

The prison gate closes behind me. As I'm walking away, I listen for the electrical noises from the hinges turning. The sliding gate makes such a clean sounding efficient buzz without an echo of a clunk or rust like the movies show, that anyone would be fooled into thinking it's run by the good guys. In reality, the only reason it looks clean is because innocent people don't make a mess, and the remains of the truth are so expertly disposed of.

Lantin Detention centre, its official name. I guess you could say I see a lot of prison... as I slip my work ID badge into my wallet behind a picture of my family. I regret the day I first made that joke. It now pops up in my head everyday whenever I leave.

Despite the relative silence I imagine some hinges screeching and imaginary rust onto the bars on the windows behind me to serve as a reminder of what it really is. That just because when I go in there, people are nice to me, doesn't mean that they're good people. It's called honouring Cinquantenaire tradition when a complaint is made of our conditions. Complaints have changed things a whole zero times. Officially, I've never spoke, spoken or will speak what this country used to be called but there's still a breed of cow called the Belgian Blue. I guess ordering a Cinquantenaire steak is very inconvenient to say for those that can afford it.

And this is without me even seeing the whole jail; being a councillor's assistant and all. I've learnt lots on how to change someone's beliefs to make them see that everything they did was wrong: whether that be stealing to become rich or stealing to feed your starving family. A terrible example I know, pulled straight out of a pre-2100 movie, but still the more things change the more they stay the same.

I sneak out through the road gate instead of the footpath as it was open to let the fleet of patrol cars out to keep the city clean for the night. Liege has one of the higher crime rates in the country but for the most part our nation is well behaved. I've never felt unsafe or threatened, and life goes on.

After the cars leave and the gate closes, I sit against it to tie my shoelaces that have become undone; round laces are much worse than flat ones. These shoes are terrible.

It's a thirty-minute walk to the bus stop along a road that's not really meant for pedestrians: a long straight with multiple lanes and a metal bar in the middle separating the two directions, but there's grass at the side. Afterwards it's fifteen minutes to home, but

today I rush for an earlier bus to get off at a later stop closer to the middle of the city as I've got a psychology seminar to get to as part of my training.

I'm the last of the three of us to arrive, but I've never been late. I simply take the empty seat next to the doorway and wait next to the others; a boy who's shorter than me, thinner than me, has shorter hair the same light brown colour and in the same straight up style as me and is just as loser looking as me. If he needed glasses like I do, he would literally be mini me. And a girl, who's the tallest girl I've ever met, always with sleek black ponytailed hair and with thick rimmed glasses. She's always looking down if not to speak to someone, then because her demeanour is completely, "Why bother."

I know I'm judgemental, I wonder why they never look happy then realise that I must look the same way. But when they were given their pathway options at fourteen and they chose this field, it probably led them to something nicer than counselling in prison. We go wherever the cheap labour is required.

Our teacher? Lecturer? I'm not sure what to call her, walks down the hallway, greeting us as she turns into the doorway and we follow. She couldn't be older than thirty at the maximum, I'd guess twenty-seven which is ten years older than me. She's noticeably short and wearing a green top and black trousers.

The tiny classroom has walls the most orange looking shade of peach and a floor the greyest looking shade of blue. The desks are plain but smooth and still in good condition and the seats are also nothing special, just dark blue plastic, they get the job done.

She gets on with the seminar, talking in a voice that hints of high-class upbringing, 'Ok everyone. Tonight, we will look at how the wording of phrases influences people. This was first thought of by Loftus and Palmer.'

I'd like to say I let it all go in one ear and out the other, a lasting effect of angsty teen me trying to reignite the phrase, "rules are meant to be broken." But I do pay attention because I'm too scared to cause trouble and tonight, I'm actually interested in how this particular technique works. Next to my notes on the results of the case studies we look at, I write, "Priming influences." I thought she was heading in that direction but then she starts talking about something else. I put a question mark next to it for now.

At the end of the seminar, she asks if we have any questions. I look back at the question mark I put because in terms of influencing people with the word choices they use, repeating specific words over again, which is a basic description of priming, seems like logically they're linked.

'No questions about anything?' she says.

My mouth stays shut and my hand stays down.

With that, the seminar is over and I stuff my sheets of notes into a side pocket of my bag. I lug the strap over my shoulder and keep a hand gripped on it as I walk out because with ten water bottles all filled to the brim inside, this bag can get some momentum if it swings. I leave the building just before eight. This gives me just over an hour to get home before curfew kicks in. Not that it should bother anyone here since we all should have licenses to stay out past curfew, but I still don't like being stopped by police patrols. Even though it's not a regular occurrence I still feel anxiety and run a list of "what ifs" through my head.

I'm about half-way home and it's a good thing my job involves a lot of sitting down because my arches and ankles wouldn't be able to handle the pain standing all day. The soles of the feet in my formal footwear are loose and sticking up in one side, which gives my socks more holes in them. I once talked to my tutors in Prison Counselling about this and they advised me to buy more expensive shoes, then they couldn't understand when I explained how I don't get paid enough for such luxurious items. In fact, I'll never be paid the same as them, even when we do the same job because they have qualifications from an expensive education while I only came through a form of Government control, which is for the state's benefit more than mine.

The rest of what I'm wearing is also formal attire. I don't mind it and would even go so far as to say it's comfy. Not the warmest clothing but that's fine, I have a black jacket on, which is warm enough and has deep pockets for my hands. As for formal footwear, I've bought a replacement pair this month and the outside is already flaking off.

The winter air smells crisper, it's something I've always pondered when I'm outside and it's cold. The air seems to have a smell, like it's finer cut than regular air and it gets further back in your sinuses tickling more nerves. But I've never talked about it with anyone because they might think I'm completely stupid for saying anything like that. The walk home to my flat isn't too far, only about twenty minutes if I can keep up a good pace. It's still a year before I can learn to drive but I likely won't have the time, money, or necessity to do it. After a few streets of nice houses on their own little hills with bold, brown tiled roofs, garages and huge gardens that run round the entire house with fancy decorations flanking the footpaths; the wealth of the neighbourhoods starts to decline. The buildings start touching each other and the streetlights get more sporadic. I get to the lowest earner properties where I live and probably won't be able to afford to move out of until the assistant part of my occupation is removed. Streets of tall buildings decorated in grey plaster and brick strips,

twenty-four stories high, with a few flats on each floor with their own tiny balconies. In such a vast suburb of identical streets, I got lost several times when I first moved into the area.

I walk faster to stay warm in the winter night. Just get home, that's all I want. My arms, wrists and hands become less cold as I imagine the warmth that awaits me there. My own little blank space that I was given when I turned sixteen has enough room for myself easily, but I see families of three or four sharing an identical place and I don't think I could live so crammed up, especially in this type of building. But I suppose they don't have much of a choice.

Thankfully, around here my role in the prison is unknown, mostly because I'm so unwilling to socialise with everyone. Every time I see my neighbours, I can't help but look at whoever it is and think of how and what ways they can be a problem to me, will they make lots of noise? Will they break the plumbing? I know it's wrong and I don't hate them. I would rather just live life in solitude.

I go around another corner and my immediate pathway is blocked by a group of what looks like other teens, all in big coats and hoods up. Of course, there shouldn't be anything to fear.

As I'm walking down the street trying to keep tabs on what parts of the pavement the group is blocking but not trying to look at them, one of them leaves the group and starts walking in my direction. The rest of the group, who I can now see consist of four men, keep glancing at their companion moving down so slowly he's still only one car length away. The boys, just boys as none of them seem to be too much older than me and one of them even looks like he isn't a teenager yet, still haven't made any move to block my path or obstruct me in any way. They lean calmly, with feet flat on the ground and all their weight on their backsides that are held up against a wall for some and a car for another. No body turning to show any interest in me so maybe I should stop showing interest in them.

I adjust my walking to avoid the one coming my way and it looks like he's going to pass without any conflict. I'm a little annoyed because I'll have to walk on the left side of the pavement to avoid him and then quickly move back to the middle to get through the others. But in the last glimpse out of the corner of my eye before we pass, he turns. Before I can react, his whole left arm is round my shoulders. His right comes up close to my face flashes an open pen knife.

'Stop walking.'

I jerk my head around and resist his grip on me, but I don't know what I'm doing. I don't remember an arm ever hitting so hard or being so heavy, forcing me in place. The echo

of footsteps is a shockwave on the concrete as the boys from up ahead come in. All jogging towards me except one who jogs up to me taking a large wheel round the car into the middle of the road en route. The closer they get the more my head moves to look at the ground.

‘Money.’ The boy with the knife dangling just below my chin says.

In a moment like this, I’d ideally be able to take out everything they want, like money, and give it to them, and then be on my way with my wallet. A few identity cards and a photo that’s only valuable to me still in my possession. But that’s never going to happen, the moment my wallet becomes visible to the group a hand grabs it off me, another hand forces down into my pocket and pulls out my phone and another takes the bag off my shoulder. With the bag, my head and arm move involuntarily to make the taking it off easier for the thug, I guess my brain’s defence mechanism kicked in and doesn’t want to give them a reason to hurt me. However, I keep a grip on my wallet, that’s got things inside very dear to my heart and it overrides my head. But hoping that maybe I can just hand them the money and they will allow me such freedom to do it is a mistake. The moment my eyes go up and meet his, he punches me in the face and my clasp on the wallet is gone.

‘It’s just water bottles,’ says the teen fondling through my bag. He then dumps them all out on the floor to confirm I have nothing of value hidden in there while the bottles thud onto the road.

‘Now get lost...Matthew,’ the boy holding and now examining my wallet says. It’s clear that I’ve spent several seconds stunned. The hands around my back and head have let go and they begin to move away down the street the same direction I came, leaving my bag and bottles.

I think maybe I could plead for the picture of my family I have in there, but if they take it out, they’d see my job ID and that I work for the police. So I just turn around. I walk with a throbbing pain above my eyeball at the top of my head, and at the bottom of my feet I’m tripping on every inconsistency in the pavement. He called me Matthew. Matthew Harding. That’s not my real name, it’s an indoctrination for when they take kids away from their parents, give them a name that sounds like where your new boss is from. It’s Cinquantenaire steak all over again. Matthew isn’t too much of a change from my real name, I suppose that’s to trick me into accepting it. But I still prefer Matthias.

Pushing my glasses back up to the top of my nose and rubbing around my eyebrow, I’m so focused on this pulsing in my head I’ve never felt before that I don’t notice one of them come up behind me and kick the back of my foot, tripping me up for one last bit of

humiliation. I don't fall over completely but I stumble enough to elicit laughter as I land heavily flat footed sending a shock up to my knee, my walk away becomes a run away.

Over a minute later and my mind is far from pulled together. But after wandering to the end of the street with no sense of should I go left or right, my brain figures out the new directions home. A longer journey but with a wide enough birth that I would avoid them but still get me there as soon as possible.

I can't remember the last time I felt this vulnerable, for months I'd been sarcastically thinking I was getting better and more confident. Maybe I was since now, my head leans down into my chest and I notice how much less I'm seeing in front of me. My mind attempts a, "it could only get better from here." One thing I feel I'm good at is learning from mistakes. I won't get mugged again, and I'm leaving this slum as soon as possible by any means necessary.

I cross the corner onto my street. Below my feet are the cracks in the pavement that I walk on every day. I know exactly what they feel like and automatically angle my feet to get the most coverage across my foot. There's no one around so no one to judge me for still doing this childish habit. And then I look at the lights of my building, completely identical to all the others here but somehow, I always think my ones stand out slightly, like I would recognise it was my building even without seeing the piece of cardboard and green duct tape that's replaced the window on the front left door, and the big crack in the glass from the bottom corner to the top on the right. The sense of familiarity makes me tell myself to pull myself together, it makes me tell myself that my insides aren't so rocky now, it makes me tell myself, "remember the tracker in your phone."

In truth I'm not actually doing that much better. My senses still incredibly numb to the world. So numb in fact that it takes a few seconds to register the flashing blue lights around me.

'Excuse me. Is there a reason you're out here after curfew?'

'Yes officer. I have a license for it.'

'Let me see.'

Great. 'I can't. It was in my wallet and I was mugged earlier. It's why I was walking up here so distraught.' I say hoping my weak persona will make him have sympathy, 'They're not far from here though. And I've got my statement ready if you want.'

'Ok kid, stand in front of the car and put your hands on the bonnet,' he says, getting out of the car. He puts a hand on his head to make sure his blue cap stays on. He's dressed like any other regular officer blue vest, white shirt, black trousers.

‘What? You’re arresting me?’

‘Out after curfew, now stand in front of the car and put your hands on the bonnet.’

‘What? No. My buildings right there, I’ll just go inside now.’

‘Hands on the bonnet. I won’t ask again.’

I stand still for a second.

He says, ‘ok.’ And takes a step forward while sending one of his hands to his belt.

‘Ok I’ll get in the car. Ok, I’ll get in the car.’ My voice is weak.

‘Hands on the bonnet you need to be searched.’

I comply. They do this protocol so a prosecutor can say at trials that video and finger print evidence was found of the suspect at the time a crime took place. It’s extremely effective at shutting people up who can’t afford a defence.

‘Well. It seems that you are Matthew Harding.’ The officer walks into the interrogation room carrying a handheld computer. ‘Sorry about your, accidental incarceration.’

‘Thank you.’

‘And since you are one of us, I’ve already granted your request for some full water bottles.’ He places a small bag on the table with a couple of bottles in.

‘Thanks.’

‘I can only apologise for this mix up. But you didn’t have your curfew license with you?’

At last, ‘No I was mugged. Now, I have a tracker on my phone. We could get the thugs who did this.’

‘No, sorry. We can’t use civilian trackers.’

‘What?’ I move to jump up but my hands are still handcuffed to the table. For a second the room echoes with the ring from the chain pulling.

‘I thought you worked here. Not much we can do for you now. None of the patrols have seen anyone else around where you reported the crime.’

‘Why can’t you track it?’

‘We have to follow Met rules from Little Brother. They don’t use trackers so neither do we.’

‘That’s ridiculous you could solve so many more crimes that way.’

‘Look we can get you a drive home and your witness statement is on the system. If we end up bringing them in, maybe we could get your possessions back.’

‘Oh forget it, I’ll have my cards cancelled and get a new license tomorrow.’

‘That’s a good attitude. The important things in there can be replaced.’

‘Not the most important thing.’

‘What’s that.’

‘Picture of my family. Haven’t got many of them.’

‘Oh well I’m sure you could get together and take another one.’

‘No, we can’t.’

‘Why not?’

I don’t say. Every word that’s spoken in these rooms is recorded and if I pretend like my captors aren’t my new, better family then that’ll give me attention I don’t want.

I get up and walk out, not looking at the cop. Sometimes I wish someone would bring a big bomb in here and blow the whole place into chaos. But that’s ridiculous, no one would be able to ever get one in here, right?

I hear the prison gates close behind me again.



Empty water bottles fall off the shelf and clatter on the floor far louder than objects that light should as I open the cupboard door. I may have lost the ones in my bag earlier but I've been collecting them for a year. However, those ones were full and these ones are not and that's a problem. I gather a couple up in my arms and head on over to my sink. Again, there's a clatter as I open my arms up but at least none of them go out of reach or fall onto the floor. I pick them all up and make a line of the variously shaped bottles and then switch my tap mode to drinking water. Above it, there's a meter telling me how much my cleaning and drinking water bill is for the month. Arching over the red light up numbers is, "Tensley" and just beneath that is little writing, "Providing the water of life." Next to my sink is a pile of plates, bowls and cutlery. I try to use and reuse everything as much as possible and then clean them all in two inches of cleaning water. I start filling up the bottles with drinking water making sure to get every drop inside because drinking water is more expensive than cleaning. By the time I'm done my drinking water bill, which was zero at the beginning of the month is now above my cleaning one I've ever had.

I know I could just wait and get water from work. But this water of life isn't for me. Dolly lives on the floor above. She's ninety with thin face, circle glasses and curly white hair. As far as I know, she's got nearby family. She has to pay the same amount of rent I do with a meagre state pension that's even less than my pay. So I get water from work for her so she can save a few bucks that way.

I knock on the door, I'm not sure if it was her that painted it yellow but it seems to be holding its brightness with the same enthusiasm as the jolly old girl. She opens it with a smile. 'Hello, come in. I was starting to think you weren't going to come tonight.'

'Don't worry, I didn't forget. I had that lecture, didn't I?'

'Oh yes I forgot. What happened to your eye?'

'I just walked into something. You know how clumsy I can be.'

'Well as long as you're ok. Have you got a new bag?'

With my usual bag left out on the street, I use a different one to carry the water in. This one is a black rucksack I had a couple of years ago but stopped using when I saw how bad the stitching on the straps was tearing.

‘No this is an old one. It’s more comfy. I just stopped using it because I thought it looked a little informal for work but I don’t think it really matters.’

‘That’s good then.’

I walk over to a side in the kitchen and start unpacking the bottles on one of the many cleared tops. It’s odd how much neater her kitchen is than mine, there are more bowls, plates, cups and even whisks and yet there seems to be more free space on counter the same size. She’s always shower me another cake or frozen dessert that looks too large to fit in the fridge but she’ll somehow get three in there.

‘Thank you my darling,’ Dolly says as she takes one and starts pouring the water into a kettle.

After I unpack that lot, I start putting the old empty ones back into my bag for me to take to work the next day. Most of my break is spent filling the bottles for me and her but to be honest, I don’t really know how else I would spend it.

‘Before you go, would you mind coming into my bedroom to help pick up my TV? I stood on a wire earlier and pulled it off the stand, silly me. And need some muscles to help pick it back up.’

‘Of course.’

When she was younger supposedly there were lots of people who worked in care to help the elderly and disabled. But these days if the old and weak can’t pay for it then they’re left to survive on their own.

I have all my things ready and my work clothes on. But I’m waiting, lying on my bed. I heard voices in the stairwell as I was about to leave and I didn’t want to see anybody so I came back and lied down when I really should be walking to the bus stop right now. My knees and elbows are tucked in, my head pops out to try and hear if anything’s outside. The events of last night are still haunting my mind.

When I first moved in here, this bed was the biggest I’ve ever had and my sheets couldn’t reach over it all so for a few nights I could only sleep on one side or sleep diagonally or just with my feet on the naked corner of the mattress that was kind of stained as I recall.

I know I must leave, it’s not light yet but it’s daytime so I should be safe. I think, *what if I call in sick?* but I won’t get paid if I do that. I leave my apartment and I’ve never

hung my head so low whilst walking on this pavement in my life. My heart has never beaten so fast and my eyes have never been so close to tears just walking to a bus stop.

I don't see anyone's face until I get to the bus stop, but I waited too long and look up to see the lights of the bus fade at the end of the street.

An hour late to work and I must wait after my metal detector scan for my supervisor who doesn't wait for unpunctual staff.

'You're late,' he says when he sees me as he walks down the corridor. A surprisingly young guy. Short black hair and quite round, wearing a very professional looking black suit and tie.

'I missed the bus. But I still made it here.'

'There shouldn't be any buts, you should be here on time.'

'Sorry.'

'There could be a massive inconvenience now by me having to come down here to sort you out. We've got to act like a family around here Matthew. We have a lot of responsibility and we have to help each other out. You're not helping.'

'Well what about me?' I snap, 'If I'm in the family then what help do I get after being mugged last night? You're supposed to be the police after all.'

'Watch your attitude. Now get to work.'

'Matthew shouldn't you be working?' one of the senior officers asks.

'Hang on I'm just printing off a new curfew license.' Fortunately, curfew licenses aren't that hard to acquire, job at a restaurant? License. Delivering goods or driving other people with licenses? You get a license. Your favourite football team's playing in a city that's just far enough away that you can't get there and back between six in the morning and nine at night? Just apply for a temporary license. The Freedom States didn't want the last one to happen, they did their best to cripple the sport to almost nothing, but even though they've made puppets out of every surviving country in the world they had nothing but resistance from both enemies and allies when it came to that.

I place my new license into my pocket that hangs loose in there since I haven't got a new wallet yet and head on over to the counselling wing. My hands in my pockets gripping my things all the way. I stop off at the water fountain to fill up more of my water bottles and see a guard watching over it.

'What's going on,' I say.

‘New rules. It’s come to our attention people may be taking advantage of the goods that are provided for free. You must sign here for your allowed five hundred millilitres you are required to help you through the day. After that, all water will be charged at the standard rate. Tensley offers the government a very generous discount so it’s disappointing that people would abuse it so recklessly.’

As I hand a single bottle to the overseer I say, ‘Mr Tensley sells one product and is the richest man in the world, I’m sure he’ll live.’

‘Not your concern. If we started letting people take as much water as they wanted, the next thing you’d know they’d be demanding it free and have whole groups stealing it and handing it out. As someone who works at a detention centre, more criminals is probably the last thing you want.’ He hands me my bottle back.

‘Ah, you work for Tensley, don’t you. You’re not actually from here.’

‘How do you know that?’

‘Because no prisoners would mean no money.’

Stealing drinking water. I walk away and say, ‘I really need to learn to keep my mouth shut,’ to no one in particular.

I make it to my desk outside some counselling rooms, which are just as blank as most other rooms but have a whiteboard and marker pens in them. I look at the people selected for one to one sessions today. It’s a good thing the United language is the only one allowed all around the world, because our country’s biggest business import is prisoners.

I was Fourteen when I was offered this position, they showed me wild experiments that had the purpose, the practical’s, and the results of the most fascinating and eye-opening studies into human behaviour. Nothing but juicy theories and brilliant results of psychology. Now that I’m actually doing it though, it’s just ticking the same boxes over and over to confirm someone’s behaved correctly or a procedure has been completed. For the next six hours I’ll be little more than a secretary mixed with some research and evaluation homework. I don’t even witness what goes on in those rooms, maybe I’ll get some tips, a little bit of tutoring at the end if any of the counsellors can be bothered.

The one to ones with the prisoners were all introduced when our prison got a new Governor, a man named Hansel. He’s much softer than any other high-ranking officer I’ve ever met. Maybe softer isn’t the correct word because in this industry, it generally implies weakness and you don’t become the governor of a prison by being a pushover. He always seems in control of the room whenever I see him. It’s more that his changes since getting the promotion have been inmate focused. Before he came here the counsellors only did two days

a week. Now we're in every weekday and for longer hours with more types of rehabilitation projects given the green light, including the one to one sessions. These ideas are not supported by the state. As far as they're concerned, us counsellors are on course to an early grave via banging our heads against a wall trying to help imbeciles.

Footsteps and guard chatter finally get my attention and I lift my head from the dreamworld I was picturing amongst the papers on my desk. My dream world consisted of doing nothing but floating in clouds; I never said I wasn't susceptible to a bit of laziness. First through for the one to one's today, we have inmates from the female side of the prison, and there's a new name to the list; Katrina Rowlands: Little Brother born, but arrested in Eifel Royal, twenty-nine, one metre sixty-eight tall, raven hair, tanned skin. Part of a criminal group syndicate linked to many acts of terror, suspected of being the centrepiece of a lot of it but lacking hard evidence for her conviction. However, violence against several officers when caught in a bust has given her a minimum of ten years here. She arrives handcuffed behind her back and on her legs and I direct the escorting officers to the right room.

Next up Dr Sofia Andrejevic, Eastern Europa like most of our imported prisoners. One metre seventy-eight tall, brown not quite shoulder length hair, olive skinned, thirty-nine year old. Gave first aid to protestors at a gathering when ordered not to. One of her four years already served.

As she walks to her allotted door one of the officers slaps her on her rear. No one does a thing.

Then there's Sam Buckley; white, blonde, thirty-four and one metre eight-nine. An Untamed North (not the official name of the country) revolutionary who assassinated a member of the government. Assassinated by running him over with her car when he was ninety-nine years old but I imagine calls were made to ramp up her case so she'd get a worse sentence. She has done three years of the fifty she's been sentenced to.

And at last, there is Laura Burnell, real name Lina Brunell but like me, she was taken away from her family, given a name that Freedom States governors can pronounce easier and forced to work wherever she was needed. Also like me, she's a teenager at sixteen. And I'll admit I've grown more than a little fond, in fact every time I'm in the room for a session and she's there I ignore most of what's going on to stare at her. She has dark brown eyes but so big, like all the cartoon girls I had crushes on in kids shows growing up. I feel ashamed when I look at her nose and my head says, *yeah that's turned up*, but only a little bit, enough for bullies to probably oink when they walk past but it doesn't bother me. Her skin is paler than most peoples and it's probably not helped by little clusters of spots on her cheek and jaw. Her

thick, black hair has a shine that's probably grease since she lives in a prison, it isn't straight but I think the way it starts to swerve as it goes down looks amazing. She has these large prominent cheek bones and a pointed chin and even though prominent cheekbones are normally an attractive male thing and pointed chins aren't really supposed to be attractive at all I think she pulls them off perfectly. No doubt she is an orchestra of broken instruments but to me she makes the most beautiful sound.

I'm fully aware that nothing will possibly happen between us. But I like to think that if she did ever feel the same way, we could for a little while make each other feel a little happier here.

Laura was working to become a gardener at the holiday home here, no doubt she had florist in her mind when she agreed to it. She worked right under the mayor of the city and for whatever important visitors they got. One that visited was a state governor with his family and the records say out in the seclusion of the gardens, Laura attacked the governor's son with a small digging fork. Laura claims he tried to force himself on her and she defended herself. If things were the other way around, if he had been caught red handed trying to force her clothes off, no doubt the court would have decided that his life shouldn't be ruined for twenty minutes of fun. But here she is. She's served six months in a twenty-five-year sentence for attempted murder.

'Good morning Laura, how are you?'

'I'm ok. It's Matthew, isn't it?'

'Yeah.' I said I stared at Laura, I didn't say I talked to her much, or any girls for that fact but a video online said I have to be interested in her, and remember eye contact, and body language, and something about looking open. I lean back and widen my shoulders but no I think that's worse so I lean forward towards her a bit, 'So, six months. Have you made many friends around here?'

'Some people here are really nice. I don't really talk to most of them though.'

I should agree with her and nod three times, 'Yeah, yeah, yeah.' It says I have to show my intent early on otherwise she won't like me, 'You look beautiful today by the way.'

'Oh, thanks.'

'That's ok.'

...

...

'So. Um you're with Kevin Peters today, right through that door. Just go in, knock first. Knock and go in.'

‘Thanks,’ she says.

Kevin Peters is my personal tutor. A man the same height as me, bald, a rather long nose with round glasses, but a nice enough person. Funny thing about his name, although very much like a Freedom States one, he’s Cinquantenaire born.

After their hours are up, I’m given just enough time to make a few notes from the counsellor’s reports before the next group arrives.

The next group is the men. Alexis Rodriguez is the first through the door, originally from Fuente Dorado, one metre seventy tall, black hair, thirty-two. He was an enforcer in part of a drug group, he’s served three of his twelve-year sentence. And I can’t help thinking he has the squarest face I’ve ever seen.

‘Good afternoon Alexis. Ready for the session?’

‘Whatever reduces my sentence time, yes,’ he replies.

‘You sound so excited to talk about your past and your feelings. Would you rather talk about guns? What type of ones did you use to shoot?’

‘FN-10-7 pistol, the lowest kickback of any handgun in the world, easiest TMH maintenance too, not that you would understand what that means.’

‘Trigger mechanism housing. I see why you’d like it, moving from the army to your... private occupation, you wouldn’t have the quartermaster to look after your weapons for you. Maybe I wasn’t just asking about it to be polite. That was a joke by the way,’ I indicate to the guards.

The army was always my back up plan, as long as I got over the upper body strength requirements for it, I didn’t see why it would be so bad. Meals paid for, steady income and it’s not like it’s being used much. Worst case scenario I get sent to the edge of the Deadzone, to guard there but there’s supposed to be so much technology and defences that I’d never be in danger; unless I had to go out to talk to the people somehow still living there in the swamps and steppes that are still almost completely covered in radiation. I did one night of research when I was motivated and TMH is one of the things I’ve remembered. I may have to look up some more stuff when I get home though. Just in case he wants to continue our conversation later.

Second is Thogan Mertins. Cinquantenaire native, one metre ninety, dark brown hair, twenty-five. Done seven months of a two-and-a-half-year sentence for assaulting an officer trying to complete an arrest. What really happened was a boy was handcuffed and on the floor, the cop was punching him in the face when Thogan tried pulling him off.

I have to remind myself not to look so aggressively at him, it's jealousy. He looks like a hero with honesty dripping from the very top of his curls right down to his clean beard, a rare sight around here, and sympathetic eyebrows on top of small dark eyes to boot. His warm ivory skin next to me makes me look pale as a politician's teeth. On top of that, I sit and eat and work with the people who attack the defenceless, and 'council' those defenceless by trying to get them to see why they were in the wrong and the police were right.

Then there's Martin Anderson, from Scanitaan. Two metres nine, blonde hair all round his head on top and bottom, forty-two years old, sienna skin. A former police officer in northern Europa, his story is that he was going to testify against supposed corruption in the force, but before he could, he was arrested himself on a variety of corruption grounds. After the first five years of his sentence was done the possibility of early release should've come up but it was cancelled for a reason I don't know. That was a year ago and he has nine more to go before he's due to get out. Compared to the other two, younger, inmates before him, Martin's hands look dry and cracked. The skin on his fingertips has evolved rougher from years of being a family man who, when the boiler breaks, rolls up his sleeves and attempts to fix it himself; whereas when something breaks in my apartment I curl up for an hour and think about getting on in life with one less basic human need.

Ellia Jackson is last, from The Freedom States itself, one metre eighty-three, light brown hair that falls apart on both sides, dark skinned, twenty-three years old. Another victim of corruption, a rookie cop caught in the wrong place at the wrong time when his superiors needed someone else to take the fall. Before Katrina arrived, he was the newest long-term prisoner here. He's still extremely bitter and in his notes it says to be handcuffed on both wrists and ankles before being escorted anywhere. He's done only two months of his fourteen-year corruption sentence.

After their sessions end, I go with Kevin Peters to observe an evaluation of a prisoner recently arrested who may or may not be insane. That's for us to decipher. A relatively slim man, one metre eighty-one tall, he has very untamed black hair flopping down all around his head. His nose is not quite long and not quite wide but above average and his brown eyes always look like they're squinting. But smallness comes from everywhere on him with a tiny mouth as well with barely visible lips. Apart from one photo of him, a Mr Adam Doe, I haven't got a close and proper look, but I might now. I'm going to observe the interview as Kevin decides whether or he has lost his mind.



I stand in the observation booth looking through the one-way mirror to the interrogation room with Kevin.

He turns to me and says, 'I heard you had a rough night last night.'

'You could say.'

'Have you talked to anyone about it yet.'

'Only the cops that arrested me for not having a curfew license.'

'At the of the day, if you want we'll stay behind a bit and talk about it. Help you get some things off your chest.'

'Ok.'

'Don't worry, I'm not going to judge.'

'Oh I know that, I've been here long enough to know. It's just, I think this might be the first time anyone's helped me with something.'

Two officers bring in a handcuffed Adam and restrain his hands to the table.

'Don't worry about it,' he says, 'We'll talk later.'

Kevin walks in and sits at the table opposite Adam. 'Good afternoon Adam, how are you feeling today?'

'Well. Sir. Thank you for asking.'

'Very polite. That's good to see around here.'

'What I was taught by my parents, nothing more.'

'Ok Adam. Can I ask how polite you were to the six people you killed?'

The door on my right opens and a senior looking detective stands there.

'Matthew?' He signals with his finger to come closer to him.

'Yes, what is it?' I say, turning and leaving the observation booth, 'I'm quite busy at the moment,' I say putting my hand in my pockets checking to see if all my personal possessions are still there.

'Oh. Learning about the insane?'

'He might be.'

'Go on. Tell me what you've learnt so far,' the man, significantly taller than me says. He wears a black coat and trousers, but much nicer than anything I own. The material is much shiner and darker looking at the same time. The way he glares down at me, I wouldn't say he's well groomed, context dictates that he probably isn't interested in haircuts but his face and hair appear naturally straight and symmetrical. Making his whole face seem always focused and right now it's all focused on me.

‘His body language is extremely open. Mirroring Kevin exactly even. He’s either very good at hiding what he feels, or he’s being honest about it.’

‘Interesting. But what’s going on in there is the least of your worries. Looking at the reports made by your mentors, it doesn’t look like you’ve got it in you to succeed here.’

‘What?’

‘Don’t worry Matthew. I’m here to help. Take a seat.’ He moves to sit down as well.

‘They all said I’m doing fine.’

‘All the reports on you say different. Lazy, cut corners. You’re missing all the key points they try and make to you.’

‘Well, if a psychological evaluation is a key point then I’m missing it right now.’

‘The bottom line is if you can’t show you’re up to scratch, then we’ll have to let you go and you can find something else to do.’

No. That can’t happen. Being kicked out here, after being not only a government worker but one as part of a brutal system like this. With no proper education, I’d be lucky to be given a job cleaning toilets.

‘Who are you?’ I ask.

‘I’m Principal Officer Thibaut Laneur.’

I’ve heard of this guy, second in command here. He was much of a Freedom States type of cop as you can get: savagely aggressive to all, a desire to know every secret of every citizen and an extremely high arrest rate with half the crooks only guilty of looking at him funny. He thrives here. So, what on earth does he want with me and my failing prospects of becoming a counsellor one day?

‘Well what do you want me to do? Try harder? Why couldn’t the actual counsellors say that to me? Why you?’

‘I have a job I need done and I think you would be the perfect person for it.’

‘What type of job?’

‘I think you’ll enjoy it. Do you like football?’

I pause a moment, ‘Yeah.’

‘Well how would you like to go play for a local team, undercover for a bit?’

‘Undercover? Why me instead of a proper detective?’

‘You’re much younger than any of the detectives we have here. When people join these groups without personally knowing any members, it arouses suspicion. Your youth will hide that. You’re just old enough to start playing in adult teams. Our computers recently picked up an anomaly with a club, several new players none of which are registered to live

around here and in fact have no record of any accommodation in the country. It's been known in the past for sports clubs to be a front to organised criminal activity so it could be vital to know what's going on.'

Even little casual sports teams' websites are being constantly monitored. 'Forget it. I'm not going to spend my own free time investigating for you. You already said, I'm behind at counselling, I have to work at that.'

'That's why I asked you Matthew. You see if you do this for me, I can say with all my authority that you have a clear understanding of the criminal mind. All your red marks will go, and you'll be fast tracked to becoming a licensed councillor with all the extra salary that comes with it.'

'And I just... say hi and ask them where they're from?'

'Exactly. That's all I want to know. I'll even let you go home early, to sharpen your skills.'

'Oh I'm gonna talk with Kevin for a little bit later. I don't know if you know but I was actually attacked last night and I still haven't got any of it off my chest.'

'Did you win?'

'No there was like five of them with knives.'

'And you think having a talk will help you. Matthew sharing your feelings doesn't help, keep it inside and make it steel yourself to get better. Take it from someone whose never lost. Now get going.'

Friday, just before leaving Kevin comes up to me and asks, 'Matthew, did you manage to get a look at the transcript of Adam and myself?' Ignoring the awkwardness that I ran off before we talked yesterday.

'Yeah I managed to read it.'

'Conclusion?'

'Not insane. He knew what he was doing.'

'He knew he was killing an entire family, that makes his mind sound?'

'He was there to kill the police officer. Maybe he saw red and judged the children by their father's sins. Maybe he knew he wasn't getting away with it so just did as much damage as possible. Either way, it's a human motivation.'

At seven, I'm standing at the side of the field watching the team I'm supposed to join playing. Dressed in a thin plain black top underneath my blue hoodie and wearing sports

trousers that still fit that I got when I was eleven from the State for P.E. in my educational accommodation. I haven't been watching long and I can see there are two clear groups of players, one, the smaller group doesn't seem to be as good with the ball as the other, most of them don't keep the ball in their personal space when they touch it, they stand off balanced when they go to kick it and the speed and accuracy of the passing is poor. Not to mention an overall lack of interest in it compared to the second group. I'm guessing this is my anomaly. There's a man who was just outside the big (good) group talking to a few people now walking over to the small. The longer I wait the harder this will be so I start walking in the direction of this man. I can't really make any features of anyone out because I'm not wearing my glasses.

'Hi, are you the manager?' He's not the manager but I need an excuse to talk to them and he looks like the most strategic thinker.

'The manager? No. I'm new. I can't remember the manager's name, one of my friends there though, knows everything about the manager. Talk to one of those guys there, they probably know it.' He waves his hand over to the big group.

The man looked just younger than middle age, a bit taller than me. He has longish black hair which is curling on the top of his head, a rather thin face, and a bit pale. But his politeness and perk of not looking intimidating has calmed my nerves a little bit. However, the manner in which he delivered that sentence peaks my suspicion, it seems far too informative for such a casual football conversation. Although my experience is just a bunch of teens.

'Actually, I'm new as well. Maybe I could stick with you a bit? I'd hate to be with that lot and stand there awkwardly while they laugh at an inside joke.'

'Ok. No problem. I'm Yoann. How you doing?'

'Good thanks. Finally decided to start playing again see how it goes.'

'Do you support a team?' Yoann asks.

'Not really. I play because I enjoy it mainly,' I say.

'Oh yeah.'

'What about you?'

'Like you. I enjoy playing it. Even though I'm not the best.'

I'm quite sure that over the next hour and a half we are both going to be terrible at football. We are both also making up reasons for being here that's clear as day. I don't think I'm very good at being undercover. The question is, is he smart enough to see that as well?

The whole group continues to be below par at football, some could pass for being players, but when we're playing the most popular sport in the world the scale of class between good and actually useful is huge.

And without leaving the warmup drills the difference is noticeable, me and the new guys, and one girl called Tana, a ginger girl, taller and rounder than me whose name I remember because she's the odd one out, we physically stand different with long gaps of hesitating when passing, receiving, dribbling. And when we start playing a match, we are the ones who stand around and come in at the wrong angles and are afraid to get stuck in. The ball is constantly near our goal fortunately some of the bigger group have come on our team and this prevents us from being destroyed. Tana goes in goal oddly and does alright, she seems to have no fear of the ball when it's smacked at her hands or legs and I don't think I can say that about myself.

When she kicks the ball out it seems to go in random directions but who am I to talk, I try nothing fancy and don't draw too much attention. I think I pass for someone who plays regularly enough instead of four years ago. In fact, all of the bad group Yoann is with stay back. Standing around using their bodies to try and stop the opposition when they run at us. The degree of success each attempt to block the group do depends on how physically big the people involved are.

At the end the manager, a roundish man with rectangular glasses and a light brown scruff of hair that's starting to get a few bald patches gives me a signup sheet which I don't intend to fill out. Some of my targets start mingling but I don't know what for; they all stand too far away from my bag for me to eavesdrop and I haven't the confidence to approach them, so I don't even learn all their names. One might have been called Gabe.

But actually I have learnt one, the first person I spoke to, Yoann, and the worst of all the players here as well. I time it so at the end we both head through the door of the fence at the same time.

'I guess I'll see you next week,' I say.

'I'll see you around, you did well tonight buddy.'

'I did? I thought I was terrible.'

'You need to have more confidence in yourself. That taxi for you?' Yoann points to the black cab waiting on the curb.

'That's for me. Do you drive? Are you local?'

'I would say local but new to the area. What about you? I'm guessing you're far enough away that you can't walk home before curfew.'

‘Yeah, I’m closer to the middle of the city.’

‘What do you do?’

‘I’m gonna be an accountant.’ Nobody asks you questions about your work if you say you’re an accountant.

‘Ever take any trips outside the city? You ever been past the prison?’

My eyes break contact with his and I quickly, involuntarily look to the left before quickly meeting his again. My breathing gets bigger and slower too and I swear my chest, my throat, my cheeks all inflate. I’ve always responded instantly to everything he’s said but this time there’s at least a few seconds of pause.

‘No,’ I say. I look at my taxi.

He says, ‘I never caught your name.’ He reaches out his hand to shake mine.

I take it. ‘Oh sorry. Nice to meet you. My name is Matthias Hazard.’

I get a taxi back home from the middle of the city. Along the way I see the deconstruction process of several old houses. All thin, lots of them detached coloured in cream or the dark brown of a haunted forest, not particularly beautiful on their own but in a city, they stood out, soon to be replaced. They sit in the shadow of the community centre that sports a huge spire on top of a hill.

I believe they used to be called churches, before their recommission. With all other forms of worship, one person did one thing wrong, and it caused the whole faith to get banned. Only until some guy called the pope criticised the government too much did it finally get put down. Although official sources claim that whole situation never existed. His step down was voluntary and had always been a supporter of the Freedom States regime.

The country of Veni has been rioting roughly once a week since the dissolution of The Vatican not long before I was born.

Either way, right now my focus is on me and I know this cab driver is going down wrong streets probably deliberately to charge me more. I always thought I wouldn't be bothered by these sorts of things I'm seeing out the window. They're old houses, they probably smell really bad. And yet I see an old man, maybe in his seventies entering one of a line of tents next to a half-demolished house, none of the tents have any heating panels on them and it's the middle of January. One of these houses being destroyed probably belonged to the old man. And when the government let this company tear everything down, because you don't become a big business by being innovative, you do it through favours from friends in the government. Those tents were probably what the company offered as a reparation for destroying their homes.

My mind's spiralling now. I used to listen to the conversations people had complaining about the government because I liked complaining about things. I always knew because of my position I wouldn't really suffer the same as farmers, working in the fields only to see so much of the food they produced taken away to the Freedom States without any payment. It's the same for making cars and even jewellers in the rich parts of town. We have to pay an extra price because we live here, and someone somewhere gets ridiculously rich off it. Finally, I hit the point in me where I feel hopelessness and my mind goes into maladaptive daydreaming, a mental disorder, imagining fun versions of me to make the speech giving politician me go away.

I make the taxi get as close to my building as physically possible to make sure I don't get attacked this time. I cut across the grass of the building next to mine as well for the first ever time instead of obeying the pavement to make the trip a few seconds shorter. My casual shoes are muddy already, it won't make any difference going through a bit of muck now. Luckily, I only live on the first floor as well, so less chance of running into a thief on the stairs. Most people probably don't like being home alone after such an event, for me however, closing the door behind me is the most secure I've felt since I was robbed.

With it being the weekend tomorrow I don't have to leave this place. The walls of my apartment are off-white and look new only if you tilt your head and adjust your body to an acute angle. Looking normally at them you'll see they're covered in scuff marks and dents. I don't know how you even dent walls but I asked one of the supervisors at the prison once and they said water damage.

I shower using my hands to turn it on and adjust everything because my building is probably older than voice-controlled showers are. When I get out the towel rack falls off the wall as I pull my towel off it. The gold-coloured metal has been worn away on about a third of it leaving only the unhygienic looking black underneath. It was never even properly secured to the wall even when I moved in; it didn't really rattle but it was loose. Trying to untangle the bar from the towel is agitating, the harder I try the more they seem to rub together, and I don't like the thought of rubbing more of the rotten metal into the fabric I'll then wipe all over my skin. I quickly drop to a snail's pace to pull them apart. The positive in the situation was that it at least waited till I finished the shower until it broke, that's the positive I'm having to use.

More in need of stress release than normal, I dig around in the cupboard. On the floor in a box of clothes that I don't wear anymore, in the pockets of the trousers, I take out a little chip. I don't get paid a lot for working and these little chips are the main reason I only ever buy the cheapest foods in the supermarket. I never expect an inspection for contraband but having this precaution is wise, especially now I'm doing undercover work. I don't know who might turn up here one day. They might trash the place, but I doubt they'll look in all the pockets of all the clothes in the box with, "For Charity" written on it.

What items do I get illegally? Movies. Films. The chips that I must hide from the authorities plug into my TV or my handheld computer if I'm in bed. And play movies. Specifically, ones that don't demonstrate the Freedom States in the best way possible, as far as the rest of the world should know there isn't a single villain from there. Though the *Rush Hour* trilogy that I watched legally the other day had some grey area characters.



At night I dream I'm back in my hometown of Spa. I'm standing in the middle of a road with no one else around until a bunch of people come out running at me, some of them riding bikes. I turn and run. They're all wearing big coats on, puffy arms and big hoods that hide their faces with thick trousers and scarfs even though it's sunny and hot here even the thin hoodie I'm wearing is too much in this heat. Why can I never run fast in dreams? In real life I'm quicker than average, that's the only way I was a threat playing football. But here I'm much slower and the people behind me are catching up. I jump to the side whenever a bike rushes close to me but I'm getting so worn out that tears are welling up in my eyes and my chest hurts so much with exhaustion like my lungs are being squeezed for every molecule of oxygen. I turn into an alley and it's a dead end. In real life, I know there's no wall in this alley but in here I'm trapped. I turn and face my pursuers, all of them are shorter than me by at least a foot. But they've all got dark jackets on with their hoods up and are holding baseball bats. As they approach me, I throw everything I own at their feet to try and get them away, my keys, my wallet, a bag that mysteriously appears attached to the back loop of my trousers.

'We don't want that.' One of the thugs says in a young teen voice, 'We want you.'

And then another joins in, 'and we're gonna do it the same way they killed your dad.' And as he hits the baseball bat into his hand again it turns into a riot baton with the circular blue insignia of the police on it.

I wake up Saturday and lie in, something I've always been good at even on workdays, the trick is to pretend you're going to get up much earlier than you need to so you can still relax and then get there on time. When I moved out, I bought new bright blue bed sheets that now stand out against the stained and gnawed wooden bedframe I was given. My handheld computer looks out of place on the desk with chunks missing on the edges I never struggle to find it when I sit up because it stands out like the only bit of smooth tarmac on a bumpy desert road. I have nothing on my to do list apart from a report about last night which I can do from the comfort of my bed on the handheld computer. Conscious of how I'm apparently failing in my counselling work, I write twice as much about my encounters last night than I would for any normal report or note taking.

It's a still before noon, I guess time doesn't pass very quick when your head is replaying a nightmare over and over. And yet good dreams always vanish from memory in a blink.

I decide that actually I need to go outside because even though I went outside the night before I still didn't feel free as work stopped my mind from relaxing. My weekdays are already work, bed, work, bed; so my weekend really ought to be something else.

If I'm going out, I'll be a good Cinquantenaire citizen and take the money that was given to me by the government and spend it on the people of my country. The place I can do this is the black market, no taxes taken out of our pockets and sent to protecting politicians personal golf courses.

I'd heard about the black market while in Educational Accommodation. It was one of the few benefits of living there. I wasn't exactly friends with all the other adolescents but since we were all in such close quarters I could just listen to their conversations and join in whenever to ask something and they would be fine with it.

I walk down the roads till I reach a T junction on the high street. On my left are bright signs, brand new clothes, home decorations, branded food stores, fancy restaurants and at least two jewellery shops. On my right, second-hand goods, cheap food stores with the paint scratched off the window frames, bars with dirty chairs and no air conditioning so the alcohol smell whiffs out into the street and fast-food places whose machinery looks old and worn. The road on the left has recently been re-laid and is completely smooth, as soon as you get to the poorer areas on the right, the road repairs end. I go right.

As I'm passing through, I stop at a couple of places, firstly, to get some super glue to fix my towel rack, it's cheap and I feel like before the end of the year the rack will fall off again. And second into a cheap drug store for some CO2 pills. A government agency called NASA announced that the lack of clean air was coming from rapid deforestation, that was the last thing they did before being shut down. The government afterwards announced that the real cause was the savages in the east continuing to grow plants in irradiated ground and if people really wanted to end the polluted air, they should assist the government any way they can in exterminating the enemy eastward.

I put my pills on the counter the price is higher than it said they were on the tag.

'It didn't say it costs that much on the shelf?'

'Sorry the price was raised today. Not by us. By the people that makes them,' the girl behind the counter says in a clear voice. She has quite a long face with a large forehead too with big eyes but small lips.

'But we need them to live.'

'Sorry.'

‘Is there a cheaper version? Like a knock off brand that still does basically the same thing.’

‘Nope. The company that makes them is the only one with the patent so they’re the only ones who can make them by law. We have to pay what they ask and the tariff to import them here. We barely break even with the price we do charge you for them.’

Tensley may be the richest company in the world but a close second is healthcare. Those CEO’s make more during a yawn than I will in a year.

Next up is a small corner shop for groceries. While technically I could go to a big supermarket and get extremely cheap food there, but when I buy ham, I want it to be more than five percent ham. In the first aisle of the corner shop, potatoes is the first thing I need and I get the cheapest ones available. In terms of shape and skin colour they leave a lot to be desired plus a few have ugly little knots sticking out of them but they’ll get the job done. Then I go to a fridge in the far corner with all manner of items in boxes in cartons, meats, milks and meals. The only thing they all have in common is the round, white and red reduced sticker on them. Even here I have to be careful as a reduced steak still costs more than a regular pack of sausages. I’m not the biggest fan of some of the spices the kebabs I settle with are marinated in but they’ll do for a few nights. I also grab a small carton of milk because I think I can finish that off before the end of tomorrow.

I leave the store and naturally, this road is close to the black market. It’s probably best to have bought the frozen stuff after I’ve got everything else and can go straight home but I don’t really want to be hanging around in town after I’ve loaded myself up with contraband.

Perila car park. Barely any light emits from anywhere on the building. But I go in and walk up to the second floor, the echoes of voices start creeping into my ears.

Of course, it’s a low volume right now. It’s early in the day for them. I try not to come by at the later times when it’s full because the people scare me. I know literally two days ago I was training to psychologically evaluate a mass murderer but here, people can scream and murder as loud as they want, and all eyes would turn away.

I walk up the ramp never leaving to wander around the ground or first floor. With this place being so abandoned yet populated it’s a living quarter for squatters and the homeless. I’d like to approach them, give them food or something. But no amount of cognitive reappraisal (trying to change my emotional reaction to seeing something) will make me think that them sitting down, leaning against the wall, staring at me, as anything but aggression. But when they speak to me and politely ask for change, I say I’ll see what I have when I come back down and if they’re still there I’ll give them something.

However, it's not the homeless who make my eyes focus only forward on the spiral ramp heading upwards; the beds here are for more than just them. In the back there are set up sections, with actual frames and blankets covering all sides for privacy. Albeit, they don't look very high beds, but curiosity made me ask once and it was confirmed by someone that has been in there, that they have mattresses, pillows and headboards, basically all the components of a bed. And waiting right on the line where the ramp flattens out are women, waiting for their next customer to join them in those beds. They're wearing more now to keep out the cold, but at this point everyone knows who they are. It's their work and I respect that, but I can judge them on how they act as individuals as opposed to the whole profession; one moment of eye contact and the trying to tempt me starts, asking closed questions that make it seem that logically, I should say yes to going to a dirty bed with someone twice my age. And the extra clothes they wear, because they're for warmth not seduction, all look filthy.

On the second floor, where the main market is, and the highest I ever go; there are other sales on the top floor. That one has guards on it. Rumours of weapons but I've never seen a gun on the street, and I've made peace with not knowing the truth.

The entrance to the second floor parking area can still just about get cars through, so a few vans litter the floor and people are mostly occupied sorting things out with what they've brought rather than eyeing up customers.

The main clientele for them right now is teens. Most of them are likely from Educational Accommodation but it's a weekend so regular kids leading regular lives in regular schools might be here. I don't know if they know about this place.

In the far back corner, there's a hole that's directly above one of the beds back on the first floor for people who I guess want to watch. I've never looked down the hole, and fortunately its business hours tend to be only when the place is busy, so the crowd noise drowns out anything I might hear from down there. It's always popular though and I've been told I should at least look once, by a girl no less, for the experience. It was some idea from our neighbours in terms of country. Where they have technically the exact same laws but, are really one of the only places in the world where they're not enforced and the whole culture is far freer. Never heard a bad word about Amsterdam.

The emptiness at the market now isn't always good because a simple kick of a can and I get more looks than I would like. And I'm a nervous walker. I bump into an above average amount of tables. Even normally the eyes looking on make me uncomfortable but

today the thought of strangers coming near me makes me automatically clench my fists in my pocket and pull my forearms as close into my body as possible.

More people suddenly call out to me trying to sell me things. I can't mention my age or its legality to reject them because that's the whole point of them selling it here. Worse is that if I've bought it before they know I'm at least a bit interested.

'Matthias. Matthias. How are you? Remember what you said last time about the taste?' an alcohol vender specifically for people under drinking age says, 'I've got something here for you.' The guy is wearing a red and black chequered jacket and I don't think he's even thirty yet.

'I told you I don't like it.' I say.

'How do you know you don't like this? You haven't tried it?'

'Last time you said it was the best alcohol. So, whatever you have now must be worse.'

'No listen. It's a completely different type of booze. This one tastes like a fizzy drink trust me you'll like it.'

'If it tastes like a fizzy drink then I'll buy a fizzy drink.'

'Those don't take the edge off like this will though. You'll forget about all your worries in no time.'

'I don't think alcohol that tastes like fizzy would be alcoholic enough to make me forget my worries right now.'

'Oh well if that's the case I've got something else you might like.' He quickly steps behind his podium and reaches into one of the crates that peak round the side of the stall. Pulling out a clear bottle with a red label saying a name I've never heard of and definitely couldn't pronounce. He thrusts it towards me.

'What is it?' I asked.

'This is called a spirit. It was invented far out in the Dead Zone hundreds of years ago.'

'Can I try a little bit of it?'

'Haha just a little bit indeed. It's very strong. Maybe you should just smell it first.'

My head shoots back, 'Yuk it smells almost like ink. Who likes drinking that?'

'It's the way you drink it Matt. You take your fizzy drink that you like, and pour a cap full of this in. You can smell how strong it is to make you forget your worries and you won't taste the bad alcohol taste you don't like.'

'So I only drink a cap amount at a time? That seems good value I guess.'

‘Oh it is. You won’t regret it. How about two bottles? I’ll give you a good price.’

‘How about one for now.’

He puts the bottle in a bag and I buy it. Even if I wanted two bottles, I only bring a little bit of cash here, nothing else. And I already knew what I wanted to spend my money on.

With that distraction gone, the good point of the emptiness is that I easily see who I want to talk to. There will be no awkward eye contacts with people selling narcotics today because I’m heading straight towards where I want to go to get my illegal rush.

‘Hi Damien,’ I say.

‘Hey Matthias. Here for another trip into our planets past? When the media was free to say what they wanted,’ He says.

‘What have you got today?’

Damien’s a big guy both height and width, the top of his giant head is flat with short light brown hair and he wears an orange puffy jacket which exposes how much of a messy person he must be at home because the stains on the bright jacket are visible and numerous. He digs around in his bag and takes out a little chip identical to the dozens already in my apartment, ‘You’ll like this. There are four movies on this one. It’s set in the Freedom States, where they get ruined by bombs instead. But the leaders are still the same type of arseholes. The main character is this girl, she’s very good with a bow and arrow and is forced to play the Government’s games until she gets the chance to rebel. Very popular in its time. I can show you some highlights here.’ He then plays a video on his phone for me and it looks entertaining enough.

‘Ok. I’ll take it.’

‘You won’t regret it. I can send you some more things like that if you want. Do you have your phone on you?’

‘No, I don’t. It was stolen.’

‘Oh, I’m sorry. You know, I think the guy there who sells trac-‘

‘Trackers, yeah I know. The police don’t use civilian trackers. I know exactly where my phone is, but I can’t do a thing to get it back.’

‘It wasn’t anyone here was it. We’re all trying to make ends meet any way we can, but it’s low to steal from one of us.’

I think his way of talking is a bit silly but I humour him by looking around then stop; my eyes widen as they make a brief moment of contact with Yoann, going up the ramp to the top floor.

‘What? Did you see him Matthias?’

‘No it’s just. Thanks for the movies Damien. I’ll see you around.’

‘Wait. Before you go. See that guy over there?’ Damien points at a man sorting out some stuff from a trunk, minding his own business. Blissfully unaware that we’re gossiping about him.

‘Who is he?’

‘Apparently, he’s came from Veni. Got all sorts of stories that they won’t tell you on the news.’

‘Huh.’

I go over to him carrying my bag of illegal things without a clue what I’m actually going to ask him. Fortunately, people like him are used to being the first to talk.

‘Hello there,’ he says. Veni accent confirmed.

‘Hi. Name’s Matthias, how about you?’

‘Gianfranco Mamause.’ I could see he had blotches of red skin on his forearm and neck, I tried to pretend not to see them. ‘Did you know Veni has the chance to be the first nation to pull off a revolution and break free of the tyranny.’

‘What’s been going on? How come you’re here?’

‘Chiaro Throtier, the last Veni born member of the government was fired. We are now ruled entirely by outsiders. The time for a revolution is now and I’m reaching out to collect any help we can.’

‘What type of help?’ Now this could be interesting, a picture in my head formulates of me, charging at the front of the riots in the streets overrunning the police and security. Dragging out all the corrupt officials out of the Colosseum building (how dare they name their Government HQ after that after letting the actual Colosseum collapse) and gutting them in the street. Funny, bladed weapons I picture fine in my head, blunt attacks though cause the image in my mind to turn to black and form a pain in my throat.

Gianfranco breaks the illusion, ‘I’m looking for donations to help keep the fight going. The more money we gather, the longer we can resist and maybe break their hold entirely.’

‘Oh.... I don’t have any money on me.’

‘Just a little bit. Our people have suffered and I’m sure you have too. Any little thing you can provide us may be the thing that turns the tide and saves thousands of people. Think about it Matthias, you alone could be responsible for it. Tell you what, give me a few more of your details, your phone number maybe. When we shake off our oppressors thanks to you, I

will arrange for you to come join in the parade. I can do this amazing thing for you if you just give a little bit now.'

'Yeah I'm not a fool. You came to Northern Europa because we have a reputation of being nicer. I also study Psychology, I know all that stuff you just said about giving me a parade is just a ploy to make me feel kinder to you. And I'm a little bit sketchy on giving my details away as well right now. Everything you need to win is in Veni, you have the people and there's no way the Government would kill all their own people. If there's anything you actually do need here, it's upstairs. I hear they sell guns.'

'What you say is true yes, but we need the money more than anything. We need to stop the Freedom States directly intervening. Some of our members have been there and we know heads in the top government can be turned, through payments, through bribes. Money's all they want, they don't care about here.'

'Yeah you bribe every politician in Freedom United, sure.'

'No not all. Just ones who can block any intervention. Just enough to stop a vote to stop us from happening. And still, every day there's a chance a bomb will explode in a random State city that will be blamed on us. And if they send their troops, their mechs over here, then we're doomed.'

'Yeah, good luck with Veni and everything. Truly, I hate them just as much as you do. But I literally don't have any money on me. Sorry.'

Monday morning and I walk through the routine searches of my job with a slight sinking feeling. Not due to my weekend purchases, only the anxiety of last week's events still lingering as I spread out my arms, exposing myself while unfriendly hands inspects my pockets.

My first task of the day is to set up chairs for a group counselling session which I'll be observing and learning from. We need to bring a special chair for Ellia to sit on, with extra bars all on it so he can be shackled to it. Even Katrina has already been trusted enough to not need these. They're not entirely necessary, I think. There are still plenty of guards round the perimeter of the room who always look vigilant, I would definitely be leaning back against the wall if I had to stand there for two hours, but maybe the brainwashing worked better on them. All in all, there are nine people sitting around Kevin as the session begins.

'Good morning everybody. Are we all feeling calm today?' Kevin says, standing in the middle of the group with all the chairs in a circle pointed at him.



For the most part there's normally an adequate amount of speaking and response from the inmates. But it's early on and Kevin just asked a bunch of people arrested for some seriously debatable crimes how good they feel. Thus, there is no response.

'I hope we can have a really good session today. Before we begin is there anything anyone would like to share?'

'This is bullshit,' says Ellia. Understandable but futile. And he chose to do this, these sessions aren't mandatory, it's just something the inmates can opt into in order to try and achieve their early release.

'Ok maybe over the course of the two hours we can change your mind. Hopefully.'

Martin leans over to Ellia and whispers something in his ear.

Alexis says, 'Why is that rat bastard four eyes here?'

He looks at me as he says it. What did I do wrong? I thought I impressed him last week talking about guns.

I shift my body away. Kevin Ignores it, very professional. 'The first thing I'd like to discuss with you all,' he says, 'actually comes from our counselling trainee, Matthias. If that answers your question Alexis. He's doing really well in training and that's already putting me in a good mood today, although with a bit of luck none of you will still be in here when he takes over...'

My mind stops focusing on what he's saying because that's a lie isn't it, I'm not doing, "really well" in training. I can't help but wonder if I've been completely duped by the whole, I need to spy on Yoann, or I'll be kicked out thing. Certainly my time at the football club has taught me that I'm no good at being undercover, wet work, secret agent and all that. So, it wouldn't have been difficult for the detectives to deceive me.

'...So we all know our stories on what we did to get here, and so far I think you've all made amazing progress. However, I want all of you to think now about yourselves back out there, free from these walls, as active members of society, working for Cinquantenaire. Imagine yourself just walking down a normal street, you've done it a hundred times now since your release. What is it then, that could possibly make you re-commit your crimes or commit any new ones. That's what I want you to think about, any possible triggers that could lead you to make another big mistake.'

I think it's a good question, certainly maintains the message our team tries to present which is, "obviously the crime is all your fault and nothing in the world is wrong." But looking at the group here, half of these guys are from organised groups (I'm including

making/selling street drugs as organised) and some others like Martin and Ellia were on the wrong side of corruption.

At least Thogan was convicted for only street crime and he speaks, 'I'd punch another cop hitting a handcuffed kid without thought. I'd spend life here happy knowing I knocked a scumbag like that out.'

'You're encouraged to speak your mind here, Thogan, but talking about assaulting officers of the law so excitedly will get you removed from these meetings.'

Only a little verbal warning for now, but we can't let comments like that fly without impunity otherwise it's us that gets done for treason. If he keeps up, the policy is that they won't be allowed to do anymore of these sessions, and that's the nicest thing that will happen to him. The only reason Ellia hasn't been kicked off yet is because he's still new. He needs time to learn the correct way of looking at the world, that he's what's wrong with it, not the Government.

The question is discussed a while longer, some more street crime criminals say borderline ok things about how they were forced into that situation, and Kevin has to explain why they're wrong and should've chosen the starving and homeless life. My conscience is on the criminal's side, because selling recreational drugs and stealing from large supermarkets are pretty much victimless. And they probably don't do it for fun.

Kevin recommends to them that once they're released, they should aim to keep the company of ideal citizens as often as possible to deter them from relapsing into the horrible mistake of having a conscience, or trying to afford a decent living or generally criticising or speaking out in any way. And I wonder what on earth Alexis, a high-ranking member of a militia group, must think about all this. I'm already over his little verbal attack on me.

We do a little bit of free association, that's when we show them a picture or say a word and they say what comes to mind. I think it's a bit useless, but it's a classic in the world of counselling, so I never tell anyone what I think. Still, it doesn't matter if they see a burning baby in the picture, we don't change their minds to make them see a butterfly, all we do here is teach them what things they got caught doing. And for some of them, what they should learn to hide better when they get out and ultimately start committing crimes again.

Well maybe not Martin whose large size is right now causing him trouble getting out of the chair, I go over to help him.

'Are you ok, Martin? Do you need help? I know it's annoying. I wish these table bits weren't so static too.'

‘I’m ok little boy. Why don’t you go back over to your desk in the corner and make sure you got all your brainwashing notes down.’

‘First, I’m not a little boy, and second I don’t want to brainwash anyone.’

‘But it’s what you do, don’t lie. You’re a smart one, right four eyes. You know exactly what this is. In the prisons back home, our counsellors do proper work to better people’s lives and give them a future. Not the two hour a week façade they do here. Guess what happens every single other hour of the week?’

‘I know how it is you don’t have to tell me. It was never my choice to be here doing this, but that’s all I’m going to say, I won’t make the same mistake you did. See you later in the week Martin. Oh but let your new friend Ellia know that if he thinks his cell is too big and his mattress too comfy, he can always swear at us again. And the guards will take him to a dark little corner of the prison so far away from the canteen that by the time he gets there he’ll only have one bite of food before lunch is finished and he has to go back.’

The cliché that, as far as I can tell, has stood the test of time better than anything is hating Mondays. Well I hate Monday nights. My bedroom is on the first floor and it overlooks a little patio communal area between my building and the one next to it. Almost every Monday, in the early hours of the morning, my eyes will be wide open as a group of arseholes will hang out on that little patio and shout at each other because they decide to spread out around the whole open space rather than sit together.

‘Honestly Lizzie, no listen. Honestly right. I believe and it’s honestly my philosophy in life is, that everyone can be your friend, if you just talk to them. So really, no one has any true enemies.’

When the others speak, they’re so quiet in comparison that I think I could actually drift off at that volume. I can’t of course, they’re still really loud, but compared to that other one, Artur I think his name is, I at least can relax a bit. My breathing becomes less loud, less heavy for just a moment. Then he starts off again.

‘Honestly, Lizzie, I would bet that a punching bag actually feels nicer to hug than to hit. I would try it, but I don’t need a punching bag. Because I’m always giving out hugs cos honestly, that’s just who I am. I won’t apologise for trying to bring a little love into the world. I honestly believe that no one could hate me for who I am and if they did, I would forgive them.’

Now like him, I think of myself as a nice person, however, there is a famous psychologist, perhaps the most famous psychologist. This guy was all about how childhood experiences affect what type of person you are in the future, most of it was to do with a person's libido but there were bits of normal life thrown in here and there. Now my father was beaten to death in front of me when I was nine years old. Now I'm not saying my father was beaten to death in a way to evoke sympathy from anyone or act like I'm still feeling rocked from it, because I'm not. But unconsciously, hidden in my brain, it must have affected me a little, because this guy talking right now, I would like to take into a dark room, remind him of all he said about how everyone is nice if you talk to them, and then release all the maniacs and killers from the prison in there with him. Don't worry Artur, it's not like our country has a crime rate so far below the average that we bring in criminals from elsewhere as a major national revenue, oh wait.

For some reason though, I always only picture pushing him into the room, and never anything that goes on in there. It's like the moment someone's about to land the first hit on him my mind shuts off, goes black instantly like it's an automatic defence mechanism. I'm like that watching films sometimes, the idea of violence doesn't bother me, heck if the movie's got someone who has it coming, I can even look forward to it. But when that moment arrives, something in my head suddenly wants to run away. It rings my head like screaming that can only be purged through thoughts of childlike happiness.

Monday nights are full of cycles, because I can't help feeling a little bad at how disturbing it is that I want it to happen. I'll start to think that maybe he doesn't deserve it, he's only talking to his friends, doing his best to enjoy life.

Then he'll open his mouth again and roar up at my room some garbage like, 'We should take all the money spent on prisons and put it into improving society because I guarantee it would stop all crime one hundred percent, forever. Honestly.' And then I think of what other creative types of criminals I should throw into the dark room with him.

I always think of getting better windows, sound proofing, sleeping on the couch, but one: I don't have the money to soundproof. Two I'll move away from here soon, so it would be a waste of my money to do it and three, if he drives me out of my bed at night to sleep on a couch that's not long enough to fit my body on then that dumbass has won and I've truly lost.

Just the fact that he feels the need to talk out here, disturbing probably a lot more people besides just me; completely oblivious to the faeces that comes out of his mouth every single week is beyond me. Especially now, it's winter. How on earth is the cold outside

preferable to everything they could have inside. As if they read my mind one of the voices, a woman says, 'Why don't we go indoors I'm getting cold.'

To which Artur replies, 'Oh I've got a blanket I'll bring it out for you.'

And they talk for another two hours.

The week manages to go by without incident, after my shambles last week though, I don't talk to Laura apart from to tell her what room to go into with my eyes firmly facing the ground. I also state Alexis' room the moment he walks in the door, he has no reason to come near me and I'm not looking at him. Even though I said to myself earlier that I was over his comment.

My undercover work seems like it will be done soon as well, Yoann and his friends aren't here this week. I'm left alone with the strangers. Through pure strength of will to avoid embarrassment and learning very quickly what my weaknesses are, like running with the ball, I get through the training. Even if I never spoke to anyone there they'd still be welcoming enough at the Educational Accommodation for a game so I'm used to playing with people I don't know. Heck even the worst looking, craziest dude who smoked anything you could roll up would say sorry if he bumped into you. But only because I was one of them, living in the system.

On my way home, I'm thinking, *I need to remember to charge the Government for my taxi journeys and the payment to the football club.* I don't get paid enough to keep these thirty bucks both ways trips up.

But it doesn't look like I'll need to do them anymore though, no sign of Yoann tonight, and it's been six days since I saw him walk up to the top floor of the black market. None of his friends were there either so I'm assuming they've moved on with their plans. As I enter through my doorway I throw my bag to the side and from muscle memory start walking to the shower so much that I don't even notice all my lights on.

Oh....

Yoann and his friends have definitely moved on with they're plans.

They weren't playing football.

But knew I would be.

They're all in my living room.

All holding guns.