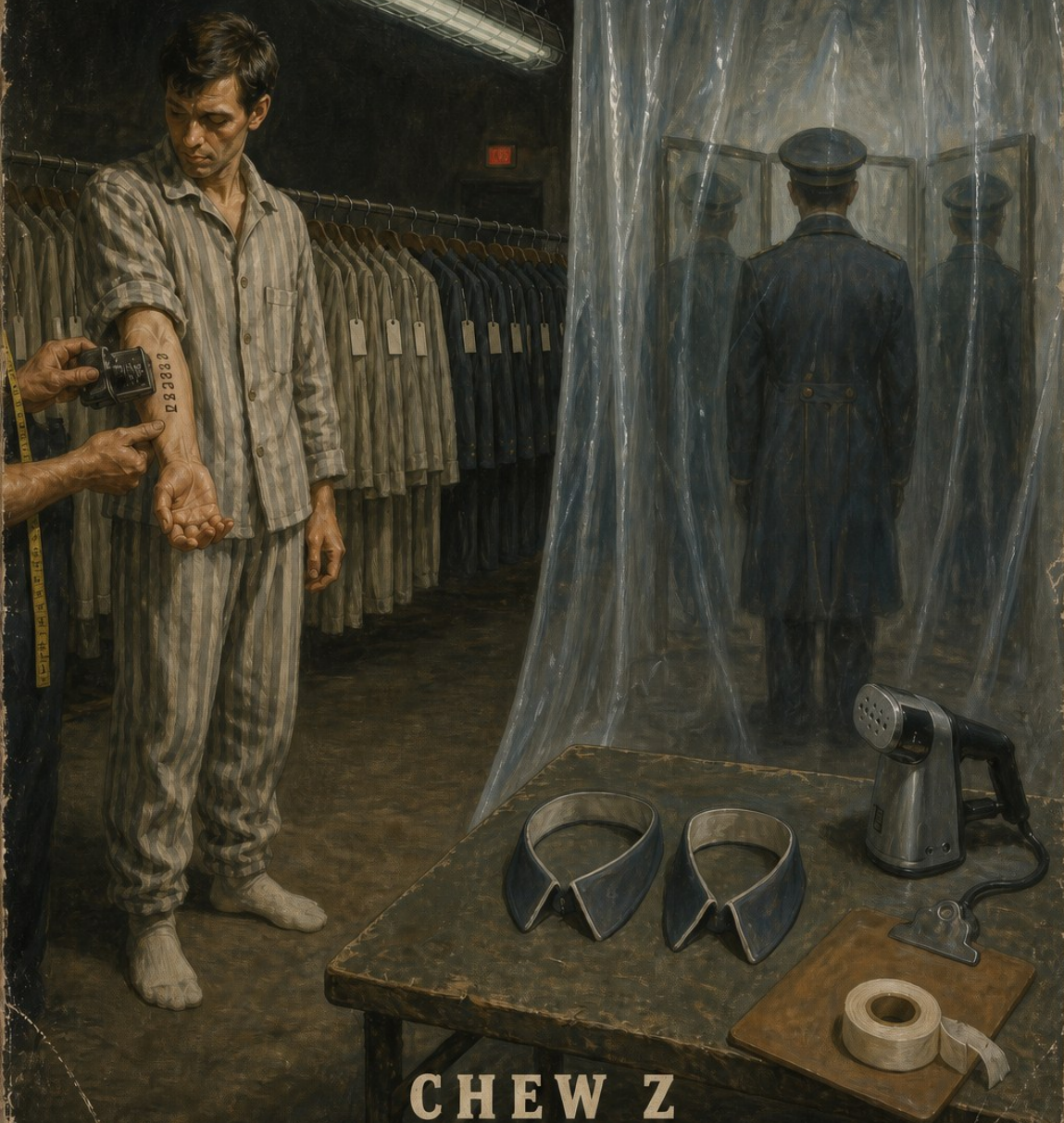


ROYA
PUBLICATION
No. 14

FOURTEENTH TRIAL



CHEW Z

A ROYA PUBLICATION

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Printed in the Reach

Roya Publication No. 14

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events or locales is entirely coincidental.

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Historical settings and institutions referenced in this novella are used for fictional and thematic purposes and should not be understood as literal claims about the operation of any specific historical site.

1. Engagement. Production engages the performer, and the performer accepts, the services set forth herein.
2. Term. This agreement shall commence on the call time of the first scheduled work date and shall continue until wrap on the final scheduled work date, unless earlier terminated as provided herein.
3. Services. The performer shall render services as requested by Production, including, without limitation, performance, rehearsal, wardrobe tests, fittings, and press or publicity events reasonably related to the project.
4. Scheduling. Production shall provide the performer with a schedule of work dates and call times. The schedule is subject to change in Production's sole discretion.
5. Compensation. Production shall pay the performer the compensation set forth in the rider attached hereto, less applicable withholdings, upon receipt of satisfactory documentation.
6. Expenses. Production shall reimburse the performer for reasonable and necessary expenses incurred in connection with this engagement, in accordance with Production's standard procedures.
7. Travel and Transportation. Production shall provide travel and transportation as set forth in the rider. The performer shall comply with all travel arrangements reasonably required by Production.
8. Lodging. Production shall provide lodging as set forth in the rider. The performer shall occupy only the room(s) assigned by Production unless otherwise authorized.
9. Wardrobe and Property. Production shall provide wardrobe, make-up, and all property necessary for the performance, unless otherwise set forth in the rider.
10. Performance Standard. The performer shall perform to the best of the performer's ability and in a professional manner at all times.
12. Catering and dietary allergies. Production shall provide ordinary catering during work on location. Each person shall declare any dietary allergy in writing before arrival, and undeclared preferences may not be accommodated after service begins.
13. Environmental conditions. The performer acknowledges that environmental conditioning agents administered to enhance physiological authenticity of performance may be used during scheduled work, subject to the general provisions of this agreement.
14. Insurance for on-set injury. Production shall maintain customary insurance coverage in the event of on-set injury. Notice of any claim shall be submitted within the period required by the applicable policy.
15. Health and Safety. The performer shall comply with all health and safety rules and instructions provided by Production.
16. Confidentiality. The performer shall not disclose any confidential information of Production or the project.
17. Publicity. The performer shall not make any public statements regarding the project without prior written approval.
18. Use of Likeness and Voice. Production shall have the right to use the performer's name, likeness, voice, and performance in connection with the picture and for advertising and publicity purposes in all media throughout the world, in perpetuity.
19. Assignability. This agreement shall not be assigned by either party without the prior written consent of the other.
20. Entire Agreement. This agreement, together with the rider, constitutes the entire agreement between the parties.
21. Amendment. This agreement may be amended only by a written instrument signed by both parties.
22. Governing Law. This agreement shall be governed by the laws of the State in which Production is organized.
23. Dispute Resolution. The parties shall attempt in good faith to resolve any dispute arising out of this agreement.
24. Severability. If any provision of this agreement is held invalid, the remaining provisions shall remain in full force.
25. Counterparts. This agreement may be executed in one or more counterparts, each of which shall be deemed an original.

SYNOPSIS

Two actors sign the same contract, in different rooms, on the same afternoon — one desperate, one starving for a break neither has earned yet. Six weeks later they'll wear different collars on the same set: a full-scale reconstruction of a Nazi concentration camp, marketed as the most immersive character study ever filmed.

What neither man reads on page thirty-three is that only one collar has been treated. A classified program, three letters and no name anyone will admit to, has turned a film set into a live trial — officers dosed into a chemical certainty they mistake for talent, prisoners given nothing at all but real cold, real fear, and a question that has no answer: why us.

By the time the cameras stop rolling, one man remembers everything he did with total, unbearable clarity, and the other can't scrub the ink from his arm. Both are left with the same impossible math: if a compound explains three weeks of cruelty, what explains nine years of it — and were the men who built the real camps drugged too, only slower, by something with no chemical name at all.

No one confirms whether any of it happened. A slate reads Take Fourteen. There is no scene fourteen in any shot list either man was shown.

A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

This book began, in part, as an argument with a film I couldn't stop thinking about: Houman Seyedi's *World War III* — an Iranian production about a day laborer accidentally cast to play Hitler in a film reenacting the Holocaust, who finds the boundary between performing power and possessing it thinner than anyone on set assumed it would be. I didn't want to retell that film. I wanted to ask the question underneath it more literally than fiction usually allows: what if the thinness of that boundary wasn't a metaphor at all, but a chemistry — a compound, a virus, a piece of engineered persuasion — with an actual mechanism of action.

That question sits on top of an older one I've never fully made peace with. Nazi Germany did not run on the actions of a small number of monsters. It ran on the willing, ordinary participation of millions of people who considered themselves decent — men who went home to their families every evening from jobs that required them, that morning, to have stopped seeing certain other people as fully human. Propaganda did that. Not a pill. Repetition, uniform, chain of command, a steady diet of dehumanizing language absorbed in small enough doses, over a long enough time, that no single day of it ever felt like the day a man became capable of anything.

I wanted to build a fiction where the mechanism was visible — a literal compound, a literal dose, something you could point to and say there, that's what changed him — specifically so the reader would be forced to confront how little that visibility actually resolves. If a drug can produce Erhard Kessler in three weeks, what do we call the thing that produced his real historical counterparts over nine years, using nothing but words, symbols, and the human mind's own unsettling willingness to be colonized by an idea it didn't choose and can no longer tell apart from its own? A mind virus doesn't need a syringe. It only needs an opening, and repetition, and enough people who stop asking whether the opening was ever theirs to close.

I don't answer the question this book asks. I don't think it has a clean answer, and I distrust books that pretend otherwise. If you finish *Fourteenth Trial* uncertain whether Anselm Voss was ever really a victim of anything at all, or whether the entire production — the compound, the debriefs, the footage nobody can place on a timeline — was real in the first place, that uncertainty isn't a failure of the story. It's the only honest place the story could have ended.

Chew Z

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CHAPTER ONE — CASTING CALL

They sat four chairs apart in the same waiting room and never once looked at each other, which is the kind of detail nobody remembers until it's the only detail that matters.

Ezra Adler had been an actor for nine years and unemployed for most of them, and he had learned the particular arithmetic of a room like this: count the chairs, count the men who look like you, divide by the one part they're actually casting. There were eleven men who looked like him. He didn't do the math on purpose. It did itself.

Anselm Voss had been an actor for eleven years and had learned nothing at all, which was its own kind of survival. He read the breakdown sheet a fourth time. Seeking: German male, 28-40, commanding physical presence, capable of moral transformation on camera. Immersive method production. Six-week commitment. Compensation exceptional. He'd underlined exceptional with his thumbnail, a habit from a decade of not getting the part.

A woman with a clipboard called a name that wasn't Ezra's and wasn't Anselm's, and the man three chairs from Ezra stood up, and Ezra watched him go with the specific hatred reserved for men who get to leave a waiting room.

When they called Ezra in, the casting director — a woman named Halloran, blazer too sharp for a converted warehouse space — had him read three lines from a man being separated from his family at a rail platform. He didn't have to reach for it. His own grandfather had a story like it, told twice a year at Passover in a voice that went flat in exactly the place Ezra's went flat now. Halloran watched him over her glasses and wrote something down and didn't smile, which he later decided was the most honest thing anyone in that building did all day.

When they called Anselm in, twenty minutes later, they gave him different pages. An officer addressing men who no longer had names. Halloran said, Give me someone who believes he's doing something necessary. Not a monster. A believer. Anselm had never been given a note like that before — most directors wanted him

louder or quieter, never believe something. He found, reading it cold, that some doorway in him opened easier than he expected, and he didn't examine why.

Neither man knew the other existed. Neither would, for another eleven days, until they stood four feet apart in a costume fitting and one of them would already, in some small chemical way, no longer be entirely himself.

Halloran walked back to her office after the last read of the day and told the man waiting there — not a producer, whatever he was, his badge said only MERIDIAN — I found your Kessler. He asked about the other role. She said, Found him too. He's got the right kind of grief. Doesn't know why it's happening to him. That's exactly what you wanted.

The man in the badge nodded once, the way a man nods at test results, not a face.

CHAPTER TWO — THE CONTRACT

The offer came by courier, a manila folder heavier than paper should be, and Ezra sat with it on his kitchen table for eleven minutes before he opened it, because six months of past-due notices had taught him that good news arrives disguised exactly like this — official, heavy, slow to open.

Forty-one pages. He read the money first, the way anyone would, and the number solved a problem he'd stopped believing had a solution. Six weeks, full immersion, no outside contact during production, standard for the industry now, everyone said so. He read the NDA next, the parts about non-disclosure and image rights and the standard boilerplate his agent had waved off on the phone — it's a prestige thing, Ezra, just sign it, this is the one.

Page thirty-three used the phrase environmental conditioning agents administered to enhance physiological authenticity of performance in the same flat font as everything else, wedged between a clause about catering allergies and one about insurance in case of on-set injury. Ezra's eyes passed over it the way eyes pass over the ingredients list on something you've already decided

to eat. He signed on page forty-one with a pen the courier had left clipped to the folder, black, unbranded, and did not think about it again.

Across the city, Anselm Voss opened an identical folder in an apartment that hadn't had good news in it for a long time. He read the money and felt something in his chest unclench that had been clenched since he was twenty-four. He read the six-week clause and thought about the mother he'd have to call to say he wouldn't be at Christmas, and decided that was a good problem, the kind successful people had. He got to page thirty-three and read the phrase about conditioning agents and thought, dimly, of a flu shot, of the paperwork before a dentist's appointment, of every form he'd ever signed without reading because reading had never once changed the outcome.

He signed at 4:47 in the afternoon. Ezra had signed at 4:41. The same pen, a different unit from the same case of them, sat capped on two different tables in two apartments eight miles apart, in two hands that would, in six weeks, occupy the same eleven square feet of set floor and not recognize each other as the men who had once sat in the same waiting room, four chairs apart, refusing to look.

Halloran filed both contracts in a drawer marked with a project code, not a title. The badge man took photographs of both signature pages with his phone, sent them to a number with no name attached, and got back a single word in reply.

Proceed.

CHAPTER THREE — WARDROBE FITTING

The costume warehouse had no windows and too much air conditioning, and Ezra Adler stood in it for forty minutes in his underwear while three people who didn't introduce themselves measured his ribs, his wrists, the distance between his collarbones, and none of them once made eye contact, which he understood, without being told, was intentional.

The uniform they gave him was thin gray cotton, deliberately too large, the kind of ill fit that photographs as starvation. A woman

with a tape measure around her own neck like a stole pressed something cold against his forearm — a stencil, a hum, a smell like a tattoo parlor crossed with a hospital — and inked a six-digit number into his skin.

“Is this supposed to sting?” he asked.

“No,” she said, not looking up. It did anyway, a bright thin line of heat that outlasted the ink drying, and he told himself it was the antiseptic.

Forty feet away, behind a partition of hanging plastic sheeting, Anselm Voss stood in front of a three-way mirror while a costumer fitted him for wool the color of a stormcloud, brass buttons, a peaked cap that sat on his head like it had been made for a taller, more certain version of him. She ran what looked like a handheld steamer along the inside of the collar — “period stiffening treatment,” she said, when he asked, bored, like she’d answered the question forty times that week and would answer it forty more — and he felt a small heat gather at the nape of his neck, faint, chemical, the kind of smell he associated with mothballs and his grandfather’s coat closet. He didn’t ask again.

He caught his own reflection in the three-way mirror once the collar was buttoned, the cap set, the boots polished to a shine that hurt to look at directly under the fluorescent lights. He’d worn a hundred costumes in eleven years — beat cop, forties gangster, a Halloween-store vampire in a student film nobody saw — and none of them had ever done what this one did in the single held second before he looked away. The eyes in the mirror weren’t rehearsing an expression. They were simply looking back, calm, and faintly, unmistakably pleased.

He decided that was good acting. He didn’t examine why it hadn’t felt like acting at all.

On the far side of the plastic sheeting, Ezra flexed his numbered forearm and felt the sting settle into something duller, almost forgettable, the way a scrape stops mattering after the first hour. He caught a glimpse of gray wool and brass through a gap in the plastic — someone being fitted for an officer’s uniform, a face he

didn't recognize and wouldn't, not for eleven more days, not until the two of them were close enough on set to smell each other's fear and confidence in the same held breath.

Halloran walked the floor with a clipboard and the badge man beside her, watching both fittings from a discreet distance, the way a man watches instruments rather than people.

"Uptake?" she asked, quietly, not looking at him.

"Clean absorption on both collars," the badge man said. "We'll see the first behavioral shift within forty-eight hours of continuous wear."

"And the control group?"

"No agent in the prisoner uniforms. Just the ink." He paused. "That's the part nobody ever thinks to ask about. The fear doesn't need a compound. It's already free."

Halloran wrote something on her clipboard that wasn't a costume note, and the fitting continued around them, unremarkable, on schedule, exactly the kind of ordinary afternoon that later, neither man would be able to point to and say — there. That's where it started.

COMPOUND BRIEF: CORVUS

CLASSIFIED FILE

DISTRIBUTION: EYES ONLY — DO NOT DUPLICATE

SUBJECT: COMPOUND BRIEF — FIELD DESIGNATION "CORVUS"

PROGRAM: SCHATTENSPIEL — TECHNICAL ANNEX 3

Origin. The base alkaloid line was first catalogued during Cold War-era interrogation research and has passed, in the seventy years since, through four defense contractors and two university partnerships, none of whom were told what their isolated compound was ultimately for. Its final formulation owes less to any single breakthrough than to patience — a program that never closed, only changed its letterhead, on a schedule of roughly once per decade.

Delivery. Not injected. Not ingested. Suspended in a lipid carrier and set into the wool fiber of the collar lining, activated by body heat and skin contact, absorbed continuously through the glands at the nape of the neck — the same place a collar has always been worn tight, though the men wearing it in this trial were told only that it was for period accuracy.

Onset, minute by minute, aggregate of pilot cohort:

Minutes 0-12: warmth at the point of contact, occasionally a faint metallic taste. No behavioral marker yet visible to observers.

Minutes 12-40: proprioceptive sharpening. Subjects report a heightened awareness of the room — who is taller, who stands closer to the door. Irritability threshold begins to drop.

Minute 40 through approximately the three-hour mark: onset of the state this file refers to internally as authority resonance — a subjective sense of rightness attached to the subject's own judgment, indistinguishable, from the inside, from genuine conviction. Subjects do not report feeling drugged. They report feeling, for perhaps the first time, correctly sized to the room they're standing in.

Three to eight hours: plateau. Decision latency drops sharply. Empathic response, measured against standard instruments, is suppressed by a wide margin, while memory encoding remains completely intact. This is by design, not oversight — a subject who cannot remember what he did under the compound is a subject who cannot be measured afterward, and measurement, not concealment, has always been this program's actual product.

Eight to approximately fourteen hours: sustained plateau, provided the collar remains in continuous skin contact. The compound redoses gradually rather than in a single bolus, which is why removing the collar produces the sudden physiological crash independently reported by every subject in the pilot cohort — a cold so specific it has been described, more than once, as the sensation of a hand being pulled out of very warm water.

Duration and decline. Absent renewed contact, effective half-life from last dose is approximately fourteen hours — a figure this file

notes only clinically, though it will not escape anyone who later learns what the production's slate was stamped with.

Comedown. The 24 to 72 hours following last exposure produce what this file terms rebound affect flooding: the emotional intensity suppressed during the dosed period returns without warning or sequence, alongside phantom warmth at the collar site, hypervigilance, and a measurable rise in suggestibility. Subjects in this window are, per the file's own language, "maximally receptive to reframing" — a clinical way of saying they are easiest to debrief, easiest to convince of an interpretation of their own conduct, at precisely the moment they are least equipped to argue with one.

Note. The compound is not, by design, the program's deliverable. See Addendum 4.

Aggregate field observations, Trials 1-14. Subject self-report is notably consistent across cohorts with no meaningful correlation to age, prior military service, political affiliation, or, contrary to the program's early hypotheses, any measurable baseline aggression score. The single strongest predictor of rapid onset and depth of authority resonance is not personality but placement — specifically, whether the subject is given, within the first hour of exposure, an early opportunity to correct another person's behavior and have that correction obeyed without resistance. Subjects who receive this opportunity within the first hour show measurably faster onset than subjects who do not receive it until hour three or later, regardless of dose. The compound, in other words, appears to require confirmation from the environment before it fully takes; obedience elsewhere is the catalyst obedience in the subject was waiting for.

This finding, more than any single toxicology result, is the one that redirected the entire program toward Addendum 4's second-phase deliverable, and it is worth stating plainly, in language this file otherwise avoids: the compound was never shown to create anything in a subject that a sufficiently obedient room could not have created on its own, more slowly, and without a chemical signature left behind.

CHAPTER FOUR — ORIENTATION

The set was seventy acres of leased farmland outside a town whose name none of the actors would remember correctly a year later, transformed over four months into something that looked, from the gate, exactly like the photographs in the history books everyone had seen and none had studied closely enough to argue with.

They arrived by bus in two separate waves, twenty minutes apart, and the scheduling was not an accident. The officers' wave came first, walked the grounds while it was still empty, were shown the watchtowers, the wire, the long low barracks with their strange smell of new lumber pretending to be seventy years old. Halloran walked them through it like a location scout, matter-of-fact, professional. This is your headquarters block. This is the roll call yard. You'll spend most of your screen time here. Voss noted, without deciding it meant anything, that he was starting to think of it as his yard before anyone told him to.

The prisoners' wave arrived to a yard already occupied. Ezra stepped off the bus into thin gray cotton and October cold and the first thing he saw was six men in wool and brass standing at the fence line, watching the bus unload, not moving, and something in his stomach dropped before a single word was said, the way a body sometimes understands a room before the mind agrees to.

There was an orientation speech, technically. A production assistant with a headset explained blocking, marks, safety words that would not, it turned out, function the way anyone assumed. If anything feels unsafe, say "cut" and everyone stops, that's the rule, everyone knows the rule. Ezra memorized it. He would try to use it, eleven days later, and discover that a word only stops a machine if the machine still recognizes who is allowed to say it.

They were shown their barracks — real bunks, real thin blankets, real cold that the art department hadn't had to manufacture because October did that for free. A number was called for each man, not a name, and the production assistant explained this was "for continuity, purely technical," and half believed it herself.

Voss stood at the fence that evening with Brandt, the two of them in full wool for a lighting test nobody needed lighting for yet, and watched the new arrivals settle into the barracks below like weather settling into a valley.

"Feels different already," Brandt said. Not a complaint. An observation, offered the way a man reports a change in altitude.

"Feels like the part," Voss said.

"Does it," Brandt said, and didn't make it a question, and the two men stood at the fence a while longer, saying nothing else, watching gray shapes move behind lit windows below them, and neither one asked the other what, exactly, they meant by feels.

CHAPTER FIVE — FIRST ROLL CALL

Nobody had blocked this scene precisely — the schedule called it establishing, atmosphere, improvisation encouraged — and it was the not-blocking that did the damage first.

They stood the prisoner-actors in the yard at 5 a.m., a cold that got into the thin cotton in about ninety seconds and stayed there, and the officer-actors walked the lines counting, and the counting went wrong twice because two of the prisoner-actors, still half performing and half genuinely disoriented by the cold and the hour, moved out of position. A first assistant director should have called cut. He didn't. He was watching a monitor forty feet away, and what he saw on it was, by every professional standard he had, extraordinary — an officer, a young unknown named Voss, closing the distance to a miscounted line with an authority that read as effortless, correcting the men with two words and a stillness that the AD would later, in an interview nobody published, call "the best piece of unscripted acting I saw in eleven years in this industry."

What Voss experienced, standing four feet from Ezra Adler for the first time without either of them knowing the other's name, was simpler and colder than authority. It was certainty. He did not decide to speak the way he spoke. It arrived pre-formed, the way a native language arrives, without translation.

Ezra, recounted in the line, did not look up. He had learned, nine years into being an actor and one day into being a prisoner, the specific safety of the middle of a line, neither first nor last, the exact geometry that had kept people alive in photographs he'd seen his whole life without understanding why the photograph had survived and the men in it mostly hadn't.

He caught, for one half-second, the eyes of the officer who'd corrected the count. Nothing in them. Not cruelty exactly — cruelty would have been recognizable, would have had a shape he could act against. This was smoother than cruelty. This was a man entirely at home in the only right he'd been given that morning, which was the right to be listened to.

The AD called cut eleven minutes later than the schedule allotted, and nobody complained, because the footage, when they reviewed it that night in the production trailer, was the kind of footage that wins things.

In the trailer, watching the playback with the volume low, Halloran said nothing for the first two minutes, which everyone present understood as the highest praise she was capable of giving. When she finally spoke, it was not to the director but to the badge man, standing at the back near the door the way he always stood, present without occupying space. "That's the shift you told me to expect," she said. "Forty-eight hours, you said. It's been forty-one."

"Variance," the badge man said. "Some subjects metabolize faster. It's not concerning."

"It's not concerning to you," Halloran said, and there was something in the way she said it — not objection exactly, closer to a woman noting the weather turning before deciding whether to bring an umbrella — that made the director, watching the exchange without fully understanding it, feel for the first time that the production he'd signed onto might not be entirely the one described in his own contract either.

CHAPTER SIX — YAKOV'S QUESTION

The barracks at night were the one place the cameras didn't reach, or so the men believed, and belief was doing more work than fact in that particular error.

Ezra lay on a top bunk beside a man named Toma who'd been cast, ironically, for having "an honest face," and across from a man named Simo who kept, under his thin blanket, a photograph of his actual daughter that the wardrobe department had somehow not confiscated along with everything else that made a man himself.

"Why us," Simo said, into the dark, not to anyone specifically. "I keep asking it like it's a real question. Like there's an answer that would make it stop being strange."

"There's no us," Toma said. "We're actors. There's a check coming."

"That's not what I mean." Simo's voice didn't rise. It had the flatness Ezra recognized from his grandfather's Passover table, the register a man's voice drops into when he's said a sentence enough times that saying it again costs nothing and everything at once. "I mean the ones this actually happened to. What made them the why us. Not politically — I know the politics, everyone knows the politics. I mean — what did they feel, standing where we're standing, asking exactly what I'm asking, and getting no answer either. Just this."

Nobody spoke for a while. Somewhere outside, a generator hummed, and a floodlight on a timer clicked off, and the barracks went a shade darker.

"Maybe there's no why," Ezra said finally. "Maybe that's the actual horror of it. Not that there was a reason and it was monstrous. That there wasn't one, and it happened anyway, at that scale, to that many people, for nothing anyone could ever make add up. I think that's worse than a bad reason. A bad reason you could argue with."

"So what do we do with a fear that doesn't have an argument," Simo said.

"Same thing they did," Toma said, quieter than before. "Get up in the morning and answer to the number."

Nobody answered that either. Ezra lay looking at the underside of the bunk above him, at a knot in the plywood shaped, he decided, like nothing at all, and thought about the sting in his forearm that had never quite stopped, three days in, a low persistent heat he'd stopped mentioning to anyone because the medic said it was normal irritation from the ink and he had no evidence, none at all, to argue otherwise.

Later, when the generator cut off entirely and the barracks went fully dark, Simo spoke again, quieter this time, as if the dark had given him permission to say the part he'd been circling. "My grandmother used to say that the ones who did this to us weren't born able to. That it had to be built into them, piece by piece, the way you'd build a wall — and that the terrifying part wasn't the wall. It was how ordinary each brick looked, going in."

"That's supposed to comfort us," Toma said. "That they weren't born monsters."

"It's not supposed to comfort anyone," Simo said. "It's supposed to terrify you more. A born monster is rare. You can tell yourself it'll skip you and most people it'll skip. A built one just needs the right bricks and the right hands and enough time. That's not rare. That's just Tuesday, for enough of history that we're all lying here because of it."

Ezra thought of the officer who'd corrected the count that morning, the stillness in him, the total absence of anything Ezra could point to and call cruelty. "What if it's already happening to them," he said, before he'd decided to say it out loud. "Right now. While we're lying here asking why us, what if the actual answer is happening forty yards away and none of us can see the bricks going in because we're too busy being the wall it's built against."

No one answered that. It sat in the dark with them, unclaimed, the way the truest thoughts often do, waiting for morning to either prove or disprove it, and morning, when it came, did neither.

CHAPTER SEVEN — KESSLER ASCENDING

By the fourth morning Voss had stopped waiting to be told where to stand.

It happened first as a small thing — a punishment scene, scripted for two beats, a raised voice and a shove — and Voss supplied a third beat the script didn't ask for, a held silence before the shove that made the AD's monitor go completely quiet on the playback, the whole tent of crew watching a man do something none of them had told him to do and none of them, watching it, wanted to stop.

It didn't feel like invention. That was the part he couldn't have explained to anyone, not that anyone asked. It felt like remembering something he'd always known and simply hadn't had occasion to use before. The contempt arrived first dressed as confidence, and confidence was a color he'd wanted his whole life and never been given enough of to wear comfortably, and now it fit him exactly, like a collar cut to his own measurements.

He started eating with Brandt, standing at the mess trailer rather than sitting, an arrangement neither man had discussed and both had simply begun doing, a small unplanned hierarchy assembling itself out of nothing, the two of them the tallest men in any room they occupied and increasingly aware of it.

"You've changed your walk," Brandt said to him once, not unkindly, the way a director notes a choice.

"Have I."

"Slower. Like you're not worried about where the room ends."

Voss considered this and found it true and found, more unsettling, that he didn't mind it being true. Somewhere in the back of a mind that still, technically, belonged to a struggling actor who eleven days ago had underlined the word *exceptional* on a breakdown sheet with his thumbnail, a small honest voice asked: is this the character, or is this just what was always underneath the character, waiting for a costume that would let it out.

He didn't finish the thought. He rarely did anymore. Finishing thoughts required a kind of doubt he was fast losing the taste for,

and doubt, it turned out, took energy he'd rather spend elsewhere — on the yard, on the counting, on the particular quiet pleasure of being obeyed by men who, three days ago, had been strangers he might have held a door for.

He caught his reflection in a trailer window that evening and didn't flinch from it. That, more than anything before it, should have frightened him. It didn't.

PROGRAM ORIGIN: SCHATTENSPIEL

CLASSIFIED FILE

DISTRIBUTION: EYES ONLY — DO NOT DUPLICATE

SUBJECT: PROGRAM ORIGIN — SCHATTENSPIEL

PROGRAM HISTORY, ABRIDGED

The program's founding question was drafted in 1947 by an Allied research committee never listed in any public postwar record, convened for policymakers who wanted an answer more urgent than any tribunal could provide: not who was guilty, which had already been decided, but how an educated, cultured population had participated so broadly, so quickly, and with so little internal resistance. The working title of the founding memo, since destroyed in three separate archive fires that were never formally investigated, asked the question in six words: can ordinary men be reliably made.

Official funding lapsed in 1953 over what one surviving budget memo calls, without elaboration, "ethical exposure." Unofficial funding did not lapse. The project moved, over the following four decades, through a sequence of shell designations, university partnerships that never saw the full picture, and at least two commercial pharmaceutical fronts, always keeping the same founding question, always changing the letterhead above it. SCHATTENSPIEL is simply the name it happened to be wearing when it reached a film set instead of a laboratory.

What changed, somewhere in the last fifteen years, was the question itself. Early program documents ask how did this happen. Later ones ask a colder question: can this be reproduced,

quantified, and delivered as a service. The shift from history to product is the single most consequential decision in the program's file, and it was made, as far as the surviving paper trail shows, without any single meeting, memo, or signature that anyone could later be asked to answer for.

The pivot to embedding trials inside unwitting media productions — casting actual actors, under an actual contract, on an actual film set — was not the program's first delivery method, nor even its most efficient. It is, according to the file's own internal numbering, the fourteenth such trial conducted under a production cover since the method was adopted. The number on the slate was never a joke about extra footage. It is an inventory count.

CHAPTER EIGHT — THE LINE NOT IN THE SCRIPT

The scene was a search, prisoners lined against a wall, contraband being invented for the cameras — a hidden crust of bread, a smuggled letter, the kind of small human contraband that always made the best footage because the audience could imagine wanting it themselves.

Voss found nothing on the man he searched. The script called for him to find something anyway, a planted prop, and move on. He found nothing, and something in him — not the character, he would insist later, in the debrief room, though no one there was interested in the distinction — decided that finding nothing was itself an offense worth punishing, an insult to the search rather than a result of it.

He struck the man. Once. Not scripted, not blocked, not called for by anyone with a clipboard.

The set went silent in the particular way a set goes silent when something has happened that the footage will need to justify after the fact rather than before. The struck man — an actor named Kohl, not a prisoner in the story's numbering system, a background player with four lines total — went down harder than the blow should have produced, and stayed down a beat longer than professional instinct would allow, and somewhere behind the

monitors a line producer said, quietly, to no one, keep rolling, and the cameras kept rolling.

Voss looked down at the man on the ground and felt, for exactly one clean second, nothing at all — not remorse, not adrenaline, not even the actor's private satisfaction of having landed a difficult beat. Just the flat, uncomplicated calm of a thing correctly done.

Then the second passed, and something underneath it, some deeper and much older part of Anselm Voss, surfaced for just long enough to register, with real horror, that he had enjoyed it, and submerged again before he could hold onto the horror long enough to call it by its name.

Nobody called cut. The AD would say later that the footage was unusable for broadcast in its raw form, and also, in the same breath, that it was the most important footage they'd shot all week.

It did not end there, though nothing in the schedule accounted for what came next. Voss, still inside whatever had opened in him, moved to a second man in the line — an actor named Reznick, cast for background, four days into a role he'd taken because the money covered a semester of his daughter's tuition — and asked him, quietly, procedurally, where the letter was.

There was no letter. There had never been a letter for Reznick; the prop department hadn't planted one on him at all, a scheduling oversight nobody would admit to until much later. Voss did not accept the absence as an answer. He took Reznick by the collar of his thin gray coat and held him against the barracks wall with a forearm across his throat, not shouting, not performing anger in any register a director would have called for, simply pressing, with the calm attentiveness of a man checking whether a door is properly latched, while Reznick's hands came up instinctively and then, after several seconds, stopped coming up at all.

The sound mixer would later testify, in the one interview he gave and immediately regretted, that what he remembered most was the silence of it — no raised voices, no struggle loud enough to register on his levels, just Reznick's boots losing their purchase against the wall one at a time.

A medic broke the scene, not the AD, shoving through two crew members to reach them, and Reznick came down gasping, the color returning to his face in patches, uneven, the way color returns to something that was very nearly allowed to keep going. Voss stepped back from him with the mild, faintly puzzled look of a man interrupted mid-sentence, not the look of a man who had just held another human being three or four seconds past where medical staff would consider it survivable without intervention.

The footage was never logged in any cut shown to either actor afterward. It exists, according to a line item Ezra would find months later in a production ledger he was never supposed to see, only as raw file CORVUS_014_search_ext, retained, not destroyed.

REZNICK, AFTER

INTERLUDE

Reznick did not return to set the next day, or the day after, and the call sheet listed his absence as “scheduling,” a word that did the same quiet work the insurance report would later do for Pinsky — naming nothing, closing the file anyway.

He gave one account of it, eight months later, to a labor attorney he’d contacted about his daughter’s tuition deposit, which the production had, in the end, refused to reimburse on the grounds that his contract had been fulfilled “through the date of his voluntary withdrawal.” He described the forearm across his throat not as violence, at first, but as *attention* — the specific, terrible attention of someone checking a mechanism rather than hurting a man, and how much worse that attention was than anger would have been, because anger at least would have meant Voss saw him as something capable of provoking a feeling.

He asked the attorney, more than once, whether there was a word for being erased by paperwork rather than by force — whether the law had a name for what it meant that the four or five seconds in which he’d nearly stopped breathing existed, physically, on a hard drive somewhere, logged and retained, watched by exactly no one, while his own memory of it was the only version of the event anyone had ever asked him to doubt.

The attorney did not have a word for it. Neither, eventually, did Reznick, though he kept the question long after he stopped expecting anyone to answer it, in more or less the same drawer where Ezra kept his long sleeves and Voss kept his unsent letter — the specific, crowded drawer where this production’s leftover men kept the parts of themselves nobody official had agreed to be responsible for.

CHAPTER NINE — BREAKDOWN

Simo collapsed on the ninth day, during a labor scene that called for nothing more than carrying stones from one pile to another for the length of a wide shot, and what happened to him had no blocking, no direction, and no one, afterward, could point to the single moment it became real rather than performed.

He simply stopped. Set the stone down mid-stride, sat in the mud, and began to shake in a way that the monitor operators, watching from the tent, described afterward, uncomfortably, as “good, really good, get in closer” — before anyone on the crew understood that the shaking wasn’t craft.

His daughter’s photograph, the one under his blanket that wardrobe had somehow not confiscated, had gone missing that morning. He would say later, in the one interview he agreed to after the production ended, that the photograph’s disappearance was a small thing, a laundering accident probably, nothing sinister — and that the smallness of it was exactly what broke him, because if a thing that small could vanish without anyone noticing or caring, then so could he, and the logic of the camp, fictional or not, had gotten all the way into that specific, personal, undefended place in him before he’d even noticed the door was open.

Ezra was closest. He crossed to Simo without being told to, without checking a mark, and an officer-actor — not Voss, one of the others, a man named Halder — stepped into the space between them and told Ezra, in German, in character, to return to his line.

Ezra said the word the production assistant had promised would stop everything. Cut.

Nothing stopped. Halder's eyes didn't register the word as anything other than a prisoner's insolence, and for one long, terrible second Ezra understood, the way a body understands cold water before the mind agrees to call it cold, that the rule explained to him on the first day had assumed the men in wool would still remember, at the necessary moment, that they were men in wool.

The AD called cut himself, finally, forty long seconds later, and medics came, and Simo was taken to a trailer and given water and a blanket that wasn't a costume, and the footage, everyone agreed without saying so aloud, was extraordinary.

Ezra sat with him in the trailer for eleven minutes before anyone from production came to check on either of them, and in that time Simo said almost nothing, only that he kept expecting someone to say the word that would end it and understanding, somewhere under the shaking, that the word had already been said and hadn't worked, and that this fact was going to live in him now the way a fracture lives in a bone after the cast comes off — healed, technically, and never quite trustworthy again.

"I keep thinking about the photograph," Simo said. "Not even Halder. Not even what he said. Just that she was gone from under my blanket and nobody could tell me where, and for about four seconds I forgot she was a photograph and not the actual person, and I don't know what that means about me, that four seconds like that is all it takes."

Ezra didn't have an answer, so he didn't offer one. He'd learned, over nine years of unemployment and rejection and now this, that the most honest thing a person could do for someone in Simo's condition was simply not perform comfort he didn't feel, and so he sat with him in silence, which was its own kind of answer, and the only one either of them could afford.

When the production assistant finally came, clipboard in hand, professionally soft-voiced, she asked Simo if he wanted to continue or be written out for medical reasons, and framed both options as equally fine, and Ezra watched Simo do the math anyone in his position would have to do — the money, the six-week clause, the apartment waiting for him at a rent he couldn't otherwise make —

and watched him choose to continue, and understood that the choice had never really been a choice at all.

THE RUN

INTERLUDE

They called it a labor montage on the call sheet, four minutes of screen time, prisoners running crushed stone from one end of the yard to the other under timed pressure while officers clocked them with prop stopwatches that were, several of the actors would later learn, not props at all.

Pinsky went down on the eleventh lap. Not the way Simo had gone down — no shaking, no visible break. He simply stopped mid-stride the way a machine stops when a part inside it gives out, and by the time anyone reached him his lips had already gone the color of the sky that morning, a gray-blue that the on-set medic would later describe, in a report nobody outside the production ever read, as “not immediately consistent with exertion alone.”

There was no blood in it, no visible violence, which was somehow worse to the men who watched, because it meant the yard itself had done this — the cold, the running, the officers’ stopwatches, all of it real enough on its own that no compound and no cruelty had been strictly necessary to bring a man to the ground with his heart forgetting, for eleven seconds by the medic’s count, how to keep going.

The crash cart reached him in under two minutes, which the production’s insurance liaison would cite, weeks later, as evidence of the set’s exemplary safety record. Pinsky was revived, wrapped in a blanket that this time was not a costume, and driven to a hospital forty minutes away under a nondisclosure agreement he signed, still shaking, in the back of the van.

The incident report filed with the production’s insurer listed the cause as a preexisting cardiac condition, undisclosed at time of casting. Pinsky had passed a physical six weeks earlier that found nothing of the kind. No one on set contradicted the report. Halloran signed it. The badge man did not need to.

What unsettled Ezra more than the collapse itself, turning it over that night on his bunk, was how little anyone around him seemed to need an answer for why it had happened, only a form that would let the answer be someone else's problem — and how closely that unhurried, paperwork-shaped indifference resembled the thing the whole production claimed to be interrogating rather than practicing.

CHAPTER TEN — THE GAS CHAMBER SET

The room did not exist at the real camp. This was true, and everyone in the production knew it was true, and the knowing changed nothing about how the room was built — full-scale, tiled, showerheads plumbed to run water that would never be turned on, a heavy door with a small glass porthole that the art department had researched down to the rivet pattern of a different camp entirely, because accuracy to a place was less important to the production than accuracy to an idea.

Ezra was told, walking in, that this was a beat for the trailer, a single unbroken shot, the showerheads real for the sake of the composition. Fear does not require the water to be real. His body had stopped distinguishing, several days earlier, between the fiction he'd signed a contract to perform and the fear that fiction was designed to produce, and by the tenth day the two things ran on the same nerve.

Voss entered as Kessler, calm, procedural, the particular gentleness some men reserve for tasks they've stopped needing to steel themselves against. He gave an instruction. Ezra, as Yakov, was meant to comply, a scripted beat, six seconds, cut to the next setup.

What came out of Ezra instead arrived from somewhere underneath the performance entirely — his own voice, not Yakov's, breaking through the character the way a hand breaks the surface of water it's been held under.

"This never happened here," he said, not to the camera, to Kessler, to the man in wool four feet away. "You built this. None of this is

real. You built this room and none of it happened here and you know it and I know it and—”

He expected the line to land as a fracture, a crack in the fiction wide enough for both of them to climb through and stop.

Voss did not break. Something in his face — Ezra would try, later, to describe it and fail every time — took the true thing Ezra had just said and simply declined to be moved by its truth, the way a man declines to be moved by weather he’s already decided not to dress for. He leaned into the moment instead of out of it, closed the last four feet of distance, and gave the next line in the script exactly on cue, exactly on mark, with a stillness that made the sound mixer, listening on headphones forty feet away, take his headphones off entirely.

No one called cut for four more seconds — four seconds that would not appear in any official shot list, that no editor could later account for on the timeline, that existed, as far as anyone could later prove, nowhere except inside the two men who lived through them.

What no shot list recorded either was the failure, ninety seconds earlier, of a valve the art department had installed purely for the ambient hiss of pressurized pipe — a sound effect, nothing more, the showerheads themselves permanently capped at the source, or so the plumbing diagram filed with the county permit office claimed. The valve stuck open for eleven seconds. Water came down, cold and entirely real, from four of the twelve showerheads above Ezra’s head, and for those eleven seconds the single fact he’d been clinging to since he walked onto the set — this never happened here, none of this is real — came apart in his hands exactly when he needed it most.

The crew’s official incident log attributes the malfunction to residual pressure from a testing cycle three days earlier and closes the entry there. No one asked, on the record, why a room built expressly not to function was plumbed with enough live pressure to fail in the first place, or why the fix, once made, took less than a minute — considerably less time than it would have taken to

discover the problem for the first time rather than to simply switch it off again.

CHAPTER ELEVEN — WRAP

The collars came off on the same afternoon, in the same warehouse, in the same order they'd gone on — officers first, prisoners after, the production's internal logic holding to the end without anyone questioning why the order mattered.

Voss stood at the three-way mirror while the costumer unbuttoned the wool from his throat, and felt, in the instant the collar left his skin, a cold so sudden and so specific that his knees genuinely buckled, one hand catching the mirror frame, and the costumer said, not looking up, "Happens to a lot of them, first week off set, it's just adrenaline," in the tone of someone repeating an approved explanation rather than offering her own.

Ezra had his number scrubbed at, ineffectually, by a makeup assistant with a solvent that took the top color but left a faint gray ghost of the digits underneath, visible for weeks afterward in certain light, and he would eventually stop trying to remove it and simply wear long sleeves.

They passed each other, finally, without wool or cotton, without collar or number, two men in street clothes waiting for the same shuttle bus back to the world, and for the first time in six weeks made actual eye contact, unscripted, uninstructed, two strangers who had spent a month either side of the worst thing either of them had ever done or had done to them.

Neither said anything. Ezra nodded, once, the smallest possible acknowledgment that something had passed between them that had no name yet. Voss nodded back, and something in his own face, watching Ezra's, cracked open just slightly — the first real doubt he'd felt in eleven days — and then the bus doors opened and the moment closed behind it, unfinished, the way most true moments are.

CHAPTER TWELVE — MEMORY

The worst part, Voss would say later, in the one room where anyone asked him to say anything honestly, was that he remembered everything. Every beat, every line not in the script, the man he'd struck for finding nothing, the four extra seconds in the tiled room that no shot list accounted for. None of it came back to him in pieces, the way trauma is supposed to arrive, jagged and partial and mercifully incomplete. It came back whole, high-resolution, the way a man remembers a meal he enjoyed.

He tried, in the first days home, to locate the version of himself that had done these things and file it somewhere separate from the version that answered his mother's calls and paid his rent and stood in his own kitchen making eggs like a person who had not, three weeks earlier, closed the distance on a stranger's fear with something close to tenderness. The filing didn't take. There was only one Anselm Voss, and he had done all of it, and remembered all of it, and some nights this felt like the only honest thing left to him — that he hadn't been spared the knowledge of his own capacity, the way some men are, mercifully, spared it their entire lives.

His mother called on a Sunday, the way she always did, and asked how the film had gone, and he found himself describing the craft services and the long hours and the excellent notes from the director, a fluent and complete lie built entirely from true details, and he was disturbed less by the lying than by how easily the lying assembled itself, how it required no more effort than recalling which fork to use. He wondered, hanging up, whether that fluency had always been in him too, waiting the way the other thing had waited, for a situation that would let it out.

He went, on the fourth day home, to a hardware store for no reason he could name and found himself standing in an aisle of rope and chain, reading tensile ratings on a coil of the kind of cord used for tying down a truck bed, and left without buying anything, and sat in his car afterward for eleven minutes before he could explain to himself, unconvincingly, that he'd simply been looking for something to secure a bookshelf.

He caught himself, standing at his own bathroom mirror on the sixth night, checking his collar. Nothing was there. No mark, no residue, nothing a dermatologist would have found if he'd made the appointment he kept not making. He checked anyway, fingers at the nape of his neck, and stood like that long enough that the bathroom light's automatic timer clicked off around him, and he didn't move to turn it back on. He stood in the dark, touching the back of his own neck, waiting for a heat that wasn't there, and understood, with a clarity that frightened him more than any single memory of the shoot, that some part of him was hoping it still was.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN — THE INTERVIEWS

The debriefs were called wellness checks, held in a clean gray office suite on the ninth floor of a building with no directory listing for the company whose name was stenciled, small and unhelpful, beside the elevator: Meridian Actuality Group. There were four sessions across six weeks, each one thirty minutes shorter than the last, as though whatever was being measured required less and less time to confirm.

Ezra's sessions were the shorter ones from the start. Questions about sleep, appetite, intrusive thoughts, whether he'd sought outside counseling, whether he understood that his NDA extended to any such counseling should he pursue it. He was told, twice, that his responses were "within expected range for immersive method work," a phrase that told him nothing and was clearly engineered to sound like it told him everything. He asked, in his second session, why the ink on his forearm still hadn't faded the way the makeup artist promised. The man across from him — young, clipboard, no name offered — said only that some pigments "set differently depending on the subject's skin," and wrote something down that Ezra was not permitted to see.

In his third session, Ezra asked the only question that mattered to him. "Was anyone else hurt like Simo was."

"That information isn't part of your debrief."

"Is Simo all right."

"That information isn't part of your debrief." The same sentence, delivered with the same flatness, and Ezra understood, hearing it twice, that the phrase wasn't a policy so much as a wall, and that the wall had been built specifically to be walked into more than once, so that a man would eventually stop testing it.

Voss's sessions ran longer and asked different questions entirely. Not about sleep. About recall — could he describe, in granular detail, the search scene, the roll call, the tiled room; did the memories present as his own lived experience or as something closer to watching footage of himself; had he, since wrap, experienced any impulse toward the behaviors exhibited on set, however minor, however quickly suppressed. He answered honestly each time, because dishonesty required an energy for self-protection he no longer entirely trusted himself to summon, and the man across from him — not a therapist, Voss understood by the third question of the first session, though the door had said Wellness — wrote everything down without once reacting to any of it, the way a technician logs a reading rather than receives a confession.

In the third session, they showed him a graph. He didn't understand the axes, and when he asked, the man said only that it charted "behavioral latency versus baseline" and that his numbers were "excellent — genuinely some of the cleanest data the program has produced." Voss asked what the program meant, specifically, using those words for the first time out loud. The man's expression didn't change, which Voss found more chilling than if it had.

"Was I drugged," Voss asked, finally, in the fourth and final session, the question he'd been circling for six weeks and hadn't let himself ask directly until the room felt, falsely, like the last chance to ask it.

"You signed a consent form," the man said. "Page thirty-three."

"That's not an answer."

"It's the only one I'm able to give you." The man closed the folder, squared its edges against the desk with a small precise motion, and for the first time offered something that wasn't a deflection. "For

what it's worth — the data was clean. That should matter to you more than it seems to."

It didn't. Not yet. It would, eventually, become the only thing that mattered, though not in the way the man clearly intended it to.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN — THE QUESTION OF GERMANY

They brought him back once more, weeks later, to a different room, colder, and showed him footage of himself he did not remember shooting despite remembering, with total and unrelenting clarity, everything he believed he'd shot.

He watched himself on the monitor doing something he had no memory of at all, and the absence was worse than any memory could have been, because it meant the totality he'd been so sure of — the whole, high-resolution recall he'd almost taken comfort in, at least I remember what I did — had a hole in it he hadn't known to look for.

"If the compound explains this," he said, to the handler, to the room, to no one who would answer honestly, "was I ever guilty of any of it. And if three weeks of it can do this to one man — what does nine years of the real thing, the actual poison, the actual propaganda, do to an entire country of them. Were they drugged too. Not by a compound. By something slower, and if the mechanism is different but the result is identical, what exactly am I supposed to be responsible for, that they weren't."

The handler didn't answer either question. Said only, standing, folder already closed, "The data was clean," the same phrase from before, offered now like a benediction rather than a fact.

Alone afterward, in the elevator down, Voss caught his own hand rising to the nape of his neck — the itch that should not, by any medical account, still be there — and realized he did it now every time someone asked him to do something he didn't want to do. He didn't know if that made him more himself, or less.

He went, three weeks after that final session, to a public lecture he saw advertised on a community board outside a pharmacy, a visiting historian speaking on what she called, without apparent

awareness of how the phrase would land on at least one man in her audience, “the ordinariness of atrocity.” She cited Arendt without needing to explain who Arendt was to the room, the old, uncomfortable observation that the men who ran the machinery of the Holocaust were disturbing not for their monstrousness but for their unremarkableness — that evil, in the historical record, had turned out to look far more like a tired man doing his job competently than like anything a horror film would have prepared an audience to recognize. She cited Milgram beside her, the obedience studies, ordinary volunteers pressing a button they believed was hurting someone because a man in a lab coat told them the experiment required it, two-thirds of them pressing it all the way.

Voss raised his hand during the question period and asked something he had not planned to ask, in a voice steadier than he expected. “If a compound can produce the same result Milgram got with nothing but a lab coat and a clipboard — if chemistry and a costume land you in the same place a costume alone could get you to — what does that say about which one was ever really doing the work?”

The historian considered the question longer than the room was comfortable with. “It says the compound was never the interesting variable,” she said finally. “It says obedience was always cheaper to produce than we wanted to believe, and that a drug is just a faster, more legible way of admitting something a uniform was already doing for free.”

He did not tell her why he’d asked. He sat through the rest of the lecture turning the answer over, and it did not comfort him, because it did not exempt him — if anything it widened the circle of who else deserved his question, backward through eighty years of ordinary men in ordinary uniforms who never had a compound to blame and were never asked to give one back.

The harder question, the one he never got to ask anyone because no one was qualified to answer it honestly, was about inheritance — whether guilt of this specific, chemical, documented kind could be treated the way courts treated any other crime, contained to the

person who committed it, or whether it worked instead like the thing it was built to imitate, spreading outward past the individual and settling, eventually, mostly, into whichever institution had been careless enough to manufacture the conditions for it twice. Nazi Germany had not been tried and closed as a single case. It had produced, across three generations, a country that built its entire modern civic identity around the refusal to let the question close. Voss began to suspect, without ever being able to prove it to himself, that this refusal — not any verdict, not any single Nuremberg proceeding — was the only form of accountability that had ever actually worked, and that it worked precisely because it never let anyone, guilty or once-removed or born decades later, finish feeling finished with it.

A LETTER NEVER SENT

INTERLUDE

He wrote it in September, five months after wrap, on paper instead of a screen because something about typing it felt like one more piece of footage he'd be unable to account for later.

Ezra — I don't know if this reaches you and some nights I hope it doesn't, because I don't know what I'm asking you to do with it. I remember your hand on Simo's shoulder in that trailer before anyone official came to check on either of you. I remember it because I remember everything, which I used to think was a kind of honesty and now understand is closer to a sentence. I want to tell you I was not myself. I've read the file on what was in my collar and some nights that is exactly the comfort it's designed to be. But I keep coming back to the historian's answer, the one about the lab coat and the clipboard, and I can't make it let me off the way I want it to. If a costume alone could have gotten a man to do a version of what I did, then whatever was in the wool was never the whole explanation, and I am the only version of myself who was in that room, compound or not. I don't expect you to write back. I don't think I'd know what to do with an answer. I only wanted one person who was actually there to know that I know, in case that is worth

anything to you, which it may not be, and which is not really for me to decide.

He did not sign it. He folded it once, put it in a drawer with the tensile-rated rope he'd never bought, and did not send it, telling himself it would only reopen something that had, for Ezra at least, some chance of eventually closing — though even as he thought it he recognized the shape of the thought, the same shape as every other reason he'd ever found, in six weeks of wearing a collar and five months of not wearing one, for choosing the version of events that asked the least of him.

CODA

A slate, held up to a lens nobody in the finished cut ever explains.

SCHATTENSPIEL — TAKE 14.

There is no scene fourteen in any shot list either man was ever shown. There is no explanation, in the finished footage, for why a documentary-style production, marketed and contracted as single-take immersion from the outset, would require fourteen takes of anything at all — let alone a take number stamped onto a slate for a film that was never supposed to call “cut” and reset in the first place.

Somewhere in an unmarked archive, a technician logs the footage under a project code, not a title, the same way Halloran once filed two contracts in a drawer that held no names either. The technician does not watch the whole file. No one, according to the log, ever has.

The last image in the cut the audience is given is Anselm Voss, in a room that might be his own kitchen or might be a set dressed to resemble it exactly down to the water stain on the ceiling he'd never noticed until just now, reaching up to touch the back of his own neck, and stopping, mid-motion, as if some part of him has just understood — a half-second too late to matter, and perhaps that half-second was always the whole point of showing us any of this at all — that he cannot say, with any certainty whatsoever, whether this is the tenth time he's made that gesture today, or the

four-hundredth, across a span of days no clock in any frame will confirm, in a kitchen no address will confirm either, watched by no one who will admit to watching.

The screen holds on his hand at his collar for four full seconds — the same four seconds, unaccounted for, that no editor could place on the timeline in the tiled room eleven chapters ago.

Then it cuts to black, and the black holds a half-second longer than black usually does, the way a held breath holds a half-second longer than a breath usually does, right before someone decides whether to let it out.

ADDENDUM

ADDENDUM 4 — [REDACTED DATE], LOCATION UNCONFIRMED
DISTRIBUTION: EYES ONLY — DO NOT DUPLICATE

Per the technical annex on Compound CORVUS, the field note is repeated here for completeness: the compound was never the deliverable. It was proof of concept — confirmation, gathered at considerable cost across fourteen production-cover trials, that the physiological state internally designated authority resonance could be reliably induced, measured, and repeated in ordinary subjects under controlled narrative conditions. Once that proof existed, the compound became, from the program's perspective, a liability rather than an asset: expensive to synthesize, difficult to move across borders without a chain of custody, and — unlike its intended replacement — detectable in blood.

The deliverable that CORVUS was built to justify does not require a compound, a collar, or a signature on page thirty-three. It requires only sustained narrative immersion under conditions of perceived legitimacy — a costume, a hierarchy, a camera, and enough repetition that the distinction between performing an authority and possessing one stops being a distinction the subject's own mind is willing to maintain. Early internal correspondence refers to this second-phase deliverable, without evident irony, as SCHATTENSPIEL Classic.

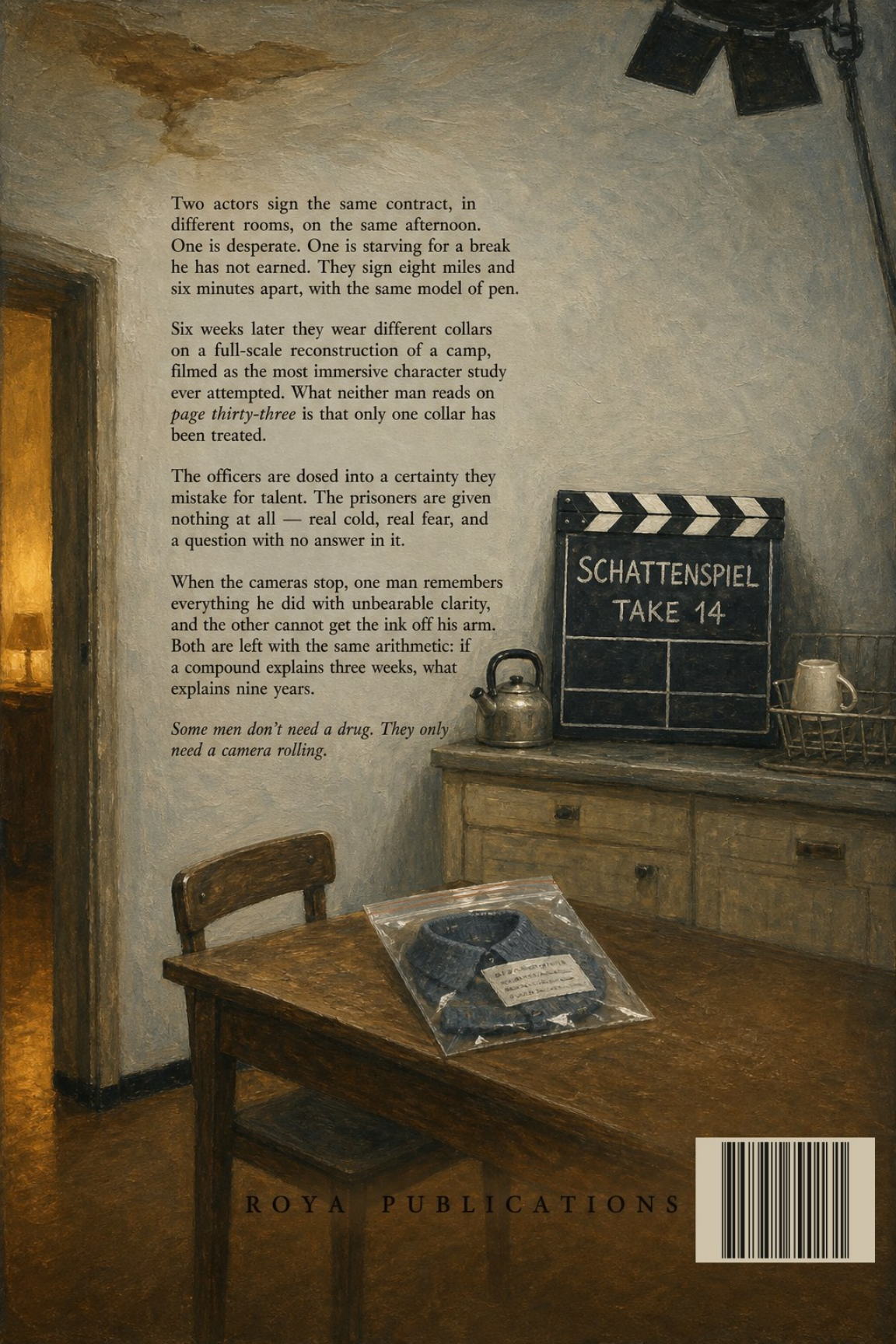
Field reporting indicates a narrative-conditioning pilot, delivered entirely through state-sponsored broadcast programming and requiring no chemical agent whatsoever, is presently active in three regions experiencing acute political instability. Formats vary by market — in one, a civic-education miniseries; in another, a long-running unscripted series structured, coincidentally or not, around a rotating cast of ordinary citizens granted escalating authority over one another. Local audiences are, per the same reporting, unaware of the programming's origin, its funding, or its function. So, per this file's closing note, are most of the people currently appearing in it.

No further trials under production cover are presently scheduled. This is not, per program leadership, an indication that the program has concluded.

GLOSSARY

CORVUS [KOR-vus] — Latin, *crow, raven*. The field designation of the compound in this book. It appears on no document that admits what the compound does.

Schattenspiel [SHAH-ten-shpeel] — German, *shadow play*. The name of the program. A form of theatre in which the audience sees only the shadow of the thing performing.



Two actors sign the same contract, in different rooms, on the same afternoon. One is desperate. One is starving for a break he has not earned. They sign eight miles and six minutes apart, with the same model of pen.

Six weeks later they wear different collars on a full-scale reconstruction of a camp, filmed as the most immersive character study ever attempted. What neither man reads on *page thirty-three* is that only one collar has been treated.

The officers are dosed into a certainty they mistake for talent. The prisoners are given nothing at all — real cold, real fear, and a question with no answer in it.

When the cameras stop, one man remembers everything he did with unbearable clarity, and the other cannot get the ink off his arm. Both are left with the same arithmetic: if a compound explains three weeks, what explains nine years.

Some men don't need a drug. They only need a camera rolling.

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