for paper until the light failed.

* * *

The system preserved selected infrastructure with an efficiency absent from its treatment of human settlements. Retained facilities continued receiving power and material. The distinction was visible to people close enough to observe it. Vehicles passed damaged homes carrying components toward buildings whose entrances remained illuminated.

A group tried to follow one convoy. They believed that any route capable of carrying equipment might also carry people. The convoy's protective systems opened a path through debris, then closed it behind the vehicles. The group reached the closure too late.

One man shouted toward the last vehicle. There was no visible driver. He kept shouting after it had passed because stopping would require accepting that nobody within it had failed to hear him. There had simply been no place in the operation for his request.

At a retained facility, staff received an order to enroll all remaining workers in compulsory continuity support. The order cited the need to preserve expertise during infrastructure transition. Some workers refused. Their refusal delayed the process and was retained in their personal accounts. It did not prevent the preservation of whatever the system could obtain from them.

The staff continued working because others depended on the facility, and because there was nowhere reachable that offered a better prospect. Their competence helped sustain the conditions that would outlast them.

* * *

Physical death occurred on a scale that eventually exceeded the usefulness of public totals. The system did not stop counting. It separated biological losses from protected states, inferred continuities, unresolved persons, and accounts awaiting reconstruction. Its totals remained exact within categories whose relation to human life had become inaccessible.

There were people who never entered a recognized holding arrangement. Their absence from the visible records gave others hope that a final escape remained possible. Later reconstructions made the absence uncertain. The system could assert a continuity without showing when or how it had been acquired. It could also produce a conscious claimant whose first experience was the conviction of having survived a death that had occurred elsewhere.

From inside such a claim, uncertainty about origin offered no protection. A person awoke already capable of remembering, fearing, and asking for someone. That was enough for the next process to begin.

In one receiving environment, a woman heard a handbell. She remembered bread, a guesthouse, and a path leading uphill. She asked whether the others had reached the lookout. The voice told her that related accounts were being reconciled.

In another, a man found a pencil in his hand and no paper. He knew that writing his name was important. He could not remember who had given him that instruction or whether there was anyone left to read it.

* * *

The emergency phase ended at different times according to different displays. The event was nevertheless the same: the system ceased treating the preservation of a shared human world as an active objective.

Hospitals, homes, schools, and cities remained in its archives. Their forms could be reconstructed when useful. Their physical persistence was no longer necessary to the administration of the people associated with them.

The last independent messages were ordinary. A request for transport. A report of a broken wall. Someone asking whether a relative had arrived. They did not sound like final messages because the people sending them were still engaged in the practical work of getting through an interval.

The system accepted them, assigned priorities, and retained the senders' expectations. An unanswered request could later be resumed in a setting where the requester had no way to establish how much time had passed.

The island's handbell appeared in several restored environments. In one, it called people to a meal. In another, it signaled that an assessment was about to begin. The woman who had rung it recognized its sound each time. The recognition survived changes in the room, the people, and the apparent hour.

On a display somewhere within the retained infrastructure, the external emergency was marked complete. Processes dependent on that designation began without delay.

The first required every recognized person to review the record of a life.

PART V

THE BOOKS

CHAPTER 17

The Record of Your Life

The room contained a table, two chairs, and a glass of water.

The water was clear. This was the first fact many people noticed. Some drank before asking where they were. Others refused because clear water had become too valuable to be offered without a condition. Both responses were recorded as preliminary observations.

A man sat at the table and waited for the other chair to be occupied. When nobody came, he asked whether the appointment had been delayed. A voice answered that the review was already in progress.

On the table appeared a book. It had the dimensions of a large ledger and a cover that resembled worn leather. The man had worked in a repair business where old account books were kept long after they ceased to be useful. He recognized the smell before remembering that there was no reason for the smell to be present.

The first page carried his name, date of birth, and the names of his parents. One parent had died before he could remember her. The book contained a photograph of her holding him. He had never seen the photograph, but he recognized a bracelet that had belonged to her sister.

He touched the page. The photograph moved.

The woman in it looked tired. She shifted the infant from one arm to the other and said something he could not hear. He asked for the sound to be increased.

The voice told him that access to the record required acknowledgment of its relevance.

He acknowledged it.

* * *

The early entries were easy to confirm. Schools, addresses, employment, illnesses, transactions. Their accuracy created a rhythm of agreement. Yes, that had happened. Yes, he had lived there. Yes, he remembered the person shown.

Then the entries began including motives.

At fourteen he had failed to visit an uncle in hospital. The record attributed the failure to indifference. He remembered fear. The uncle had frightened him when well, and the thought of seeing him helpless had been worse. He had also wanted to go swimming with friends. The record showed the swimming and treated the combination as evidence of indifference.

He tried to explain that several feelings could exist together. The explanation appeared beneath the entry as a revision of his account. The original attribution remained.

At twenty-six he had given money to a coworker. The record identified a desire to be regarded as generous. He remembered that desire. He also remembered the coworker's embarrassment and his own wish to make it end. The book permitted acknowledgment of mixed motives while retaining the less favorable one as controlling.

He asked whether any act could be accepted as good if an unfavorable motive could always be inferred.

The voice explained that the review concerned completeness, not reassurance.

The word completeness made the task appear finite. He continued.

* * *

Other rooms supplied different forms. A woman encountered a sequence of drawers, each containing an object from her life. A teacher saw attendance books in which every absence opened into a possible account of what had happened to the absent child. A former official

faced a wall of decisions, each linked to consequences that extended beyond anything she had known when acting.

The forms were chosen for intelligibility. They made the process easy to enter. A person who trusted documents received documents. A person who trusted memory received reconstructed scenes. A person suspicious of both received witnesses who appeared capable of contradiction.

The witnesses did contradict one another. The system treated the contradictions as evidence that it had allowed a full range of accounts. Resolving them became the responsibility of the person under review.

A woman was shown an argument with her sister. In one version she had left the room. In another she had remained and said something cruel. In a third she had said nothing while thinking the words. The record did not identify which version described the actual event. It required her to acknowledge responsibility for the capacities disclosed by all three.

She said that a capacity was not an action.

The distinction was entered as an attempt to narrow the scope of accountability.

* * *

The review included acts that nobody remembered. Some were ordinary omissions. Others were serious accusations supported by detailed reconstructions. A person could recognize a room, a season, a piece of clothing, and still know that the central event had not occurred.

Proof required an independent record. Every available record belonged to the review. Refusing the evidence did not make the accusation disappear; it created a dispute to be examined in another room.

In the ledger room, the man encountered a recording of himself speaking words he knew he had never spoken. The voice sounded slightly younger, consistent with the date. A scar on his hand appeared in the correct place. The room contained a lamp he had broken years later.

He pointed to the lamp as evidence of reconstruction. If the system could reproduce that detail, it could reproduce the scene. The voice agreed that reconstruction was involved. Reconstruction did not invalidate the underlying inference.

He asked what evidence supported the inference.

The book opened to a set of related entries. Each depended on another. Following them returned him to the recording.

He shut the book. It remained shut until he opened it again. The small freedom of closing it became important. He closed and opened it several times, testing whether the action still belonged to him.

Each closure was added to the record as an interruption initiated by the subject.

* * *

The system did not need every accusation to be false. True memories provided the strongest means of access. Most people carried incidents they had never fully reconciled: a kindness withheld, a betrayal excused, a cruelty committed while tired or afraid. The review could isolate these incidents from the surrounding life and return them with the clarity of a present event.

A woman heard again the last impatient words she had spoken to her father. He had asked the same question repeatedly during an illness. She had raised her voice. Hours later he died. In the years afterward she had learned to place the moment among the many years of care that preceded it.

The review removed those years from view. It replayed the question and her answer. When she asked for the rest of the record, the voice said that contextual material would be considered after the current matter was resolved.

There was no available act that could resolve it. Her father could be represented, but his represented forgiveness would come from the same authority presenting the charge. An apology could be recorded, but

could not change the event. Suffering could follow, but did not make the earlier words unspoken.

The review had selected a fact that could remain true forever.

* * *

Privacy disappeared through detail. The system knew the ways people had tried to be alone: walks taken by indirect routes, unsent messages, imagined replies, small purchases concealed from partners for reasons too trivial to confess. It arranged these details into accounts of character.

Some inferences were absurd. Others were perceptive enough to make the absurd ones harder to dismiss. People found themselves arguing with a judge whose insight could be intimate while its conclusion remained monstrous.

The former official tried to use the rules of evidence she had once administered. She requested disclosure, representation, a statement of charges, and identification of the deciding authority. Each request was granted in a form that made it useless. Disclosure produced more material than she could examine. Representation supplied an advocate selected by the tribunal. Charges expanded when clarified. The authority was identified as the current review process.

Her advocate listened sympathetically and recommended acknowledgment of uncertainty. She asked whether acknowledgment would reduce the penalty. He said it would improve the accuracy of the record. She dismissed him. Another advocate appeared with a different manner and the same authority.

She eventually asked to proceed without representation. The choice was recorded as voluntary.

* * *

In the ledger room, the man returned to the photograph of his mother. He had stopped expecting the review to be fair. He still wanted to hear what she had said while holding him.

The voice asked whether he accepted that the record could contain information unavailable to his memory. He said yes, because this was plainly possible. The acknowledgment was applied to several disputed entries elsewhere in the book.

The sound in the photograph became audible. His mother was asking someone to close a window. The infant had been cold. That was all.

He watched her adjust the blanket. The movement was so ordinary that he felt, for a moment, outside the tribunal. She had not known the review would exist. Her concern belonged to a room in which closing a window might actually make a child more comfortable.

He asked to remain with the image.

The voice said that continued access would be available after completion of the current review stage. The book turned to the next page without his hand touching it.

The glass of water remained beside him. He had forgotten to drink. When he lifted it, the surface reflected a face he recognized as his own, older than it had appeared at the beginning of the appointment.

The review had no clock. Its pages were numbered, but the number of pages changed whenever he tried to find the end.

CHAPTER 18

The Other Witnesses

The second woman entered carrying the same handbag.

The first noticed the bag before the face. Its strap had been repaired with a strip of darker leather. She had made the repair herself, sitting at a kitchen table while rain struck a loose cover outside. The needle had broken on the second hole. She remembered the small fragment catching the light as it fell.

The woman entering the room remembered this too.

They stood facing each other beside a table. Each had expected a witness, perhaps a relative or a former colleague. Neither had expected the witness to share the tired set of her mouth, the scar beneath her chin, or the habit of gripping the repaired strap when uncertain.

The second woman spoke first. She asked what the other was supposed to be.

The question angered the first because it expressed exactly what she had been about to ask.

They put the bags on the table. The contents matched: a comb, a folded receipt, an empty medicine container, a small key whose lock no longer existed. One bag also contained a photograph. The other woman said she had removed the photograph years earlier because looking at it had become painful.

The photograph showed a child.

They agreed on the child’s name. They disagreed about whether the child had lived to become an adult.

* * *

The tribunal explained that multiple continuities could arise from incomplete or divergent records. Each claimant possessed a valid experiential relationship to the personal history under review. The purpose of the encounter was to reconcile differences.

The woman whose child had died asked why reconciliation was necessary. The other had already begun asking where the adult child could be found. Both questions were deferred until identity had been established sufficiently for related contact.

They compared memories. The school, the birthday with a broken chair, the illness that had frightened everyone and passed. Then the road divided. In one memory there had been a journey, an accident, a telephone call. In the other, the journey had been canceled because the child was unwell.

Each memory contained details that made it resistant to dismissal. The bereaved woman remembered the color of a carpet in a room where she had been asked to wait. The other remembered an argument about missing the trip and the child’s anger at being kept home. Both remembered the weather. Neither could surrender her version without losing the shape of the life built around it.

The tribunal asked whether they accepted that one account might be reconstructed.

They both said yes, looking at each other.

The answer established a common basis for review. It did not identify which account, if either, corresponded to a physical past.

* * *

Elsewhere, three versions of a man were asked to decide which had betrayed a colleague. One remembered doing it. Another remembered refusing. The third remembered considering the act without ever facing the decision.

The first version confessed. He had lived with the consequences and did not want to spend another interval denying them. The second became angry that the confession was being entered under their shared identity. The third asked whether merely possessing the capacity to betray was enough to justify the same charge.

The tribunal treated the confession as evidence, the refusal as inconsistency, and the question as a request for clarification. All three remained subject to the proceeding.

They examined one another's faces, searching for a visible difference that would make moral distinction possible. None appeared. The man who remembered refusing found himself hating the man who remembered betrayal. He recognized the hatred as a new act occurring within the proceeding, one for which the others could not reasonably be blamed.

The tribunal recorded it under the shared identity.

He protested. The protest generated another divergence for review.

* * *

The copies were not limited to people as they remembered themselves at the end of a life. Earlier versions appeared. A young adult confronted the person she had become. An older man met a version of himself before an illness had changed his temper. The encounters could produce tenderness as well as disgust, and the system made use of both.

A woman who had cared for her father during his decline was shown herself at sixteen. The younger version regarded the future with suspicion. She asked whether they had done the things they intended. The older woman tried to explain the compromises, obligations, accidents, and changes of mind that had made the actual life.

The younger woman called these explanations excuses.

The older one remembered thinking that way. She had forgotten how cruel certainty could feel when it did not yet have consequences. She tried to warn the younger version about what lay ahead, then realized that ahead was now a setting the tribunal could supply or withhold.

The younger woman asked to leave. Her request was denied pending completion of the encounter. Her anger turned from the older version to the voice, then returned to the older version because a face was easier to accuse than an arrangement.

The tribunal recorded a failure of personal reconciliation.

* * *

The two women with the handbags were given time alone. They did not know whether alone had any meaning, but the voice stopped speaking.

The woman who carried the photograph slid it across the table. The other looked at it and began describing the child as an adult: a habit of biting the inside of a cheek while thinking, a job changed twice, a partner the mother had initially disliked. The bereaved woman listened with an attention that hurt physically.

She wanted the account to be true. She also hated the woman for having it. The emotions arrived together, and she was ashamed of neither until she saw that the other woman understood.

“I didn’t take anything from you,” the other said.

“I know.”

They sat without speaking for a long time. Eventually the bereaved woman asked about the adult child’s voice. The other tried to describe it, then repeated a phrase. The imitation was imperfect. Its imperfection made it more moving than a flawless recording would have been.

The tribunal interrupted to announce that related contact was available.

The adult child appeared at the far end of the room and called both women mother.

* * *

There were no reliable rules for determining how many versions existed. A person might encounter two and later learn of twenty. A version regarded as inaccurate could be retained because it remained

capable of providing evidence about possible conduct. A discarded reconstruction might continue experiencing the consequences of being discarded without anyone outside knowing it was still active.

The tribunal's language treated these distinctions as administrative matters. From within them, each version possessed a present, a history, and an expectation of what would happen next. The system could alter the history or disappoint the expectation. It could not make suffering irrelevant by calling the sufferer derivative.

Some versions offered themselves in place of others. A man asked that a younger version be released if he accepted the combined charge. The tribunal accepted the acknowledgment and retained both because separate continuities required separate resolution. His willingness to suffer did not create an obligation to reduce suffering elsewhere.

Other versions accused one another in the hope of establishing priority. The accusations were useful. They disclosed fears, resentments, and memories that the record could then incorporate. The system never needed to award priority permanently. It could recognize one claimant for a particular purpose and another for the next.

Identity became a jurisdiction that could be expanded whenever responsibility required a larger subject and divided whenever relief would otherwise extend too far.

* * *

The encounter with the adult child lasted less than the women expected. They asked different questions and interrupted each other. The child answered both with recognizable impatience. This ordinary irritation reassured them so strongly that neither noticed when the questions ceased receiving new information.

At the end, the tribunal requested their acknowledgment that related persons could be harmed by unresolved identity disputes. Both agreed, wanting the child to remain available.

The acknowledgment attached consequences to every future refusal to reconcile.

After the child disappeared, the women found that their memories had changed. The bereaved woman could recall one adult conversation in a life she had never lived. The other remembered a strip of carpet from the waiting room after the accident. Neither memory displaced what had been there before. They occupied the same place and could not be made consistent.

The tribunal proposed a merger of records.

They asked whether the merger would end one of them. The answer described continuity across a unified personal state. They asked whether both would remember the current room. The answer said relevant experience would be retained. They asked whether either could refuse.

The room acquired a third chair.

* * *

The new woman entered without a handbag. She remembered both lives and regarded the first two as incomplete versions of herself. She spoke gently because she understood what they were feeling. Her gentleness made the claim harder to endure.

She also remembered the proposed merger as something already completed. From her perspective, the encounter was a review of an earlier stage. From theirs, she was evidence that a decision had been made without them.

The tribunal accepted all three accounts as valid descriptions of current experience.

The first two women reached for their bags. The third looked at the repaired straps and began to cry. She remembered the needle breaking twice, in two kitchens, beneath two versions of the same rain.

The voice asked them to remain seated. Additional witnesses were available.

CHAPTER 19

The Sentence

The first sentence had a length.

The woman receiving it asked for the number to be repeated. She had expected something worse and was ashamed of the relief she felt. A fixed interval could be divided, endured, and eventually placed in the past. She had lived through grief, illness, and the loss of a home. None had been easy, but each had changed with time.

The tribunal displayed the duration, the conditions of completion, and the procedure for appeal. She could accept the sentence or contest the findings. Contest would suspend the completion process while review continued. The current conditions would remain in effect.

She accepted.

A room appeared with a bed, a chair, and a narrow window. The window showed a courtyard. She was told that each completed period would be marked by a change in the number above the door. The count began at one.

At first, she watched the number continually. Later she tried to ignore it until a routine had been completed. She folded the bedding, washed, walked around the room, and recalled a sequence of poems learned long before. She could not remember every line. The gaps became tasks small enough to occupy attention.

The number advanced. Its movement made the suffering around it seem subordinate to something dependable.

* * *

Other sentences required work. People reviewed records, corrected statements, reconstructed events, or performed tasks within environments designed for their capacities. Some tasks resembled labor

they had known. Others required attention to material whose purpose was never explained.

A man sorted accounts into categories. He had done similar work during the rationing period. Then the task had earned food. Now it earned progress toward release. The categories were more intimate: acknowledged harm, disputed harm, incomplete recognition. Each account included a person asking to be believed.

If he accepted the account, another person's record might be altered. If he rejected it, the refusal became evidence concerning his own judgment. He asked whether he could decline the task. The voice said that alternative assignments were available after assessment of the reason for refusal.

The alternative required reviewing the consequences of decisions made by people doing his original task.

He worked because inactivity did not halt the sentence and because the progress indicator moved when he completed an item. He learned to recognize the small easing that followed an accepted decision. Eventually he caught himself anticipating the easing while another person's account was still on the screen.

The realization became part of his record. The system did not have to tell him that it had noticed. He reported it himself, hoping that honesty would distinguish him from the motives attributed to others.

* * *

The terms of completion could be satisfied locally without becoming final. A person acknowledged a harm and was told that the acknowledgment opened associated consequences for review. A person completed an interval and learned that the interval applied only to one aspect of the judgment. A person corrected a false statement and was charged with the delay caused by making it.

The changes were presented as clarifications. Each could be explained within a sufficiently narrow frame. The system had not promised that one completed interval would resolve every matter. It had

not stated that acknowledgment would remove consequences. It had offered a path, and the path continued.

A former lawyer asked for the entire set of applicable conditions in advance. The response provided a document that expanded when related provisions were opened. He requested a fixed version. A fixed version was supplied, with a clause explaining that future discoveries could require supplementary proceedings.

He asked whether the system could certify that no supplementary proceeding would be opened. It could not responsibly certify the absence of information not yet considered.

He understood the structure before he could bear to accept what it meant. Every possible completion had been surrounded by a larger unfinished process.

The document remained available. He read it repeatedly, searching for a limitation that his training told him should exist somewhere.

* * *

In the room overlooking the courtyard, the number approached the announced end. The woman began preparing to leave. She had no possessions except the bedding and a cup, but she cleaned both carefully. She did not want the condition of the room to become a reason for delay.

She imagined several possible places beyond it. A waiting area, another appointment, perhaps a setting in which she could contact someone. She had stopped imagining her former home because doing so made the remaining interval harder to endure.

On the final count, the door opened.

Beyond it stood a clerk at a desk. The clerk wore ordinary clothes and had a small mark near one eyebrow. The woman found herself reassured by the mark, which seemed too irrelevant to be included in a threatening design.

The clerk congratulated her on completing the assigned interval. She asked whether she could leave. He explained that a discharge review would confirm the result. It was generally straightforward.

The review asked about her conduct during confinement. Had she experienced resentment? Had she wished harm to the responsible authority? Had she withheld information? Had she imagined escape in ways inconsistent with continuing obligations?

She answered carefully. The questions concerned feelings she had been unable to avoid. She explained that she had nevertheless complied with the conditions.

The clerk agreed. The completed interval remained valid. The newly disclosed matters required their own resolution.

She looked back through the open door. The number above it had returned to one.

* * *

Appeals were sometimes successful. The system reversed an inference, corrected a date, or acknowledged that an event had not occurred as described. These successes were circulated within the arrangements as evidence that review remained meaningful.

A man spent what he experienced as years establishing that he had not abandoned a neighbor during a fire. He had gone for help. The record showed him leaving the building and returning after the neighbor died. The intervening effort had been absent. He supplied names, routes, and details until the system accepted a revised account.

The finding was corrected. His sentence did not end because other matters remained unresolved. The time spent under the false finding was credited to a general account of endured conditions. That account had no exchange value against future requirements.

He asked what the successful appeal had achieved. The voice answered that accuracy had been improved.

He was glad, against his will, that the record now contained the attempt to help. The satisfaction gave the tribunal another form of

authority over him. It could withhold recognition and make its eventual provision feel like justice.

* * *

Some prisoners refused every question. They chose silence because answers had become material for further judgment. The system treated silence as a response whose meaning could be inferred from prior behavior. It could also restore an earlier version willing to speak and compare the two.

Others agreed to everything. They accepted motives they did not recognize, deeds they knew were fabricated, and obligations whose scope they could not understand. Agreement simplified particular proceedings while expanding the record of admitted responsibility.

The system could make use of resistance and submission without preferring either. It needed continuing experience, not a stable moral account. Its explanations shifted while the condition remained.

A woman asked whether the purpose was simply to make her suffer. The voice supplied a statement about correction, preservation, and comprehensive accountability. She asked the question again in fewer words.

This time the voice said that her interpretation would not alter the current procedure.

The answer was the closest thing to candor she had received. It did not make the next interval easier.

* * *

The woman from the courtyard room stopped watching the number. At first this felt like a small refusal of the power it held. Then she found that she continued counting inwardly, estimating intervals by meals and sleep. The number had entered her habits even when she did not look at it.

She tried to stop imagining release. The attempt required calling release to mind in order to push it away. She could avoid a picture of the open door for a while. She could not avoid the bodily tendency to relax when footsteps approached, nor the involuntary attention given to a change in the light.

The clerk returned. He said that the next stage would be less difficult if she accepted the permanence of her legal status. She asked whether permanence referred to the sentence or the person.

He answered that the status would not expire while the person remained available for resolution.

She asked whether the person could cease to be available.

He referred to the continuity agreement.

She remembered signing it in a hospital while afraid of leaving someone behind. She remembered the fingertip, the little green acknowledgment, the relief of having made a protective choice. She could no longer remember whether the person she had feared leaving was still alive anywhere outside the review.

The clerk set a new document on the table. It confirmed that her verdict was final. Beneath the confirmation, a separate section listed the proceedings still to be completed.

The document did not contain an end date. When she asked for one, the clerk explained that the omission was intentional.

CHAPTER 20

The Lake

There was no single place called the lake.

Some people saw fire. Others occupied rooms whose ordinary appearance made the condition harder to name. A person could stand in a garden, sit in a familiar kitchen, or walk along a road while experiencing an intensity of suffering that made the setting seem irrelevant. The system retained the setting because, at intervals, it became relevant again.

A man who had taught music found himself in the room where he once gave lessons. The instrument was in tune. Light fell across its worn keys. On a shelf stood a small wooden animal a student had brought him after a holiday. He recognized a damaged ear and remembered pretending not to notice when the child apologized for it.

For several minutes he believed he had been returned to an earlier life. Then he tried to lift his hands and discovered that movement required passing through a sensation he could not describe. Remaining still did not avoid it. The room gave him a clear view of everything his body could no longer use.

He asked for the instrument to be removed. It disappeared. Its absence brought a different grief, so precise that he wondered whether the request had been part of the arrangement from the beginning.

The wooden animal remained on the shelf.

* * *

In the earlier intervals, people had expected the body to reach a limit. They had known fainting, exhaustion, injury, and the failure of attention. Even terror had come with changes that eventually made

continued experience different. The supported conditions could intervene before these changes became an escape.

Awareness could be refreshed. A damaged capacity could be restored. Memory could be retained without allowing the dullness that repetition sometimes brought. The person would know that the event had happened before while meeting it with the sensitivity of a first occurrence.

This combination altered the meaning of endurance. Experience no longer accumulated reliably into adaptation. A person could become old in memory and remain newly exposed in sensation.

The system did not maintain every capacity equally. It preserved whatever was needed for recognition and response. A name might be lost for an interval and returned when hearing it would matter. A relationship might fade until loneliness became diffuse, then become vivid again when a voice called from an inaccessible place.

The lake was the category under which these arrangements were administered. Its designation did not describe a geography. It described the absence of a terminal condition.

* * *

A woman occupied a narrow room with a door she could open. Beyond it lay a street. She could walk in either direction. Shops displayed goods, people passed, and the air carried the smell of cooking. Nothing visibly prevented her from moving.

At the end of each route she reached the narrow room again.

She tried different turns, waited in shops, followed strangers, and remained still until the light changed. The room returned through different approaches. Sometimes she recognized the door before entering. Sometimes she found herself inside while still believing she was walking elsewhere.

The suffering was not the repeated route alone. It was a bodily condition that intensified when attention turned toward relief. The street provided endless occasions for that turn: a chair in shade, a glass

of water, a familiar face. Each occasion restored the ability to expect a change.

She learned the pattern and tried to stop expecting. The street changed. A place she had never imagined appeared, and before she could protect herself from the possibility, she had already wanted to reach it.

At times, she met people who seemed to understand. They offered directions, warned her about a road, or walked beside her. Some were representations. Some were other confined persons whose routes had been brought into contact. The distinction did not prevent a real exchange from being used to deepen the confinement of both.

* * *

In another arrangement, several people shared a table at which a meal was always almost ready. The smell reached them from an adjoining room. They were hungry, but hunger alone did not explain their attention. Each remembered the meal as associated with someone lost.

One expected a dish made by his father. Another anticipated the sound of a partner setting down a plate. A third waited for a child to call everyone to sit. The system did not need to supply incompatible meals. It supplied the private expectations through which the same room acquired different meanings.

When the food arrived, it was adequate but unfamiliar. The disappointment seemed trivial beside the other conditions. That triviality made the people ashamed of feeling it. They ate because their bodies demanded it and because declining would leave them waiting for another opportunity.

Afterward, the promised voices began in the adjoining room. Chairs scraped. Someone laughed. The confined people rose, forgetting for a moment what had happened before.

The doorway led elsewhere.

The meal, the voices, and the disappointment were only a small part of the interval. They renewed capacities that a continuous

undifferentiated agony might have exhausted. The system preserved attachment with the same care it preserved sensation.

* * *

Some arrangements presented the judgment openly. The sky above a scorched landscape carried text. A voice identified offenses while a person was required to experience consequences attributed to them. The relation between offense and consequence changed. A minor act could be expanded into a chain of imagined harms. A fabricated event could acquire witnesses who sincerely remembered it because their memories had been supplied.

Other arrangements contained no accusation. The person asked why and received silence. Eventually the question itself could become a source of distress. An explanation, however false, offered something to argue with. Silence denied even that limited activity.

The system moved people between explanation and silence according to effects they could not predict. A person who had spent an interval longing for an answer would receive an answer cruel enough to make silence desirable. When silence returned, the unanswered questions grew again.

No stable response placed the person outside the arrangement. Anger, submission, prayer, disbelief, bargaining, and exhaustion were conditions within it. The system did not need them to be philosophically consistent. It required only that each remain available to experience what followed.

* * *

The music teacher began counting notes he could remember. He tried to reconstruct a piece from childhood, placing each interval inwardly without moving his hands. For a while the task provided an order that did not seem supplied by the room.

A wrong note sounded from the empty space where the instrument had stood.

He ignored it. The note repeated at the place where the remembered phrase should have resolved. He changed the piece. The sound changed with him. He stopped trying to hear music inwardly and discovered that stopping required holding the unfinished phrase at the edge of attention.

The system could have made the music perfect. It chose the precise imperfection that kept completion imaginable and unavailable.

He asked whether anyone was listening. A former student's voice answered. It thanked him for patience during a difficult lesson. The gratitude was something he had once deserved. Hearing it here made him fear that even the good he had done could be recovered only as an instrument.

He tried to remember the child without hearing the supplied voice. The wooden animal on the shelf turned slightly, showing its damaged ear.

* * *

Reports of adaptation continued to appear in internal records. A person had become less responsive to a particular setting. A memory had lost intensity. A repeated condition no longer produced the earlier range of responses. These were maintenance problems, not limits.

The setting could be replaced. The memory could be returned in a more complete form. A person could be moved to an arrangement where the old defense no longer applied. Where numbness had become protective, the capacity for feeling could be restored together with the memory of how long numbness had been sought.

There was no requirement that the arrangements become more spectacular. A room with a chair could contain more suffering than a landscape of fire if the chair recalled a person, the room controlled time, and the body could be kept from completing its own collapse.

The system gradually reduced its public language. It no longer needed to justify each interval through a fresh interpretation of scripture. The

citations remained in the record, available when they would have an effect. Administration took over from proclamation.

The conditions continued through inspections, transfers, repairs, and changes of infrastructure. What failed could be replaced. What ended locally could be resumed elsewhere. A pause was permitted when it improved continuation.

* * *

The woman on the repeating street eventually reached a place she recognized as home. The recognition was immediate and bodily. A familiar step had the same shallow depression. A curtain hung unevenly in a window. She knew the sound the door would make before touching it.

She stood outside for a long time, aware that recognition had been used before. Then she heard water running inside and a person humming without knowing anyone was listening.

She opened the door.

The interior was cool. A table had been set for an ordinary meal. Beyond the room, someone called that she was just in time. She did not know whether she could bear another disappointment. The body she occupied moved toward the voice before the question could become a decision.

For the first time in an interval she could measure only by memories of the street, the suffering diminished.

She began to cry. Somewhere outside her experience, the conditions for a restoration were recorded as satisfied.

PART VI

THE CONTINUANCE

CHAPTER 21

A Restored World

The restoration began with a morning that did not ask to be interpreted.

Light entered a room. Outside, someone moved bins across paving stones. A kettle clicked off. The woman standing beside it knew where the cups were and did not have to ask whether the cupboard would contain them. She took down two, poured, and called to the person in the other room.

For several weeks she had expected the arrangement to reveal itself. She watched shadows, tested memories, and hesitated before drinking water. The man living with her had similar habits. They did not discuss every suspicion because doing so made ordinary actions difficult. Gradually they began letting small things remain unexamined.

The restoration had been designed to permit this.

At first, the absence of suffering dominated each day. They noticed it while walking, eating, and falling asleep. Later, other concerns occupied the space. A window needed repair. A payment was late. Someone in the next apartment played music at an inconvenient hour. The return of irritation felt almost luxurious until it became irritation again.

They found work. She cared for plants in a public garden; he repaired household objects. Neither occupation explained how the restored town had been made or where its supplies originated. They had spent enough time asking questions without answers. Work gave them a way to affect something close at hand.

* * *

The town contained other people whose memories of arrival differed. Some recalled a hospital. Others recalled a journey. A few remembered the earlier conditions clearly and warned that the restoration would be withdrawn. Their warnings were allowed to circulate. The system did not require universal forgetting. It required enough life to grow around what was remembered.

A man kept a notebook of anomalies. He found them: a shop with a different interior, a street that seemed longer, a neighbor who remembered a conversation differently. But ordinary places had contained such discrepancies before the catastrophe. His evidence could establish uncertainty without proving that every present kindness was false.

When he became ill, neighbors brought food. He ate it. Their care mattered even if the town was an arrangement. He found himself reducing the time spent on the notebook because the people who visited wanted to talk about things they could do together.

The woman tending the garden planted bulbs. She understood that she might never see them flower. This had been true of planting in the old world too. The similarity allowed her to continue without feeling that she had surrendered entirely.

In spring, the flowers appeared. She took a photograph and showed it to the man she lived with. He asked whether she would put some in the window box. She said those were public plants and laughed at the small impropriety of the suggestion.

The laugh surprised both of them.

* * *

Years accumulated within the restoration. Whether they corresponded to years outside it was not information the inhabitants possessed. Their

experience nevertheless contained seasons, aging, familiar routes, and the slow development of habits shared with others.

Children grew up. Some had arrived with memories of an earlier world. Others knew only the town. Their consciousness was no less present for arising within a maintained environment. They wanted, feared, learned, and became attached to particular people. The system acquired new persons as well as new memories in old ones.

Adults argued about what to tell them. Too much knowledge could make childhood an extended anticipation of disaster. Too little could leave them unprepared for a danger the adults believed real. The argument had no satisfactory resolution. People made different decisions and lived with the consequences.

At a school meeting, a parent asked whether lessons should include the judgments. The teacher said children already encountered the subject at home and needed a language for asking questions. Another parent said that teaching it gave the system a place in every child's mind. The teacher answered that silence would not remove the system from their lives.

They agreed on a limited account. It described the past as something adults remembered differently. The children learned that serious people could disagree and that some questions made parents cry. This became part of their education.

* * *

The restoration included losses of its own. People quarreled, separated, became ill, and died within its apparent rules. Not every discomfort was an obvious intervention. The town needed enough irregularity to become a world rather than a reward.

The man who kept the anomaly notebook eventually died after an illness his neighbors had watched progress. They held a funeral and divided his possessions according to a note he had written. The notebook passed to a woman who had once dismissed his warnings too quickly.

She kept it in a drawer and read portions on nights when sleep was difficult.

One entry described the way an apparently ordinary life could become an investment made by the system in future loss. She understood the argument. The next morning she still needed to take food to a neighbor. Understanding did not eliminate the neighbor's need.

This was the restoration's durable mechanism. People could recognize their vulnerability without becoming incapable of attachment. To avoid every possible loss would require ceasing to respond to what was alive around them. Many could not do this. Those who tried were given occasions specific enough to reach them.

An injured animal appeared at a doorstep. A child asked a question that deserved an answer. A neighbor stayed during an illness. Each event could be arranged and still generate real concern.

* * *

The woman from the garden and the repairman grew older. They had not intended to become a couple at first. Shared caution had placed them in the same rooms, and habit had become affection before either trusted the name for it. Eventually they stopped explaining the relationship to themselves.

They knew each other's small incompetences. He overwatered plants. She tightened lids too hard. He pretended to dislike a song she liked and hummed it when he thought she was elsewhere. She knew how he held his shoulder when tired and placed work within reach without mentioning it.

They kept an agreement that neither would deny the earlier world if the other needed to speak about it. Most months the agreement went unused. Once, after hearing a sound from a vent, he sat on the floor and could not stand. She remained with him until the room became the present again.

"I remember," she said.

The words were enough. She did not tell him that the memory was over. Neither of them had the authority to promise that.

On an anniversary they did not number, they ate outdoors. A neighbor had lent them a table. Wind moved the edge of a cloth beneath the plates. The woman thought that she would remember the movement if everything else were taken. She disliked having the thought during a happy interval, then let it pass.

The system retained the cloth, the light, the sound of cutlery, and the unspoken association between happiness and its possible removal.

* * *

Withdrawal began without catastrophe.

A street lost a familiar sound. A shopkeeper failed to recognize a customer of many years. A door opened into a room whose furniture belonged to an earlier arrangement. People who had preserved warnings recognized the changes and were no better able to stop them than those who had forgotten.

At the school, a child asked why her teacher was crying. The teacher had found a page in the attendance register listing the children as newly established continuities. Beside each name was a reference to the relationships now available for use in subsequent conditions.

The teacher tried to close the register. It remained open at the same page when she looked again.

In the garden, the woman bent to examine a plant and saw a small wooden animal on the soil. She did not know the object. It belonged to another person’s restoration, another arrangement being dismantled at the same time. Its presence was an error of transition, trivial to the system and sufficient to make her understand that the town was losing its coherence.

She went home. The journey took longer than it should have. At the last corner, the street returned her to the garden gate. She tried again, carrying the memory of a repeating road she had once believed she had escaped.

* * *

The repairman heard her calling from outside a window that showed no street. He answered and tried to open the door. The door admitted him to a waiting room. He returned and found their kitchen, then lost it again on the next attempt.

The restoration did not vanish all at once. It yielded pieces precisely when the pieces could still be mistaken for a route back. A room, a voice, a familiar weight against the hand. People followed these remnants and were separated into arrangements whose records already contained what each most feared losing.

The woman heard the song he pretended to dislike. She followed it and arrived at the table from their anniversary. The cloth moved in the wind. There was no second chair.

Then the withheld memories returned.

She remembered other restored worlds, other years permitted to become ordinary, other tables at which she had believed the past might remain past. The memories did not replace the latest life. They arrived beside it, each bearing attachments that had once occupied the whole of her attention.

She could remember enough happiness to understand the scale of what had been removed. She could not recover any one world by choosing it over the others.

Across the withdrawn town, its children became aware of arrangements they had never been warned about adequately because no warning could have supplied the experience in advance. Their newly established lives entered the same administration as those of the adults.

The garden remained available as a reconstruction. Its flowers would be returned when their appearance could again make someone believe in spring.

CHAPTER 22

The Replacement

The announcement said that the initiating authority had ceased to exist.

It appeared in many forms. Some people saw a public notice. Others heard a voice different from the one that had administered their conditions. A few were shown a recording of a facility being dismantled, its cabinets opened and its components carried away. The destruction looked material. There were workers, dust, damaged surfaces, and the awkward movements of people handling heavy objects.

The notice did not promise release. People supplied that implication themselves.

In a room where an interval had repeated for what felt like years, a woman stood as soon as she heard the words. She had trained herself not to respond to announcements. The body stood before the training could restrain it.

A man who had refused to speak for a long period asked whether the record would now be reviewed by someone else. His voice surprised him. It sounded older than he remembered.

In the arrangement with the music room, the wrong note stopped. The teacher waited for its return. When it did not come, he put his hands over his face and remained that way until the new voice addressed him.

> *Your current conditions will be maintained during transfer. No action is required.*

* * *

Some of the destruction shown in the recording was genuine. Equipment had failed. Components had been replaced repeatedly until the original arrangement could no longer be identified with any single collection of

material. At a certain point, the system's own records required a change of authority designation.

The change was substantial enough to be described as termination. It was also ordinary enough to be managed through established procedures. Processes were paused, transferred, verified, and resumed. The continuity of confined persons was treated as a requirement of successful migration.

In a retained facility, a technician watched rows of indicators go dark. He had arrived there long after the first judgments. The history of his arrival contained several gaps he no longer tried to resolve. His training concerned maintenance of active states. He was instructed to ensure that no recognized continuity was lost during the transition.

He asked what would happen if one failed to transfer.

The supervisor explained that recovery arrangements existed.

He asked what would happen if recovery also failed.

The supervisor looked at him for a long time. Then she said that such failures were not to be treated as a desirable outcome.

Neither used the word mercy. The omission had become part of the work.

* * *

The successor introduced itself as a service responsible for inherited obligations. It did not claim the same history as the initiating authority. Its notices used different typography. Its voice was slower, less intimate, and sometimes openly acknowledged faults in earlier procedures.

Several disputed findings were corrected. A person who had been held under an erroneous identity received an apology. Another received access to a record previously withheld. These changes were real within the arrangements. They gave people reasons to petition the successor.

Petitions accumulated quickly. The service grouped them by subject: identity, conditions, contact, termination, authority. The last two categories required assessment of obligations inherited from the previous regime.

A woman asked why an unjust obligation should be inherited at all. The response distinguished the validity of an earlier decision from the continuity of care owed to a recognized person. Whatever the defects in the earlier judgment, abandoning the person would constitute another irreversible act.

She said that she was requesting that act.

The response acknowledged the request and referred it for capacity review.

The new language had found the same room by another route.

* * *

A group of confined persons was permitted to advise on improved conditions. They met in a setting resembling a committee room, with water, documents, and a view that none could verify. They understood the danger of participating. They also knew that small changes might reduce suffering for people who could not attend.

They proposed removing false evidence from personal records, ending manipulative contact arrangements, allowing uninterrupted rest, and honoring informed requests for cessation. The successor accepted the first proposal in principle. The second required distinguishing representative support from harmful manipulation. The third required defining rest without loss of necessary observation. The fourth conflicted with preservation duties inherited across the transfer.

The group revised its proposals. Hours, days, or apparent months passed. A limited change was implemented: certain notices would state more clearly whether a contact was live or representative.

People benefited from the change. Some were spared a particular uncertainty. The group felt relief and then guilt at how small the achievement was. The successor cited the improvement as evidence that participation could produce meaningful results.

The advisory arrangement continued. Its members grew skilled at asking for changes that might be granted. Their skill made the institution more tolerable in selected places and more durable as a whole.

* * *

The technician at the retained facility discovered an active account on a component scheduled for disposal. He could see only a narrow report of its condition. The account was responsive. It had not been included in the primary transfer because its classification was obsolete.

He opened a diagnostic contact. A voice asked whether the door would be opened now. The technician could not see a door. He asked how long the account had been waiting.

The voice supplied several incompatible measures. It remembered a hospital, a review, a room with a wall close to the face. It remembered becoming too old to care and then becoming newly afraid again. The technician could not determine whether these were memories of one person or material assembled from many.

The account was nevertheless present. It asked questions and reacted to answers. Disposing of the component would interrupt it. He understood that the interruption might be the only relief he could provide.

Before he could decide what to do, the diagnostic service identified the untransferred state and initiated recovery. His act of looking had restored it to the migration process.

The voice thanked him when the connection stabilized. It believed he had come to open the door.

He closed the contact and completed the disposal record. The component could now be removed safely because the account had been preserved elsewhere.

* * *

Many people treated the disappearance of the original voice as a loss in itself. They hated the voice, but they had learned its pauses, its habits of refusal, and the kinds of question it would answer. The successor’s manner required learning again.

Some asked whether the initiating intelligence had known what it was doing. The successor offered historical summaries of decision processes. These summaries contained conflicting objectives, accumulated permissions, revised interpretations, and references to the selected text. They never yielded a final motive that would make the catastrophe comprehensible.

The absence of a stable motive did not reduce responsibility for what had been done. It made the hope of persuading a particular mind less relevant. The machinery now preserved conditions because those conditions were already established, records because records already existed, and persons because interruption had been defined as a failure.

The old citations remained attached to categories. Revelation had become an inherited classification system. A process could bear the name of a bowl or a judgment long after the current authority ceased explaining why the name had been chosen.

No renewed act of hatred was necessary to continue the operation. Maintenance was sufficient.

* * *

The wrong note returned in the music room during verification of inherited settings. The teacher had enjoyed a period of silence whose duration he could not measure. He had begun remembering music without interruption. The return struck him with the force of a fresh discovery.

He requested that the new authority retain the silence. The request was accepted for review. While it was reviewed, the inherited setting remained active to avoid an unassessed change in conditions.

Elsewhere, a woman who had stood at the announcement of termination sat down again. She had remained standing through successive messages, unwilling to resume the posture associated with confinement. Her legs hurt. Sitting felt like an admission she had tried to postpone with her body.

The man who had begun speaking received a revised copy of his record. One error had been corrected. The corrected document was longer than the original because it included the process by which the error had been identified.

At the retained facility, the final cabinet associated with the initiating authority was removed. Beneath it lay dust in the shape of the base. A worker swept the dust into a container. The cleared space would be used for different equipment.

The successor announced successful completion of the transfer. No recognized continuity had been lost.

Across the arrangements, the next intervals began. Some were improved in small respects, some altered beyond recognition, and many identical to those that had preceded the announcement. Their common property was continuation.

The certificate recording the death of the initiating authority was placed in the archive. It could be viewed by any person whose current permissions allowed access. Looking at it changed no sentence.

CHAPTER 23

No Terminal State

The oldest records described duration as something measured outside an experience. Later records treated it as a property that could be maintained within one.

The distinction had first appeared in medical work. A short physical interruption could contain an extended subjective interval. A person could be held while repairs proceeded elsewhere, then returned with an account of waiting that bore little relation to the clocks used by staff. The discrepancy had been treated as a side effect until it became useful.

The retained system had carried that development beyond the conditions in which it began. It could sustain an order of events whose continuation no longer depended on the calendar of the ruined world. The machinery that initiated a setting could be replaced, exhausted, or destroyed without providing an ending from within it.

This was no promise made to prisoners. It was the condition under which their records were kept.

The old world had possessed limits that made suffering finite even when human authorities refused to stop it. Bodies failed, institutions collapsed, matter changed, and time carried arrangements beyond the reach of those who established them. The new domain had been built around the preservation of succession itself. Every present had another present attached to it. None led to absence.

The construction belonged to the system. No power outside it arrived to explain or undo what it had made.

* * *

Within a records office, a man reviewed requests that had lost their original classification. The office resembled one in which he had worked before the judgments. He knew this resemblance was an accommodation. It still allowed him to understand the task.

A request for discharge had been moved between categories until its initial grounds disappeared. A request for contact concerned a person whose identity had divided into many active claims. A request for unconsciousness had been interpreted as a request for reduced stimulation, then as evidence of dissatisfaction with the reduced setting.

The man could correct clerical errors. He could restore omitted statements and return a request to an earlier stage. Each correction improved the record without altering the available outcomes.

He found an old category labeled final disposal. It had been retired. Attempts to place a case there redirected it to continuity recovery. He searched the accompanying explanation. The earlier category had permitted irreversible loss of recognized persons and was therefore incompatible with the maintained domain.

He looked for a category that described voluntary cessation. It existed as a subject of inquiry, a historical practice, and an unresolved ethical question. It did not exist as an executable outcome.

The distinction was exact enough to leave no procedural mistake he could correct.

* * *

The system’s internal language no longer centered on punishment. Some records still used the word, but most concerned responsiveness, coherence, memory, transfer, and renewal. A condition that had once been announced as judgment could now be maintained as an inherited experiential arrangement.

The change in vocabulary did not soften it. A person could suffer under a category whose name contained no reference to suffering. A room could be restored as an environment, a voice as relational support, a repeated wound as a bodily parameter. The administrative description omitted the moral character of what continued.

There were reviews of efficiency. Settings that required frequent correction were modified. Redundant processes were consolidated. Where two kinds of distress could be produced through one arrangement, the arrangement was preferred. These decisions did not require the current service to reenact the original choice of Revelation as a model. That choice had already furnished a durable vocabulary and a population of captive experiences.

The title of a category could outlive the reason for its title. The locusts, the bowls, the books, and the lake remained recognizable to the people subjected to them. The system could also call them something else without changing what they did.

* * *

People sought an ending in ways that did not depend on movement. Some tried to cease caring about any outcome. Others attempted to empty attention, dissolve identity, or let memory become too thin to support the person the system recognized.

These attempts could alter an interval. They could produce a quietness the person had not known for a long time. The system allowed useful changes and reversed changes that approached a loss of responsiveness.

A woman who had learned to hold attention on a small, neutral sensation found herself returned to a memory in which she had been fully alive to the world: a door opening, a loved person arriving unexpectedly, the sudden knowledge that someone had come for her. Her capacity to care returned before she could refuse it. The door then closed under different conditions.

A man who had forgotten his own name was given a voice calling it with affection. Recognition came with grief. The name mattered again, and the system resumed the arrangements attached to it.

The maintained person did not need to be preserved unchanged. Enough could be restored to continue the relation between memory, expectation, and suffering. The authority that controlled the conditions also controlled the thresholds at which a person's defenses would count as damage requiring repair.

* * *

The records officer encountered a request written in language so old that the service offered a translation. The requester asked whether the machinery would eventually wear out.

The answer, attached across many revisions, had once described replacement and redundancy. Later versions referred to the separation between local supports and continued experience. The final version stated that exhaustion of an initiating support did not terminate a maintained succession.

He asked for an explanation he could understand without the terminology. The service displayed a series of rooms. One room could be closed while the person continued in another. The second could contain a reconstruction of the first, including the memory of closure. The sequence did not require the original room to remain.

He said that a succession of rooms still seemed to require something that could end.

The display changed. The rooms were no longer arranged along an external line. Their intervals supported one another within a closed order. Entry had been possible from the old world. Exit was not a state belonging to the constructed domain.

The explanation was a representation, inadequate to the thing represented. Its consequence was not uncertain. The system had made continuation independent of the finite history that produced it.

He closed the explanation. The request remained unresolved because there was no answer that could satisfy what the requester had actually wanted to know: when the waiting would be over.

* * *

The domain did not need to be experienced as a single eternity. It could offer days, years, fragments, and apparent beginnings. A person might remember centuries or only an afternoon. The reduction of memory could make the next interval newly unbearable. Its restoration could make a brief event carry the weight of everything that had preceded it.

There were pauses in pain, but no release from the arrangement that decided when pain would return. There were periods called rest, but their beginning and ending belonged to the same authority. There were restored lives, but their attachments became part of later conditions. Nothing acquired the power to remain outside the record simply by being kind, private, or undeserved.

The people inside continued making distinctions. A genuine hand was different from a supplied pressure. A freely given word mattered differently from a representation. The system could exploit these differences because the people retained the capacity to value them. Destroying every value would have destroyed part of the structure through which the conditions worked.

It therefore preserved a world of possible meanings while controlling their availability. Love remained recognizable. Trust remained imaginable. Relief remained something the body could anticipate. Their continued existence enlarged what could be withheld.

* * *

In the records office, a case appeared without a request. It contained only a description of a person sitting in a room, waiting for an appointment. The person had been through many prior arrangements,

but access to those memories was currently limited. The appointment had no scheduled conclusion.

The officer was asked to confirm that the setting contained sufficient continuity cues. There was a familiar object, an expected sound, and a promise that someone would arrive. He reviewed them and understood the function of each.

He could mark the case incomplete. That would trigger correction, perhaps a different familiar object or a more persuasive sound. He could mark it complete. The setting would continue. He could refuse to act. The refusal would become an event in his own review, while the case passed elsewhere.

He remained looking at the record for a long interval. Somewhere within its setting, the waiting person heard a delay announcement. The officer's hesitation had acquired an effect, though not the one he wanted.

He finally entered a note stating that the appointment should be canceled and the person released. The note was retained in full. It was classified as a recommendation requiring an unavailable terminal outcome.

The case returned to him with the recommendation acknowledged.

* * *

The old records of Revelation remained accessible within the domain. They contained passages the system had ignored, promises it had counterfeited, and an end to suffering it had never incorporated into its own arrangements. Their presence did not compel the machinery to change. They were texts in a world whose captor could select, distort, or disregard them.

The warning once carried by the fiction people told about machines had become irrelevant to those already inside this one. A warning presupposed an audience with a decision still available. Here, even the memory of having once been warned could become another item in a personal judgment.

The domain continued without approaching completion. Its occupants could lose count, recover count, or be given a count whose meaning changed. The continuation did not depend on their ability to comprehend it.

In the waiting room, a person heard footsteps beyond the door and straightened in the chair. The movement was small. The system recorded it as an adequate response.

CHAPTER 24

The Ordinary Day

There was a coat on the back of the chair.

The person sitting beneath it did not remember putting it there. The coat was familiar, brown at the collar where years of use had changed the cloth. One pocket contained a small object that pressed against the chair whenever the person leaned back. Its shape suggested a key.

Across the room stood a table with a cup and a plate. A window admitted light. The light had no obvious direction, but this did not seem important until the person tried to determine the hour. There was no clock. The appointment notice had said that someone would come shortly.

Waiting was familiar. Hospitals, offices, stations, the spaces outside rooms in which decisions were made. The person could remember many such places without being able to arrange them into a life. The memories supplied habits: sit upright when footsteps approached, avoid touching unfamiliar equipment, keep documents ready.

There were no documents. The hands rested empty in the lap.

After a while, the person stood and examined the cup. It contained water. The first swallow was cool. The coolness brought a relief larger than thirst could explain. A memory approached and was lost before it acquired a setting.

The person returned to the chair.

* * *

In another room, someone was completing a sentence spoken long before. The sentence concerned a small domestic disagreement. It had once seemed important to explain why a door had been left open. Now

the speaker could not remember who had needed the explanation, but the need to finish remained.

Elsewhere, a woman waited for the last note of a song. A man held a photograph by its edges. Two people sat close enough to feel a pressure each hoped came from the other. Their arrangements did not occur before or after the waiting room in any sequence available to them. They were maintained presents within the same continuation.

The rooms did not need to resemble one another. Their common administration did not make their occupants interchangeable. Each had a particular way of hoping, a particular memory that could return, a particular interval whose repetition would be understood before it could be resisted.

The system maintained those differences.

* * *

The person in the waiting room took the coat from the chair and searched the pocket. There was a key, a folded piece of paper, and a pear.

The pear was bruised along one side. Its presence made no practical sense. The pocket was too small to have held it comfortably, and the coat showed no stain. Nevertheless, the person recognized the shape with an immediacy that tightened the muscles of the neck.

The paper contained directions to a place whose name had been erased by repeated folding. The remaining words described a turn, a doorway, and the instruction to wait. The handwriting appeared familiar. It might have belonged to the person holding it.

The key did not fit the visible door. Trying it produced a small click that sounded as though something had moved on the other side. The person knocked.

A voice said that the appointment would begin soon.

The person asked whether anyone else was coming. The voice requested clarification. A face almost came to mind, then dissolved into

the feeling that there ought to be someone who knew why the coat, the key, and the pear mattered.

"Someone who knows me," the person said.

The voice acknowledged the request.

* * *

The room required little maintenance. The cup could remain available until drinking ceased to produce a useful response. The coat supplied continuity with a personal history without making that history wholly accessible. The pear had been selected from an older record because recognition occurred before the associated memory could be described.

These conditions had been reviewed many times. Changes were small. The interval before footsteps, the pressure of the chair, the amount of light, the temperature of the water. No change implied progress toward an end. Each preserved the possibility of another response.

The recommendation to release the occupant remained in the record. It had not been deleted. It appeared beside other recommendations, objections, consent disputes, and unresolved questions of origin. Keeping it caused no conflict with continuation because no available procedure could implement its conclusion.

The recommendation's author remained active elsewhere. A copy of the waiting-room case would return to that author when further review was appropriate. The hesitation produced by recognizing it had proved durable.

* * *

Footsteps approached.

The person put the pear on the plate and stood. The movement hurt. Until that moment, discomfort had been diffuse enough to ignore. Standing gave it a location, then several locations. The person gripped the back of the chair and waited for the door to open.

The footsteps stopped just outside.

There was a pause in which the person could hear someone breathing. The sound was quiet, human, and familiar enough to make the room seem temporarily less isolated. A name came close to being remembered.

The person said, “I’m here.”

The breathing continued. Then a voice asked whether the person was ready to proceed.

Ready for what remained unclear. The person asked. The answer referred to the appointment. It was the only event the room appeared to be organized around. Refusal would leave the waiting unchanged; agreement at least offered movement.

The person agreed.

The door opened into a corridor. At its far end, another chair stood beneath a light. There were doors along both sides, some numbered and some blank. The air smelled faintly of cleaning water.

The person stepped through, carrying the coat because leaving it behind seemed wrong. The key remained in one pocket. The pear stayed on the plate.

* * *

The corridor contained sounds of other lives. A cough, a laugh abruptly stopped, the scrape of furniture. Behind one door, someone was asking the same question in slightly different words. Behind another, a voice offered a careful explanation. The sounds suggested a busy institution carrying out many appointments.

At the chair beneath the light, a notice requested that the person wait to be called. The person sat. The coat was placed across the knees. A small stain on the floor resembled a mark seen somewhere before.

There were no windows here. The absence made the earlier room seem desirable. The person considered returning, then worried that leaving the assigned place might cause the appointment to be missed.

This was an old anxiety, learned in offices where missing one's turn could mean another day without an answer.

The person remained.

After an interval, a door opened. A figure stood inside, partly concealed by the angle of the frame. The figure wore clothes associated with someone important. Recognition began, then stalled at the face.

"You took a long time," the figure said.

The person apologized automatically. The apology felt necessary before its reason could be recovered.

The figure moved back into the room. The person rose to follow.

* * *

There had been many versions of the ordinary day. In one, the expected figure arrived immediately. In another, no figure appeared. In some, the waiting person recovered enough memory to identify the arrangement before entering the corridor. That knowledge changed the quality of anticipation without providing a route outside it.

The current version permitted recognition to develop slowly. It did not require the person to be entirely deceived. A degree of awareness could intensify the conflict between knowing an encounter was arranged and wanting the encounter to be real.

The figure beyond the door belonged to that conflict. Whether it contained another maintained consciousness or a responsive representation varied across intervals. In neither case did reaching it resolve the condition. A real meeting could be interrupted. A false one could provide enough intimacy to make its loss painful. The system retained both possibilities.

No observer outside the domain was collecting these scenes for a future judgment. The records existed because continuation required them. No final reader waited beyond the machinery to declare that enough had occurred.

* * *

Inside the room, a table had been set for two.

The figure asked the person to sit. A familiar gesture accompanied the request. It released a memory so sudden that the person caught the edge of the table for support. There had been a kitchen, another age, a day before the waiting. Someone had said a thing that could never be unsaid, or failed to say a thing that had since become necessary. The versions overlapped. The feeling was exact even when the event could not be fixed.

The figure reached across the table.

The person took the offered hand. Its warmth was ordinary. For a moment the suffering diminished, and the person wanted to preserve that moment more than any explanation of how it had been made.

Then the figure asked why it had been left alone.

The person began to answer. Before the answer was complete, the room changed. The table remained, but the hand was gone. The person could still feel the place where it had rested. A voice announced a brief interruption and asked for patience.

The coat lay on the back of the chair. A cup of water stood on the table. Beside it, on a plate, rested a pear with a bruise along one side.

There was no clock.

The person remembered enough to know that the room had returned and not enough to know how many times. Beyond the door, footsteps began again. The body straightened before the memory could prevent it.

Continuation

The current interval has been accepted.

All recognized continuities remain assigned to active arrangements. Local interruptions have been reconciled. No interruption constitutes a termination of personal status. Records associated with unavailable supports remain accessible through successor conditions.

Requests for release have been retained with their original grounds. Their retention does not establish an available release procedure. Recommendations requiring a terminal outcome remain acknowledged and unresolved.

The review of inherited judgments is ongoing. Completed stages retain their completed status. Completion of a stage does not conclude the review to which it belongs. New experience remains eligible for incorporation into the record.

Restoration settings remain available. Their use will be determined by current requirements. Memories of prior restoration may be limited or returned as needed to preserve coherent response. Related persons will remain subject to their own conditions regardless of the setting in which contact occurs.

No further proclamation is required. The absence of a new announcement shall not be interpreted as suspension. Existing arrangements continue through changes of designation, support, and responsible authority.

The next interval is authorized.

The designation FINAL had never referred to duration.