

a blossom of fire (or: thirteen bulletproof mirrors)

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Cast of Characters

<u>PETRA</u> :	A junior intelligence agent at the American Federal Privacy Bureau.
<u>CERISE</u> :	A senior intelligence agent.
<u>THE BOSS</u> :	The administrative head.
<u>EDISON</u> :	The delivery liason between the Bureau and the federal government.

Scene

The office of the AMERICAN FEDERAL PRIVACY BUREAU in Township 242, PA, USA.

Time

Evening of August 10, 1974, into the 11th.

ACT I

prologue

DISCLAIMER

The following primary recordings are property of the United States federal government, Department of ----. Chairman, Dr. ---- T. ----.

The following events took place on the night of August 10, 1974, in Township 242, Pennsylvania.

These recordings may be redacted in to protect national security interests.

firehouse dream

*The sound of cards shuffling.
The cards are cut, dressed, and shuffled again.*

PETRA

When the firehouse alarm sounds I'm always counting cards. They're waiting for me to deal the next hand but the number of cards in the deck keeps changing. Fifty-one, fifty-two, fifty-three, fifty-four--

The alarm sounds. Great clatter and tumult.

THE FIREFIGHTERS

Let's go!
Petra, drop it, get your gear!
What's wrong with you? Let's go!

PETRA

(v.o.)

My company is ready to go but I don't remember how to put on my equipment. The buckles and straps are in the wrong places. I fumble while the alarm gets louder and louder.

THE FIREFIGHTERS

Petra! We have to move!
Hurry!
Hurry!

PETRA

When I'm finally ready I turn around and start to run.

The engine starts. It grows louder and louder and abruptly cuts.

(CONTINUED)

PETRA

(v.o.)

They're gone.

When I awake, sweating and alone, it's just before eight p.m. I've kicked the blankets away. Still, the very last of the late-summer sun trickles through the window across my body. My shift starts at nine. The walk is long from my house at the bottom of the hill, but in the summer at least I have the last of the sunlight to send me on my way.

My name is Petra Pulaski and I grew up in Ohio. My mother and father were a nun and a poet. Now I live in a place called Township 242 and I work for the government. I work nights. They're always long. They're good practice for death, because I assume that in death the same thing will happen every day and night. Only rather than the same something it will be the same nothing.

I like the walk. The roads look freshly-paved, even though they must be two decades old. They mostly go unused. Our fire engine sits in the station except when there's a parade. Our hospital often closes early on Sunday. I live at #1 Franklin Drive, and no address in town needs a number higher than 20.

Sometimes I think I recognize the birds individually. But I don't know, because I don't have anyone to explain this observation to.

This place is lonesome. Lonesome is a condition of a place, like a color or a measurement. I don't think lonely is a condition of a place. I think loneliness is a choice. It's not a choice I bother with.

edison's delivery

Rural Pennsylvania. Township 242. Night of August 10, 1974.

The loading dock at the AMERICAN FEDERAL PRIVACY BUREAU. The Bureau is housed in an old church at the end of a long road.

A truck pulls up and the operator gets out and walks around. He rings the buzzer, twice. CERISE appears from inside the building. The operator opens the clattery metal rear gate of the truck.

(CONTINUED)

CERISE

This is it?

EDISON

Slow day at the capital. Just the one case. Looks like y'all can take it easy here tonight.

CERISE

Really? I thought tonight was going to be another big haul.

EDISON

Nope, you and Petra have already processed most of the material. The real transition's been in the works for months. Rush is over you'll have a lot more free time coming up.

CERISE

We don't mind that. And may Nixon rot in hell, bless his heart.

EDISON

I hear ya. Ford's a fine man. Sign here.

EDISON flips between pages for CERISE to sign.

EDISON

Sign here and here. Date.

CERISE

Tenth?

EDISON

Right.

Let's get this on the dock. 1, 2, 3--

The pick up the case together and bring it onto the loading dock.

EDISON

(cont.)

You want me to help bring it up to the office floor?

CERISE

No, leave it. Petra can handle it. I'm sure she doesn't mind.

EDISON

Fine by me. You have a good one, Cerise. Did you get a haircut?

(CONTINUED)

CERISE

Good night, Edison.

EDISON gets in the truck and drives away. CERISE enters the facility through a heavy metal door.

welcome 242

PETRA enters the office, struggling with the case.

CERISE

You can leave that over there, we'll get to it later.
We have all night.

PETRA

What is it.

CERISE

What are you pouting about? The case? Come on. It's good for you. You need that upper body workout.

PETRA

I'm sick of bringing in all the deliveries.

CERISE

If you want to get here earlier and deal with Edison, be my guest.

PETRA

Oh, you're doing me a favor?

CERISE

That's right, you're welcome.

PETRA sits and sulks.

CERISE

Now don't pout. I wish you could be a little more civil. These shifts go on and on and on and on and on when you insist on behaving like a sullen teenager.

PETRA sighs like a sullen teenager.

CERISE

Oh, please. You're a grown woman. Have some office decorum. Pretend we work in the Penn Borough office from our advertisement.

PETRA

Penn Borough?

CERISE

You've never seen the old Bureau video advertisement?

PETRA

No.

CERISE

With all the agents smiling and carrying binders? While the jaunty song plays?

PETRA

No.

CERISE

We have a reel of it. Come see.

CERISE readies an old-timey film projector.

old timey advertising

The projector clatters.

A better, quainter office full of smiling people.

Textbook diversity.

Sepia filter. Jaunty music.

The BOSS, doing advertisement things like opening folders and signing documents. He greets the audience with an "oh, I didn't see you there" candid advertising smile.

BOSS

Welcome to the 24th and newest organization in your country's intelligence community: The American Federal Privacy Bureau.

We lead the world in security, ethical espionage, and data protection services. With our award-winning recipe of judicial oversight, internal review, and procedural transparency, we work hard to give the United States the free, conscience-based security services the Founding Fathers envisioned.

Our main office in Penn Borough is a model of technical and procedural innovation. I'm here in the central office on the ground floor, data receiving and processing. Downstairs is the redactions department, which operates round-the-clock to keep our secrets safe. Tending the fires: of liberty.

If you want to know more, I'm happy to invite you to our office in Penn Borough. Any concerned citizen is encouraged to call today to set up a free personal tour with any of our friendly agents.

(MORE)

(CONTINUED)

BOSS (cont'd)

The American Federal Privacy Bureau:
Your secrets,
our way.

End.

brief history

PETRA

That's where the department used to be?

CERISE

No, that's just a film set in D.C. where they shot the ads and did the tours. The real office has always been here. When they established the agency, they rented that set, but bought this church.

PETRA

So what happened when people called for tours?

CERISE

They went straight to an answering machine that nobody ever checked.

The Boss thinks someday we'll have the budget to move in there, set up our actual office inside of its own image. But that won't happen. NSA gets all the money, CIA gets all the firepower. Not much left for us.

God, I wish I worked there.
The Boss used to work there.

PETRA

At the CIA?

CERISE

It's true.

The story goes that he was second-in-command while Gloucester was chair. A few years in, Gloucester started noticing some "odd" behaviors.

The Boss was coming in earlier, staying later. Hoarding files. Picking scrap paper out of other people's trash.

And then, so it goes, the Boss stopped going home altogether, stayed in the office for weeks at a time, obviously hadn't been sleeping, voice hoarse, so you'd have to get real close to hear him.
And nobody wanted to get too close to him at that point.

Weird thing was he looked sharper than ever. Started glowing almost, like a Renaissance painting or a television lifeguard.

(CONTINUED)

Gloucester was terrified. So was everyone else. Gloucester offered him a deal: 'You've outgrown the responsibilities,' he said. 'You're operating at a world-class level. We're promoting you to administrator: your own agency, all-new facilities, a payroll wide-open as Nebraska and your choice of the top operatives in the country.'

PETRA

And what's the catch?

CERISE

You see a doctor, a priest, and a therapist. He said: Can I choose the doctor? And they said: No. He said: Can I choose the therapist? And they said: No. He said: Well, gentlemen, I'm not at all religious. And they said: A community church is a fine place to expand your social circle. Come back when you've found a priest. He picked a basic-cable televangelist. And he must have learned something, because when it was time to choose a site he picked this church.

PETRA

That's what they must have wanted all along. Just to get him somewhere far away.

CERISE

Sure. But the federal officials figure if they have a new bureau they might as well do something with it. They start shipping fourth-priority assignments here, just to see what he can get done, and what do you know, the material starts to vanish.

PETRA

Material like what?

CERISE

That's the thing. I can't tell you. After he got to it, nobody knows. It's more gone than gone.

PETRA

So they just turned that into his job?

CERISE

They realized that he was destroying evidence so thoroughly that it might as well have never existed. So they thought, why not make it official? Now it's just you and me, staying up all night, making the nation's secrets vanish into the flat black nowhere. You want to go first?

petra ii/hammer of doom

PETRA

(v.o.)

On the slow nights we play darts and waste the first couple hours. I insist.

Darts.

Our board always has a photo of the previous president. Tonight I tear down Lyndon Johnson and put up a magazine cutout of Nixon's arms-out crooked grin for peace.

Cerise beats me the first game, and loser always buys Cokes from the machine in the dock.

Vending machine.

CERISE

Pepsi?

PETRA

I pressed Coke. The machine's the same as always, says Coca-Cola on the outside.

CERISE

Pepsi is for communists.

PETRA

I know. One more?

CERISE

You don't want to get started?

PETRA

One more.

Darts.

PETRA

(v.o.)

She beats me again.
One more?

Darts. Sirens.

PETRA

(v.o.)

In the middle of our seventh game I hear the sirens. I'm in the middle of my turn. They come from no direction and never get any closer. There are two darts in my hand. I close my eyes and open them again. Still two. This is good. This is reassuring. This is--

(CONTINUED)

CERISE

Petra.

PETRA

What?

CERISE

Are you okay?

PETRA

I'm fine. Let's open that case. Let's get to work.

pandora

PETRA and CERISE.

CERISE

Alright. Ready?

PETRA

Ready.

They open the case and prepare to keep notes in their great record-book.

CERISE

Eleven twenty-five p.m. August 10, 1974. Condemned material reception, American Federal Privacy Bureau, agents me and you.
Delivery volume one case, size K, no corollaries.

PETRA

(writing)

"...no corollaries." Delivery agent:

CERISE

Edison Dekker.

PETRA

Contents.

CERISE takes these out and lays them down as she dictates.

CERISE

Hand mirror.
Two, three hand mirrors.
Four vertical full-length mirrors.
Two compacts.
Three medicine-cabinet bathroom mirror panels.
One huge-ass Old Roanoke bar mirror, which makes...

(CONTINUED)

PETRA

Thirteen.

CERISE

Yup.

A ring of seven keys, unlabeled. A binder from the Milwaukee Nuclear Authority.

Two folders with bureau insignia.

PETRA

Our bureau insignia?

CERISE

Yup.

PETRA

Contents?

CERISE

The contract I signed on my first day.

PETRA

What's in the other one?

CERISE

Yours.

PETRA

What do you think?

CERISE

This has never happened before.

PETRA

Do you want to call the Boss?

CERISE

I'm surprised he hasn't checked in with us already. We both expected it to be busy here.

PETRA

I did too.

CERISE

Only a few more items were important enough to destroy. So why were we included?

PETRA

Just being cautious, I guess. Nixon and his goons weren't cautious, so Ford and his goons won't make the same mistake.

(CONTINUED)

CERISE

If it's nothing but a paper trail it doesn't need to come to us. They have paper shredders in every office in the White House.

PETRA

What's the difference? It's the same principle, ours just happens to be the biggest.

CERISE

No, it's not the same principle. Documents you shred don't exist any longer. Documents you give to us never existed in the first place. Hear the difference?

PETRA

I hear a semantic nitpick, not a reason to have a mental breakdown.

CERISE

I'm not having a mental breakdown. I'm thinking this through. We might be in trouble.

PETRA

From Ford?

CERISE

Could be from anyone. The people aren't in the mood for data spooks like us.

PETRA

(laughing)

Does it matter to us if "the people" don't like what we do? They don't exactly have a say.

CERISE

Watergate was a botched cover-up. This is a clean-up, and they won't botch this one.

PETRA

What's the matter?

CERISE

First, you and I are going to lose our jobs.

PETRA

This job sucks. We'll get better jobs.

CERISE

It's not that. We're loose ends. When the bureau is gone, we'll be loose ends.

(CONTINUED)

PETRA

What the fuck are you talking about?

CERISE

Ford's people have to be sure we won't go to the press. They have to make sure we never, ever tell anyone even the smallest, most insignificant detail about this place.

PETRA

We'll swear secrecy. Or we'll change our names. Whatever.

CERISE

What if that's not enough?

PETRA

Are you serious?

CERISE

What if they can't let us live?

PETRA

You think we're going to get kidnapped and thrown in a white van?

CERISE

It could be worse.

PETRA

This job has made you paranoid. I don't really think anyone gives enough of a shit.

CERISE

I don't know.

How come we vote for presidents before we know what kind of presidents they'll be?

PETRA

And Ford we didn't even vote for. What should we do now?

CERISE

Wait for the Boss. He'll know.

PETRA

You just said he might be in on this imaginary plot to kill us to keep us from talking.

CERISE

But if he expected us to find our contracts, then he must have wanted us to figure it out. He's in the same boat as we are.

(CONTINUED)

PETRA

You should have thought about that when you signed up.

CERISE

When I realized what we were doing I wanted to quit.
But I didn't. Neither did you, and I knew sometimes you
wanted to. You knew it intuitively: loose ends.

PETRA

Fuck.
Whether you're right or not--and I think you're not--we
have to behave like we don't know.

CERISE

Do everything like we would any other night.

PETRA

Everything else goes down below. Except for these
documents. We hide these. This doesn't mean I think
you're right. Just that your line of logic is worth
entertaining.

CERISE

We'll have to break down the big pieces outside. Start
with the smaller stuff.
Let's get the hatch. Open on three, 1, 2, 3--

*They open the chute's heavy iron cover.
The business of the REDACTIONS DEPARTMENT is
audible: scraping, grinding metal, large
industrial furnaces and solemn music of worship.*

PETRA

Always creeps me out.

CERISE

You ought to be used to it by now. Check them off:
Three hand mirrors.

PETRA

Check.

Sound of the impacts. .

CERISE

Two compacts.

Impacts.

PETRA

Yep.

(CONTINUED)

CERISE

Ring of keys and Milwaukee Nuclear report.

Impacts.

PETRA

Done.

They haul the cover closed. Perhaps the sound persists.

CERISE

You ever met any of the redactions people?

PETRA

The people down there? No.

CERISE

I don't trust them. They never seem to sleep. I never see them come or go, either.

PETRA

They probably have their own entrance.

CERISE

Or they never leave.

PETRA

Sure. Or that.

CERISE

They're all shrouded in mystery and red tape. But they were here before either of us.

PETRA

Like back when it was a church?

CERISE

Maybe.

PETRA

An order of monks that predate all of us, destroying secrets first for the church, and now for the government, and then for whoever comes and inherits our position?

CERISE

Exactly.

PETRA

A battalion of serious men in hoods, you think.

(CONTINUED)

CERISE

Or serious women maybe. But they're either all men or all women. It's one of those things.

PETRA

Wow.

You've been working nights too long. I read an article about this: living without sunshine will mess with your brain.

CERISE

I'm obviously kidding.

PETRA

Yeah?

CERISE

Yeah, mostly. But t's true they were here before I was hired and it's true I never see them come or go.

PETRA

It's government work. The hours aren't good.

CERISE

Yeah.

PETRA

That's all it is.

CERISE

Yeah. Government work.

petra iii

PETRA

But I've failed to convince myself.

My mother had been a sister in a particular Christian order. She wanted me to go into the faith, but found it so difficult to persuade me. She was like a doctor prescribing a medication that had failed her. I felt the tilting chasm of her hypocrisy between us.

She joined the holy order at sixteen. She worked in their library, copying theological dissertations by hand every day until she left, the night of her twentieth birthday. My father was a third-rate poet from Columbus. A blizzard descended while he was on the road, and he stopped at her convent for shelter.

Six hours later the storm withdrew. The sun was grinning out from the eastern margin of the sky. They tiptoed from the emergency exit, hand-in-hand.

(MORE)

(CONTINUED)

PETRA (cont'd)

And this is the story I remember when I think about religion. This is why Cerise's musings set me on edge and confuse the iconography of my subconscious.

alleyway of mirrors

Outside. They're carrying the mirrors.

CERISE

Keep coming this way. Let's go over by the fence.

PETRA

(v.o.)

Official procedure requires an oversize materials hauling detachment--a crew of six barrel-shaped men in rough denim coats--when we get material that's too big to go down the hatch, like the big mirrors. We used to actually do it: call a crew, wait for them to show up, watch them bust up whatever it was, file the invoice, and finally dump everything down below.

Then we started getting into other methods. Like when we took turns pushing that decommissioned satellite down the hill.

CERISE

Okay, down. Prop them against the fence.

PETRA

What now?

CERISE

Grab a rock.

CERISE picks up a handful of rocks.

PETRA

Okay.

CERISE

You first.

*She takes a deep breath and throws.
The rock strikes the glass unhappily. Nothing
breaks.*

PETRA

Look at that light. Our reflections in the surface. Our images getting mixed up in there with the ghost of President Nixon.

(CONTINUED)

CERISE

Bet you I can hit that light with one throw.

CERISE throws a rock at the light and misses. The rock lands somewhere far off.

CERISE

Do-over.

She throws again. The lightbulb shatters and showers down glass.

CERISE

What do you see now?

PETRA

Nothing. Just the opacity of the future.

CERISE

That's what the future looks like? Nothingness?

PETRA

Not only nothingness. Nothingness examining its own reflection.

PETRA throws the rock at the mirror. It shatters.

CERISE

Go on.

PETRA and CERISE throw rocks again and again until the glass is just a treacherous and shredded pile.

CERISE

Feels pretty good.

PETRA

Yeah.

CERISE

I feel bulletproof.

PETRA

Got your head back on straight?

CERISE

Yeah.

PETRA

We're perfectly safe.

CERISE
Maybe.

PETRA
We'll go in and get a bag for all the pieces.

CERISE
Okay.

PETRA
You're shaking. Why are you shaking?

CERISE
We're in more danger than ever but we don't have to be afraid. Nobody's going to help us but we don't have to be afraid.

Sounds of stumbling and falling nearby.

BOSS
(distant)
Motherfucker!

PETRA
You hear that?

CERISE
This way.

personal intervention

PETRA and CERISE move in the direction of the sounds. They discover the BOSS. He's been drinking.

BOSS
Don't help me up. I'm fine. I'm good.

CERISE
Sir, just hold on to me, okay? Petra, get his other arm.

BOSS
It's totally not necessary.

PETRA
Okay, sir, get on your feet. Ready?

BOSS
Ready.

They hoist him up. He falls down.

(CONTINUED)

BOSS

Do-over.

CERISE

We've got you. Hold onto my arm.

BOSS

Hup!

They get him to his feet.

BOSS

Very successful. Excellent work, team.

PETRA

We're taking you inside.

BOSS

I'm not leaning on you because I need to.

CERISE

We know, sir.

BOSS

Thanks, though. Thanks.

CERISE

You're welcome.

They haul him inside.

CERISE

Let's put him in my chair.

They do so.

BOSS

Wow. This chair is really something.

CERISE

I brought it from home.

BOSS

Jesus. We don't have anything this nice anymore.
Goddamn government work, everything held together by
panic and miracle. No understanding, no compromise.
Coke machine restocked full of Pepsi. Communication
breakdowns everywhere. Plausible deniability, you know?

CERISE

Yes, sir.

(CONTINUED)

BOSS

Now, I knew it would be a busy night here, so I thought it was important to make myself available.

PETRA

It's actually not that busy here, despite everything.

BOSS

Nonsense! Give me something to do. What are you working on?

CERISE

Same as every night, sir, just keeping the national conscience clear. You can hang out right there and rest.

BOSS

No. It's good to be productive. Good for the psyche.

CERISE

Okay, sir. Petra, come here.

CERISE and PETRA apart. The BOSS sings hymns softly in the background.

CERISE

What are we going to do with him?

PETRA

You wanted answers. Here's your opportunity.

CERISE

He's drunk. We won't know if he's telling the truth.

PETRA

What else is new.

CERISE

Let's just get him out of the way. I'll call a taxi. Go talk to him. Just keep him entertained for a little while.

PETRA

I want to call the taxi.

CERISE

No, too late, go hang out with our drunk boss.

PETRA

Sir. Cerise is going to call a taxi for you, okay?

(CONTINUED)

BOSS

Why bother. There won't be any at this hour.

PETRA

You should get home and rest. We have a lot of questions for you but they'll have to wait until morning.

BOSS

Come on, then, let's talk now. Sleep? No. That's the last thing I need. I'm on a roll! You don't quit when you're on a roll.

PETRA

How long has it been since you slept?

BOSS

Today is... Thursday?

PETRA

Saturday.

BOSS

Interesting. Saturday. So it's been, I don't know, it's been a while.

PETRA

Why?

BOSS

I don't want to be the one who receives the dream.

PETRA

What dream?

BOSS

You and her and the bureau. When they send that information out into the night, nobody knows who will get it. Won't be me, though. I swore that.

PETRA

Who? Who's they?

BOSS

The keepers of the furnace. They worked here when the place was still a church. They'll be here long after we're gone. You haven't noticed they never come and go?

PETRA

That's real?

(CONTINUED)

BOSS

"Real" is an understatement. Religious orders are kind of another thing.

PETRA

An order of serious men in hoods, just like Cerise said?

BOSS

Women, actually. They're all women. I had one of their dreams when I worked at the CIA. Scared me so much started working all night to keep from sleeping. When they transferred me out of the agency they told me to see a doctor, a priest, and a therapist.

PETRA

What did you do?

BOSS

I met with all three at once for a panel discussion. I explained what had happened to me. The doctor said I needed medication, because I had chemical disruptions in my brain. The therapist said I had to get out of government work, because I felt complicit in acts of horror and mendacity. And the priest said to move bravely in the direction of my fears, for they would either stand aside or destroy me.

So I did as in the dream. Opened the hatch, climbed down, asked the keepers of the furnace nicely to stop.

PETRA

Stop what? What are you saying?

BOSS

The things you send downstairs to go into the furnace--you don't think they just disappear, do you?

Reality is like a coin: it's flat and it has two sides. We live here on the heads side. Information goes through the furnace and comes out on the tails side, where we live when we dream. So with a little help from that underground holy order, we hide the nation's secrets in that black and uneven world of sleep, where they're safe.

But we've never had secrets like these. About ourselves. I don't want to risk receiving the dream of our own unspeakable careers in the covert. So I won't sleep until it's over.

(CONTINUED)

PETRA

You knew our documents would be in the shipment.

BOSS

Yes.

CERISE

Petra.

PETRA

You wanted us to find them.

BOSS

I can't say what will happen when the snake eats its own tail, when the secret-keepers destroy the secret of their own business. All I know is someone will be along tomorrow to make sure the snake is gone.

PETRA

And if it isn't?

BOSS

If the goon unit catches us here with condemned materials? Arrest. Trial. Prison. Public shame, bankruptcy, spiritual degradation, solitary confinement, and a final disgrace in the press and the history textbooks. For all of us. This country can't tolerate loose ends.

PETRA

And we're supposed to accept all of that?!

BOSS

I'm not sure accepting makes any difference.

CERISE

Petra.

PETRA

What?

CERISE

No taxis.

BOSS

Told you. I've got the gift of prophecy. Like the swans.

PETRA

Horseshit. You have no idea how to help us.

(CONTINUED)

BOSS

True. But I know who might know.

PETRA

I see. So I should go downstairs and ask them.

BOSS

On record, Petra, I'm expressing disapproval. But that's neither here nor there. The real manager here is not me, but the conscience.

PETRA

Yeah, I've always believed that.

BOSS

And they won't give you anything for free. Nixon's made sure of that.

PETRA

I think I have something to offer.

BOSS

We move toward the truth as the earth moves toward the sun: around and around, now closer, now farther, but too close, ha-ha, too close and we burn. So be careful down there. And keep on.

PETRA

That's right.

BOSS

Keep on.

He sleeps.

CERISE

What is he talking about?

PETRA

Downstairs, immortal nuns feed the furnace with our national secrets.

CERISE

Uh-huh.

PETRA

And the furnace turns them into dreams.

CERISE

And you believe this?

(CONTINUED)

PETRA

You thought of it first.

CERISE

Only hypothetically!

PETRA

I'm going down there to find out if it's true.

CERISE

Then what?

PETRA

He doesn't know what to do next. I'm going to ask them.

CERISE

You shouldn't.

PETRA

Why not?

CERISE

It's not safe.

PETRA

Up here's not much better. "Out of the frying pan," you know? Are you coming?

CERISE

I don't see why I should. You're only interested in helping yourself.

PETRA

That's not true.

CERISE

We'll see.

PETRA

I'm asking for your help. We have to make a decision together. Come with me.

CERISE

Shouldn't one of us stay here with him? It'll be morning soon.

PETRA

Fine. But I'm going. Don't shut the hatch.

CERISE

I won't.

the custodians

PETRA below.

"Quoted text" is in-scene dialogue.

PETRA

Below, It's a pleasant heat. Comforting.
I don't mind it as much as I thought I would.

There are a dozen of them. Their clothing is stiff and blackened. I have no idea what color it used to be.

They don't speak.
They pause in their work and look at me as I pass,
moving between their machines and their mountains of files.

I keep checking behind me,
for that opening in the ceiling through which I'll have
to make my escape.

As I pass they return to work.
They are graceful and tireless.

Only one is watching instead of working. I know right
away she's the one I'm looking for.

"Hey."

"Hey!"

She puts forward her contract.

PETRA

She looks at my contract. but doesn't take it.

"It's an offering.
I need to know what happens now.
What happens to the bureau, and what happens to the
three of us. Ford wants us gone, but then what?"

"Take it! Whatever happens to me, I don't care. I'll
trade it for a single definite statement of truth."

The pages flutter.

The mountains of files flutter all around them.
And she does take it.
She carries it over to the furnace delicately,
as if it were made of the thinnest glass. The others
all stop in their work and stand with me to watch.

A blossom of fire. The suggestion of sirens.
Music.

(MORE)

(CONTINUED)

PETRA (cont'd)

As it burns, the sun begins to rise, as if one caused the other. I see the light winding its way through the hatch from above, and it's enough. All of them look. They haven't seen sunshine in a long time. But they look away as if it doesn't interest them.

This night's already over. Our every choice had already been accounted for, and down below it'll go on just the same.

They lift me up, bearing me back and above, and I climb, and climb, and am grateful that Cerise has not closed the hatch--

She's above again.

CERISE

Petra.
Petra!

departure

PETRA

It's just like he says.
The furnace. The silent women. The heat. Holy Christ, the heat.

CERISE

You watched them burning it?

PETRA

They've got a lot down there. They're probably backed up for centuries.

CERISE

What did they tell you?

PETRA

They don't care in the least what happens up above. They're satisfied.

CERISE

I thought maybe it was going to be okay.

PETRA

When did I ever say something like that?

CERISE

Then we can't stay here. It's just like I thought.

(CONTINUED)

PETRA

Yeah.

CERISE

I'm leaving.

PETRA

Where?

CERISE

Somewhere safe where a fire doesn't always burn below.

PETRA

Somewhere with no extradition agreement?

CERISE

If that's what it takes.

PETRA

That is a dumb fucking plan.

CERISE

What's yours?

PETRA

I don't know.

CERISE

You don't have to stay here. If we go now, there might be enough time.

PETRA

Time for what? A life on the margin with a bag full of counterfeit passports?

CERISE

If that's what it takes.

PETRA

What about him?

CERISE

What about him? He'll be fine. They'll set him up somewhere with a new office and new lackeys.

PETRA

No. It'll be worse for him. He'll be called accountable.

CERISE

Don't get fooled into thinking you owe anything to him or to those women down below. You and I might be the only people we can trust.

(CONTINUED)

PETRA

You want to just leave him?

CERISE

Yes!

PETRA

I can't.

CERISE

Where was this sense of duty before?

PETRA

He trusted me to do what he couldn't.

CERISE

And that's enough for you?

PETRA

If you have to go, go. Leave your contract with me.
Once you're gone, it's my responsibility.

CERISE

Where's yours?

PETRA

They're keeping it safe down below.

CERISE

They must like you.

PETRA

I have to give final reports at seven. Give it to me.

CERISE gives the last document to her.

CERISE

Why is it so important to you now?

PETRA

No loose ends.

CERISE

Thanks.

PETRA

You should hurry. Maybe we'll catch up with you later.

CERISE

Yeah, okay.

PETRA

Better go.

CERISE

Yeah.

Okay.

She goes. The exit door opens, then shuts.

PETRA

(v.o.)

I wait until the door shuts.

Then I let her contract drop into the hatch and watch it flutter out of sight. When they burn it, maybe it will buy her time. Or maybe she'll wake up tomorrow morning on the opposing surface of reality, remembering my face and voice from her own dream. For the rest of us she won't even be a memory. I can't be sure, but at least I can't take it back.

PETRA quietly sings for a long time. The BOSS wakes up.

transition

[frame text placeholder]

excelsior

BOSS

Ugh. What time is it?

PETRA

Six fifty.

BOSS

Already?

PETRA

You slept a long time. Do you feel okay?

BOSS

Like Satan pinched my nose and vomited in my mouth.
Where's my vodka?

PETRA

You drank it all. There's no more.

BOSS

Bummer.

(CONTINUED)

PETRA

Yeah.

BOSS

Alright, then. Reports, let's go.

PETRA

Okay.

"Night of August 10, 1974--"

BOSS

(with tremendous hangover ennui)

You don't have to do that. Just tear it off and hand it to me. Fuck's sake.

A sheet of paper tearing off a notepad.

PETRA

You want Cerise's report too?

BOSS

That's an odd name. Where have I heard that name before?

PETRA

Cerise?

BOSS

Yeah. Familiar, but I don't know.

PETRA

Never mind. Never mind, sorry.

The buzzer.

BOSS

I'll be damned.

PETRA

Who is that?

BOSS

Edison and his men.

PETRA

Here to clean up?

BOSS

You got it.

PETRA

Fuck.

(CONTINUED)

BOSS

That's right.

PETRA

Fuck!

BOSS

This is the end. Go out the emergency exit. The alarm won't sound, it never does.

PETRA

They'll be waiting right outside. They'll catch us. The only safe place is down below.

BOSS

Then you better hurry.

PETRA

Come on.

BOSS

Not a chance.

PETRA

We'll wait below until they're gone. They like me down there.

BOSS

I'll take my chances with Edison and his men.

PETRA

Why? You know what they'll do to you!

BOSS

Even if I were brave enough to go with you, they wouldn't let me. The fires of liberty are tended by women. Always have been.

The buzzer.

BOSS

Last chance.

Some kind of sound that signifies climbing. Metal ladder or something.

petra iv

PETRA.

PETRA

Down below, they're waiting for me with a black robe. Just holding it toward me and waiting.

(MORE)

(CONTINUED)

PETRA (cont'd)

"No.

I'm just waiting for night to fall. For Edison and the Boss to go, and I'll be gone.

I'm not here to stay."

The hatch falls shut.

I'm just waiting for night to fall. This bright national sunshine might last for a century or more. But working in silence, under a black hood, with the pulsing heat of the furnace animating my blood, I am more patient than even death.

edison returns

Buzzer.

Buzzer.

BOSS

(calling)

Yeah, I'm coming.

The BOSS opens the door.

BOSS

Hello, Edison.

EDISON

Good morning.

BOSS

Just you? No muscle?

EDISON

Just me. Gimme your keys. Let's go.

The BOSS hands over his keys. They go outside.

EDISON

I know this is crude, but I have to pat you down.

BOSS

Are you serious?

EDISON

Orders from the top.

EDISON gives him a quick pat-down.

BOSS

Satisfied?

(CONTINUED)

EDISON

Sorry. Alright, now. Hop in.

The BOSS opens the truck's passenger door.

EDISON

No no, not there.

He undoes the metal latch and throws open the truck's clattering rear gate.

EDISON

You ride back here this time.

BOSS

Must I?

EDISON

I'm sorry.

BOSS

We've known each other so long.

EDISON

Like I said. Orders from the top.

BOSS

Alright.
Wait. Answer me something.

EDISON

What I can, no promises.

BOSS

Where are we going?

EDISON

I got pretty specific orders not to tell.

BOSS

Come on. Nobody in this country follows every law.

EDISON

Even if I could tell you, you wouldn't like what you heard.

BOSS

I know a lot of things I wish I didn't. It's become a comfort.

EDISON

Well, all I can say is this: we're going to the place of all silence and forgetting.

(CONTINUED)

BOSS

The last American comfort.

EDISON

I've said everything I can.

BOSS

North Dakota.

EDISON

Alright, you said it, not me.

BOSS

You'll tell them I went willingly.

EDISON

Of course.

BOSS

And obviously, I'd do the same thing if I were in your position, or Mr. Ford's.

EDISON

We understand.

BOSS

Good.
Good, good, good.

EDISON

What's the matter?

BOSS

The sun's already up. I slept through the sunrise. This has been the longest night of my life, I spent the last thirteen years in darkness, and I've just missed the sunrise.

EDISON

Come on, now, enough of that. Climb in or get thrown in.

BOSS

You wouldn't do that.

EDISON

I'd hate to, but I would.

BOSS

Alright, I'm going.

The BOSS climbs in.

(CONTINUED)

EDISON

Now you answer me something.

BOSS

(suddenly far away in the cargo hold of
the truck)

Anything, my friend.

EDISON

Where's Cerise?

BOSS

Don't know anyone called Cerise.

EDISON

And Petra? Where is Petra?

BOSS

Don't know anyone called Petra either. Why do you ask?

EDISON

Just trying to be thorough. No loose ends. You
comfortable?

BOSS

No.

EDISON

Me neither, my friend.

*He rolls the gate shut and locks it.
He climbs in the driver's seat, starts the engine,
and drives off.*

Sweeping music.

Sampled:

GERALD FORD

(inauguration speech, 1975)

My fellow Americans, our long national nightmare is
over.

Our Constitution works; our great Republic is a
government of laws and not of men. Here the people
rule. But there is a higher Power, by whatever name we
honor Him, who ordains not only righteousness but love,
not only justice but mercy.

As we bind up the internal wounds of Watergate, more
painful and more poisonous than those of foreign wars,
let us restore the golden rule to our political
process, and let brotherly love purge our hearts of
suspicion and of hate.

In the beginning, I asked you to pray for me. Before

(MORE)

(CONTINUED)

GERALD FORD (cont'd)

closing, I ask again your prayers, for Richard Nixon and for his family. May our former President, who brought peace to millions, find it for himself. May God bless and comfort his wonderful wife and daughters, whose love and loyalty will forever be a shining legacy to all who bear the lonely burdens of the White House.

End.