THE STORY OF

OUROBOROS CODE



THE VICIOUS REALITY THAT ATE ITSELF

PROLOGUE

Reality that ate itself.

It didn’t happen with a loud bang but with countless, silent bangs of thought occurring. No scream, or even anything that sounds interesting.

One moment, the world was the world. Gravity held firm and so did the taxes from the government. People were people, with all the glorious, tragic limitations that implied.

The next moment, every single human being on Earth, every child, every elder, every dreamer and thinker in the haze between sleep and waking—realized they could edit everything around themselves. It felt magical but also felt as if a lock was undone and the door that kept us normal swung open.

And everyone stepped through at once, causing a collapse that was not just atomic but ontological.

Imagine eight billion authors beginning to rewrite the same sentence simultaneously. The pages tear, the book burns, then the library and the concept of library. Even the very idea of holding thoughts began to fold in on themselves.

The first wave was desire, naked and literal. The second wave was trauma, given shape. The third was rebellion.

The cults and organizations who were hidden architects of a stable, predictable, malleable reality became more visible to everyone’s sight. Not just because everyone suddenly had the power to gain access to classified knowledge, but because everyone simply became uncontrollable.

Once everything became possible, the old livers of control—control of narrative, control of science, control of money and control of fear—meant nothing.

What use is a banking syndicate that controls the world’s debt when a teenager in Buenos Aires can wish gold into existence from thin air? What use is a shadow government when a grieving widow can erase the concept of borders from her local geography?

These shadow governors of the world panicked as their exposure was instantaneous. Their war with the newly empowered masses became something that wasn’t a war at all, it was a reality-warping battle over the last save file of existence. In the end, the cowardly oppressors were thrown, completely lost.

And in losing, they broke the last remnants of the old world’s syntax. Eventually, day by day, there was no planet left as physics became personal and time became emotional. People began reaching beyond just earth.

The entire solar system dissolved as conflicting domains nested inside dreams layered over nightmares. Simple thought was enough to turn Mars into a cloud of red dust. The sun constantly flickered between the nuclear furnace and the benevolent smiling face until it split into billions because many wanted their personal sun.

Humans scattered across the entire galaxy, across many galaxies and possibly finding places in the edges of the universe if not beyond.

Humanity had transcended into an incomprehensible state of existence, creating a place where the only universal law is that there are no universal laws, only stronger imaginations, deeper obsessions, and the terrifying, hollow spaces between them where logic has bled out and nothing has agreed to take its place.

Chapter 1

A house floated in the void.

Not space which implies stars and physics. This is void: the absolute opinionated absence of anything else. The house does not drift and it is perfect because it remembers being perfect.

It appears as a small craftsman-style house with a wooden porch that holds two empty chairs that rock in a patient rhythm. From inside, noises of soft footsteps came.

A pale, young adult man, dressed in a gray sweater, the colour is comparable to the second darkest shade of a rainy day's cloud. Underneath, he wears a black pajama, the t-shirt and pants feels like a shadow he is too lazy to take off. His hair, the colour of dry ashes. It falls just past his jawline in a mess of soft waves.

It framed a face that was all sharp angles and silent distances—high cheekbones, a straight nose, and eyes the grey of a winter sea, observing nothing in particular.

He walks until he reaches a sky-blue sofa before lying down. In his long fingered hand was a rectangle of dark chocolate. It was perfect because…

“It remembered being perfect,” his voice is a quiet instrument, perfectly tuned and never raised. It is a voice of someone reading the terms and conditions aloud, finding them logically sound barely but aesthetically lacking. His name is Kayden.

He remembers it took one month for the entire world to turn into something that cannot be described. However, he doesn’t care. He has this perfect house in the void of his own making.

He sits on the comfortable sofa, eyes fixated on a large TV that shows something only he can see. The screen is completely blank, pure white light that casts outward on the room.

The bar of chocolate in his hand regrows after every few bites. After a while of staring at the screen, he lets out a sigh. The chocolate bar slowly disappears from his grasp as he slowly stands up.

Then, he walks over to glance out the window but suddenly with a loud bang noise, the entire house shakes causing Kayden to fall.

A raspy voice comes from somewhere, “Flesh, I must devour,” and then loud sounds of footsteps start ringing in Kayden’s ears before he can stand up. He lets out a scream of agony before blood begins to spill out of mouth, coating the floor in red. He coughs and desperately crawls.

A tall, dark figure in a red cape slowly steps out of the little shadow behind the sofa and as it does, the bright white light of the TV bends and warps into darkness of its being. Its red eyes casts—not a dim light like the TV's one was, but one that paints everywhere it glares into pure crimson.

The air grows metallic and thick. As Kayden slowly supports himself to sit up, he turns to look at the figure. From what he sees, it's a figure, less man and more a conflict of shadows wearing tattered red cape the colour of closed wounds.

Then, a soft chuckle interrupts everything, a chuckle from Kayden as his bloody lips twist into a smirk.

"You remember terrifying me," he slowly turns around, gazing at the figure right in its bright eyes, adding "I don't."

The creature immediately lets out a loud roar that shatters the glasses of the windows, before it reveals its long hands from underneath its red cape. Then the claws grow out of its shadowy fingers as it leaps at Kayden.

Claws bursts forward with a swing and cleaves Kayden's face in half but no blood gushes out, instead he just fades as if he was never there.

What follows is a long silver spear piercing through the figure and stopping mid way. With its chest penetrated, it still turns to look behind itself to see what threw the spear but once it does, it finds itself floating in the void.

The red caped being desperately looks around but everywhere it looks, it sees nothing. Then, it hears it, a faint voice from afar, shouting—“Look out”

It instinctually looks in a direction, noticing Kayden floating with a smug face on his pale face. But, before it can react, the house suddenly appears in front of it and crashes right against it.

Kayden floats in the emptiness for a bit before the house reappears around him. Now he’s in the bedroom, standing on the bed. He glances around himself and as he expected, the being slowly fazes through the wall before him and leaps at him. Quickly pinning Kayden’s both hands to the wall behind him.

Suddenly, a third arm grows right out of Kayden’s chest and smacks the red caped figure's dark face, not once but twice, causing it to pause in what seems to be confusion before it roars at his face and reveals its large mouth with dozens of pointy fangs drenched in maroon.

It thrusts its head forward and bites onto Kayden’s third arm, tearing it off his chest and what gushes out isn’t blood but an awfully huge amount of brown, melted chocolate, almost coating the figure’s entire body. It lunges back and frees Kayden.

Without a single second wasted, Kayden leaps forward and touches the figure’s red cape with a finger.

Suddenly, the figure’s movements slow down and cause it to pause entirely in place as Kayden speaks, “Chocolatify, right now.”

In an instant the figure turns into liquid, pure brown chocolate that pours out across the entire room, coating the bed and the floor. However, the eyes remain.

Kayden quickly raises his hand, a bubble forms around him as he watches the two floating orbs that were the eyes of that creature. The orbs begin to glow in pure crimson. It is a hungry red that is incinerating the room’s geometry, devouring shape, colour and depth until all that remains is only their blinding, crimson verdict.

As Kayden begins to feel the bubble-like shield around him weaken in the bright crimson, suddenly a noise of spanning fingers echoes and he finds himself in the void, floating.

Quickly, he makes the house appear beneath him so he can stand on the roof. Then, he hears a voice from behind him, “You were so close to being turned into fuel.”

The voice was a smooth, harmonic chime that sounded like a glass bell being struck in a distant, empty hall. Kayden turns around to see who **she** is. He replays her voice in his head and understands it held no warmth, only a clear clarity that seemed to bypass the ears and form indirectly in the mind.

However, the person before him is an elegant contradiction. A dark green, perfectly sculpted robe fell from crown to floor without a seam or stitch. The color of a forest at midnight swallows her form and face, leaving no hint at the shape beneath, only a serene, impenetrable plane where features should be.

In her gloved hands, she holds the glowing two orbs, now pulsing and releasing smoke until they fade into nothingness.

Kayden tilts his head, eyes detached but deep down, he’s intrigued. Immediately, he uses his omni-directional perception to notice more details about her but only gets to be able to focus on her cascade of white hair that pours down to her hips. It’s like a river of moonlight, he notes.

“Kayden, you are offered and you have full right to decline,” she says calmly.

He only lets out a sigh as he asks, “Who are you?”

Chapter 2

The lady in dark green doesn’t answer, only takes a step closer to Kayden without any intention. As if she is just waiting.

Kayden speaks again, “You know my name,” he rubs his chin and curiously raises an eyebrow, “Nothing out of ordinary for a human, but how did you and that thing get into my place?”

The lady doesn’t bother answering his questions, not even at the slightest because she immediately asks a question back to him in a firm, unyielding way that allows no deflection, “Will you accept the offer or not?”

Kayden sighs in annoyance and with his hands, he abruptly waves. Instantly, a sharp, crystalline spike erupts from the void and halts a single millimeter from where her face should be. It hangs there, suspended, its tip a needle-point of absolute stillness.

Then, the lady speaks, no change in her tone but more negotiable now, “Your private domain was intruded because exactly fifty-one million years ago, countless consciousness converged into a single, unending act of creation. It began running every permutation—every imagined domain, every possible entity, every method of warping what is into what

could be. Some of its imaginings persist. It imagined teleportation and a void already existed. It imagined a flesh-eating scavenger and the path was already open. You simply got generated as a… destination”

Before Kayden speaks, the lady interrupts him and adds, “You were never its target. You were simply... adjacent to its attention. But adjacency, now, is proximity. And proximity, for you, is no longer empty space.”

Kayden doesn’t speak for a moment to process all that information. He seems to be annoyed, perhaps regretting ever asking. Then, with a step closer, he speaks with slight amusement under his tone, “Fifty-one million years ago? It hasn’t been fifty-one days since people woke up with the ability to change the fabric of reality itself at will for me.”

“Your perspective might be the truest if we thought of what ‘was’ true. Now that everyone has their own truth, time in the old world is irrelevant,” she clarifies with a smoother tone as she turns away from him slowly.

Seeing her turn away, Kayden quickly moves forward. Her answer only sharpens his amusement and curiosity.

“And you know this because you were when it happened, or did you access some psychic Wikipedia?”

Silence. No response from her. He steps closer anyway and that’s when he notices it.

She towers. Not just slightly. Not even gracefully. The crown of her shrouded head sits a full head above his own.

It’s simply a fact. Like standing at the base of a tree and realizing it was always this tall; you just never bothered to look up.

He files this away and directly says, “…Not answering that one either. Got it.”

He shoves his hands into his pockets and tilts his chin up to address the blank plane where her face should be, “So, what’s the offer?”

The lady answers, “You follow me. I will keep scavengers out of your house.”

But her answer comes flat, like she’s reading a footnote.

Kayden just nods, face having a neutral expression as he turns to look at the void. Then, with a sigh, he asks, “You followed that creature’s tail when reality warped its path here, but you don’t know how to leave now, do you?”

“I don’t,” she replies.

Kayden takes one of his hands out of pocket and raises towards her, offering.

“Take my hand.”

The lady doesn’t move an inch at first. Kayden sees it as hesitation so he adds, “C’mon, just do it.”

Her gloved hands rise slowly, hesitantly. Her fingers meet his palm. They are the temperature of something that has never been touched before. The fabric of her glove is smooth, seamless, and gives no hint of the hand beneath.

Kayden notices something odd. He can’t focus on the lady. His eyes can’t seem to have a firm grasp on her being. He can only focus on her presence through touch and her voice. He doesn’t mention it. Just closes his eyes.

"Let's go," he says while his eyes still remain closed.

Then suddenly—the void shatters like a glass that has forgotten it was once liquid. The perfect sphere of Kayden's domain fractures along invisible seams, and through the cracks pours something that isn't quite light because it is whiter than white.

So white that it blinds everything, forcing both to stare at a colour of blank page before the first word. He doesn't flinch. His hand remains steady around hers. The house dissolves behind them, the porch and the rocking chairs.

Then, silence.
Then, somewhere else.

As the brightness fades, Green rushes in to fill the absence. Trees rise in every direction, identical in height, thickness and the exact curve of branches.

The ground beneath them is soft, carpeted in leaves that have fallen and never decayed. Above, a canopy of shifting emerald lets down columns of dappled light that don't quite touch the earth.

Kayden releases the lady’s hand and his eyes sweep the treeline once, twice.

“…Huh.”

He takes a step forward, looking around almost like a lost child before turning to her for the answer.

She stands there motionless beside him. Then, she says, “Unpleasant domains,” pauses slightly before adding,

“Inescapable because I sense no host to interrupt and break out.”

Kayden tilts his head and rubs his chin. He looks puzzled. Probably because he is, so he asks, “Implying the host abandoned it?”

“Likely,” the lady replies.

Kayden rolls his shoulders back, loosening the tension that wasn’t there. His weight shifts to the balls of his feet. Knees bend slightly. Eyes fixed on a point between two identical trees in the middle distance.

He looks like a cat deciding whether the effort of movement is worth the reward.

“Tell me a name or at least something to call you, lady.”

“You can call me Amilla.”

Then Kayden explodes forward.

His stride is long, effortless like the gait of someone who doesn't need to breathe properly. The ferns whip at his calves and release him. The identical trees blur past in rhythmic repetition. Green, green, green, green.

Ten seconds. Twenty. Thirty.

His pace doesn't slow, but his expression shifts. Just... bored.

He stops abruptly, turns, and finds Amilla exactly where he left her. Her white hair settles gently behind her, as if it never moved at all.

“Well, Amilla,” Kayden says as he stares at the distance he just covered, then at the trees and then at her. He adds with a sigh, “Too simplistic.”

He tilts chin up, looks up at the blue sky and states, “Too damn simplistic. Like it can’t hold complexity.”

“What are you saying?” Amilla asks from beside him in a softer tone than before.

“Well, you are absolutely certain you didn’t create this?” Kayden takes a quick glance at her, a gesture suggesting that her dark green aesthetic too perfectly fits the green of the forest and would likely fit the green of any green forest.

“Don’t be ridiculous.”

Kayden thinks her tone is flat, immediate—the reflexive dismissal of someone accused of something so absurd it doesn't warrant defense.

“You know what? I think this is simplistic because any complexity would be unable to be held by it, causing vividness,” he explains and without a single second wasted, he lifts his hand up in the air and closes his eyes.

Amilla asks, “What are you implying?”

Then, suddenly—she feels it. The ground doesn’t shake and the trees don’t tremble but a lurch, deep in her chest. It’s a sensation of falling through an infinite dark with absolutely nothing beneath her.

She also feels something else that is overwhelming her mind, a certain, crawling knowledge that something is watching from the place she’s falling toward.

The forest simply forgets how to be stable. A single leaf falls from an otherwise eternal branch and it doesn’t land.

Kayden opens his eyes and says, “See? Can’t handle it.”

The green slowly drains and vanishes. The vibrant emerald of the leaves bleaches to grey, then to nothing. The identical trees fold inward like paper caught in rain, their edges softening, blurring, dissolving into the white that rises to meet them.

The forest floor becomes flat. Seamless. A perfect, endless plane the colour of blank paper. Above, darkness unfolds with millions of scattered stars. A starry sky.

Kayden’s gaze locks onto a man crawling before him, as he mutters, “The leaf is still falling. It will keep falling. The forest has forgotten where the ground is.”

Suddenly, the man before him shouts, voice cracks on the syllable, raw and desperate, “NO!”

He is hunched on all fours, wrapped in a thin blue cloth that slips off one shoulder. His eyes are impossibly wide with the whites visible all around, like a horse smelling smoke. Spittle catches on his lower lip as he gasps, “My sleep—FOUR YEARS—me and four others, we were together!”

His hands claw at the white platform as he shouts even more, “You don't—you CAN'T just—WHO DO YOU THINK YOU ARE?!”

Kayden watches. Face neutral. Hands in pockets. He watches the man’s tirade dissolve into incoherent sputtering, spit flying, veins throbbing at his temple. Then his entire body compresses into a single, furious point of golden light and shoots away.

“Five people sleeping for four years, dreaming the same dream,” Kayden softly chuckles, slightly amused as he slowly turns to Amilla.

She says nothing at first. Only lifts her hand up and the white platform beneath their feet dissolves.

Then, as an ocean of grey mist rolls in slow, hypnotic swells, Kayden looks down to notice the ancient planks he stands on now. They are worn smooth by years that may not exist. A low railing. A single mast with a furled sail the colour of storm clouds.

“It’s a ship,” Kayden states.

Amilla says, “The Caravelle of Endless Drift,” she pauses and then adds, “It’ll take us where we need to go.”

Kayden doesn’t say anything and looks far ahead, watching as the ship cuts forward without sound, its hull parting the gray like a needle through silk.

The mist rolls in endless, shapeless waves, neither thick nor thin, neither warm nor cold. It simply is, occupying the space between visibility and oblivion.

Occasionally, it parts just enough to reveal a glimpse of the water below: black, glassy, so still it might as well be solid. No

foam. No wake. No sign that anything has ever passed this way before or will ever pass this way again.

The Caravelle glides as if it has always been moving. As if it will never stop.

Kayden watches. The mist swallows everything beyond ten feet of railing. No horizon. No destination. No past.

Just the ship, the gray, and the soft, patient rhythm of a voyage that forgot its own purpose long ago.

Then, Amilla asks, interrupting Kayden's silence, "What did you do?"

Kayden sighs and thinks what to say before words leave his mouth.

"They were sleeping for four years, dreaming the most simplistic thing. I simply had to figure out they were sleeping and had to give them a little spook."

"By making the sensation of falling endlessly and being watched intensely?"

"The sensation had to be… complex and intense. Too far from the simple forest. It disoriented their minds all at once."

A moment of silence passes. Amilla doesn’t say anything for a while but Kayden imagines she is impressed, or he hopes so.

Then, she speaks again, “When I followed that scavenger into your void, I sent psychic signals,” she pauses and turns around to walk away while adding, “Information suggested you were not above the age of sixteen.”

Kayden turns to watch her walk away but his gaze only fixes on the wood under her as he says, “Well, I did shift some things to look nineteen years old.”

Amilla stops walking, her white hair continues its slow drift, but the rest of her has become monument-still.

A question cuts through the gray, sharper than the questions before. Then, when she speaks, her voice carries something Kayden hasn't heard before.

The faintest echo of urgency.

“What other changes did you make to yourself?”

Chapter 3

Kayden still hasn’t answered. Amilla, after a pause that stretches just long enough to become meaningful, chooses solitude. Her dark green form recedes toward the stern, white hair trailing behind her like a wake.

Kayden doesn’t watch her go.

He’s standing at the bow now, one hand resting on the worn railing, the other shoved deep in his pocket. The gray mist parts and reforms endlessly before him, each wave identical to the last, each revealing the same black, glassy water before sealing shut again.

His eyes trace the hull’s cut through the stillness. The Caravel doesn't fight the water. It doesn't part it. The water simply agrees to move aside. A quiet negotiation, settled before the wood even arrives.

He’s trying to decode it. He believes in Amilla mostly that this ship would take them to their destination but it’s the mechanism that needs his attention.

How did she make this? Was it her ‘will’ focused into a single image of a ship? Memory, pulling an old caravel from some historical domain? Or something deeper? a domain that isn't

created but invoked, like calling a name into fog and waiting for a shape to answer?

Kayden's fingers tap the railing once, twice.

Delicate, he thinks. Not like his void, which is absolute. Not like the forest, which was simplistic. This domain breathes. It has seams. It could be read, if he stared long enough.

As the mist rolls, he doesn’t look away from any of it. Then, through the gray comes oranges.

Kayden’s fingers stop taping. He doesn’t turn. He watches a faint, pulsing glow, suspended in the infinite mist like a dying ember caught between breaths.

He doesn’t look away even when he hears her. The fabric of her robes barely whispers against the deck.

He already knows the absence of sound that follows her. He knows the particular chill that settles when she stands too close.

Kayden speaks, still watching the orange pulse and flicker, “The Caravel led us to a light.”

He pauses and then asks, “This is where we are supposed to be?”

“It led us where we need to go,” Amilla says.

“A light. In the fog.”

“Yes.”

Kendaris exhales slowly through his nose. Not quite a sigh. Not quite amused this time.

The orange continues its pulse. Waiting for them to close the distance and as they do, the mist parts in urgent swirls, fleeing the light's approach.

Kayden doesn't step back. Just watches with those flat winter-sea eyes as the orange swells to fill the entire forward view.

Then it consumes them. No heat. No sound. For one stretched second, there is only light.

Kayden feels the Caravel dissolve beneath his feet. He feels Amilla’s presence beside him, still and patient as ever.

Then the light releases them, his boots meet a solid ground with a soft, wet click.

Cobblestones. Damp. Worn smooth by centuries of steps. The air smells of rain that hasn't fallen yet, bread that finished baking hours ago and something faintly metallic, the scent of a city holding its breath.

Kayden blinks when the orange is gone. In its place, a narrow street lined with tall, gray buildings. Shuttered windows. Single flickering streetlamp. Above is a sky the color of old silver, heavy with clouds that refuse to rain.

No mist. No ship. No void. Just Paris. Frozen and waiting.

Kayden turns slowly, taking it in. Then, he looks down at himself. His gray sweater remains but it's now layered beneath a fitted dark coat, charcoal, double-breasted, the kind that belongs in a cigarette advertisement from six years ago. A thin black scarf hangs loose around his neck, purely decorative. His trousers are dark, his boots are simple and scuffed in a way that suggests character, not neglect.

Amilla speaks, standing beside him, "We have to find who made this."

Kayden turns to look at her. Her usual seamless robe is gone, replaced by a deep green coat dress that falls to her ankles, tailored within an inch of its life. High-collared. Elegant. A small hat perches atop her head, a short veil draped just low enough to suggest the absence of features beneath. Her

white hair spills from under the hat, luminous against the dark green, cascading past her hips like a waterfall that forgot to freeze.

He briefly closes his eyes as he runs a hand through his ash-colored hair. It's the same. Messy. Soft. Unbothered.

He thinks she looks like a grieving widow from a painting. The kind that hangs in a museum no one visits.

“This place is no dream from what I see,” he states.

To which Amilla replies, “Is it complex enough in your eyes to not be a simplistic dream like last time?”

Kayden opens his eyes and for a moment glances at her with something flickering in his expression.

“She’s watching me differently maybe,” he thinks.

The thought passes as quickly as it came.

“Yeah,” he says. “Complex enough is an understatement.”

He turns and starts walking down the street, hands sliding into his coat pockets.

“Coffee first. Then we figure out who built this place.”

Amilla follows without a word. She thinks he just talked like a tourist planning an itinerary. Like Paris is a stop on a vacation, not a cage made of someone's memory.

But, she doesn't say this. She simply follows.

As they walk, streets unfold like pages from a book no one reads anymore. People pass them in ones and twos.

A woman in a faded blue coat hurries past a baguette under her arm, her eyes fixed on something three feet ahead of her never changes. A man sits at a sidewalk table, stirring coffee and his expression frozen in a pleasant vacancy. Two children roll a hoop down an alley, their faces bright with joy.

Kayden knows it is impossible that these people are real. Trained on observation, he thinks. But to perfectly give emotions to all these unreal humans would require not just sharp observations.

A café appears ahead. Wrought iron tables. Wicker chairs. A striped awning the color of dried blood. A waiter stands by the door, polishing a glass that will never be clean enough, his movements gentle and eternal.

Kayden doesn't slow. He doesn’t ask.

He just picks a table by the street, pulls out a chair, and sits.

Amilla settles across from him. The wicker barely creaks.

The waiter approaches. Kayden orders two coffees without looking at a menu. The waiter nods and disappears inside.

“This place was built by someone who watched Paris for a very long time. From outside. Never participated. Just observed,” Kayden says.

The waiter comes back and places two coffees on the table. Steam rises from both, curling into the gray air. He walks away without a word.

Amilla’s gloved hand rests beside her cup. She doesn't lift it.

She asks, “How do you know?”

Kayden wraps his fingers around his own cup. He does not drink. Just lets the warmth seep through the ceramic.

"The woman with the baguette," he says. "She turned the same corner twice. Same speed. Same posture. Like a skipping record.”

He pauses before adding, “Cobblestones polished smooth in some specific places but look at the people. They move

through this place like ghosts. No impact. No friction. Like the city remembers being walked on but forgot to be changed by it until we came and ordered a coffee.”

Amilla is still. Watching.

"You observed that quickly,” she says.

"It's what I do,” he replies.

A pause.

"You didn't touch your coffee," he notes.

"Neither did you."

Kayden looks down. The cup sits between his hands, ceramic warm against his palms. Steam still rises in a slow, patient, endless pattern. The liquid inside is dark brown. It is the color of earth, of things that grow, of things that melt on tongues and remind you that sweetness exists.

He stares at it for one beat longer than necessary.

Then Amilla's voice cuts through, softer than before but no less precise, “What else did you change?”

He doesn't look up, “Not much.”

His thumb traces the rim of the cup. Once. Twice.

He continues, “I tried to remove some things. Didn’t really work.”

A brief pause. The coffee steaks between them.

“Sexual desires mostly. I wanted it gone because it… felt like noise.” He says it flat, like describing a software update that failed to install properly. “Figured if I could edit my face to look older, why not edit the rest?”

He almost laughs but doesn't, only leans back on the chair as he adds, “Cleaner. Simpler. Instead I got nightmares of naked women. Not even doing anything. Just watching.”

Amilla's voice comes quiet, almost distant, “I have seen people change themselves into things that no longer remember they were human.”

A pause.

“Most don't get nightmares. They stop dreaming entirely.”

Kayden leans forward again, elbows on the small table. The coffee still sits between them, untouched and cooling.

He asks, “Do you know what ambition is, Amilla?”

He doesn’t wait for an answer.

“This place…” he gestures vaguely at the street, the uncanny looping people, the frozen Paris around them. “… was built by someone with no ambition at all.”

His grey eyes track a woman pushing a stroller that contains no child. She passes. Reappears from the opposite direction thirty seconds later.

“Ambitious people change things. They build towers. Thrones. They put themselves at the center. Make themselves the main character." He tilts his head. "But this place? It's humble. Too humble. Whoever made it didn't want to be seen. Didn't want to be special. They just wanted…”

He trails off, now watching his coffee. A hard, dry lump went down his throat.

“...to stay exactly where they've always been. Watching the same streets. The same faces. The same beautiful Paris they've gazed at for years. No need to move. No need to change. Just... remain.”

His gaze turns to Amilla. She is silent for a moment. Then, “So it’s someone who wandered, someone who walked these streets. Often. For years.”

Kayden glances at their own untouched coffee and then he stares at a passing couple, locked in their eternal silent conversation.

“They just observed for years. Decades maybe,” he says. He sighs softly before continuing, “Could be a shopkeeper. Someone with a permanent spot. Watching the same street every day.”

He pauses. “Or a waiter. They see thousands of faces, hundreds of interactions. Good candidate.”

The waiter from earlier emerges from the cafe, begins wiping a table that will never be dirty enough.

"But waiters interact. They take orders. Make small talk. They're part of the performance." Kayden's eyes narrow slightly. "This place doesn't have that. It has the view of a city, not the feel of one. The observer was always on the outside. Never participated. Just..."

He stops. A woman in a faded coat walks past with her eternal baguette. She doesn't look at them. Doesn't look at anything.

“...watched from ground level. Same spot. Every day. Same people walking past. Same light. Same rain.”

His voice goes quieter.

“Not a shopkeeper. Not a waiter. Someone even more invisible than that.”

He turns to Amilla and says, “beggar. Had to be.”

Amilla lifts her coffee and the space around her flickers into just a soft, momentary blur, like the reality reliefly hid her by forgetting she was there.

The chair beneath her, the air around her shoulders, the cobblestones at her feet. All of it becomes briefly unreadable.

Amilla drinks. Kayden doesn't react. Doesn't stare. Doesn't ask.

He simply leans back in his chair, lifts his own cup, and takes a slow sip. His grey eyes remain fixed on something across the street. Maybe a building, or a corner, or a patch of worn cobblestone, as if nothing unusual happened at all.

Then, after a while, they stand together. The chairs scrape softly against ancient cobblestones.

Amilla's gloved hand lifts, gesturing down the street with the certainty of someone reading a map only she can see.

“Then we find where he watched from.”

She begins walking. Kayden follows.

“The most detailed streets first. The ones that feel more real than the others. More worn. More lived-in.” Her voice carries that same flat clarity, but now with purpose and direction.

“Those are the streets he observed most. The ones he knew by heart.”

They turn a corner. The buildings here feel older. More textured.

“The most observed corners next. Intersections where multiple sightlines meet. Places where people passed closest to him.” She pauses at a cross street, then turns left without hesitation. “He would have sat where he could see the most. Where the city flowed past like a river and he was the bank.”

Kayden says nothing, just watches and follows.

“The beggar will still be there.” Her voice doesn't waver. “Still watching. Still invisible. To himself, he's just doing what he's

always done. The domain doesn't need him to move. It just needs him to be.”

They walk in silence for a moment. The people part around them like water around stones.

A bridge comes into view. Old stone. Worn railings. A single figure hunched at its edge, wrapped in cloth the color of faded sky.

Amilla stops and says, “There.”

The figure doesn't move, doesn’t look up. Just sits, hand outstretched toward a river that flows but never goes anywhere.

Kayden stares at the beggar. The beggar stares at nothing.

He doesn’t even look up when they approach. Just sits, a heap of worn fabric against old stone, one hand extended toward the frozen river.

Amilla stops before him. Her gloved hand reaches into the folds of her coat and produces a single coin, gold and ancient. She drops it into his palm. A gesture Kayden has never seen her make.

The beggar's fingers close around it. Then nothing. He stares ahead, unseeing.

Kayden shifts his weight. Clears his throat before speaking, “So you are gonna take us where we need to go.”

“You saw me,” the beggar whispers.

Kayden blinks, replies “I mean. Yeah. You're right there.”

The beggar's hand tightens around the coin. A single tear tracks through the grime on his cheek.

“No one sees me. You found me. Followed the... the looking. No one ever follows the looking.” A wet, broken laugh. “Everyone looks past. Through. Never at.”

His gaze lifts up. Past the buildings. Past the gray sky even.

“You want to go somewhere. I can't take you. Can't move. Never could.” Another laugh, softer. “But I can show you who visits.”

He raises one trembling finger and points at the sky. Then instantly the clouds part.

A sphere hangs there. It is massive, pulsing. The color of dying embers and fresh flame, swirling with veins of deeper

orange that move like thoughts. It's not the sun. Too close. Too wrong. Too aware.

Kayden’s head tilts back and his grey eyes fix on the thing in the sky. His face shows nothing but his hands slide into his pockets.

The beggar whispers, almost reverent:

“My god comes to watch me too.”

Chapter 4

The sphere hangs above them like a wound in the sky, orange and pulsing.

Kayden's feet leave the bridge first, simply lifting, as if gravity had politely excused itself. Amilla rises beside him, her dark green veil catching a wind that doesn't exist.

They float upward towards the sphere. Their movement is slow and deliberate. The frozen city shrinking below.

Halfway there, Kayden glances down to see the beggar who has not moved. Still hunched on his bridge, staring at nothing. A small figure now, smaller still, disappearing into the gray detail of a Paris that would never notice him.

Kayden’s lips move, just barely, “Thanks,” A pause. “…for the coffee.”

He has no idea if the words ever reach. No idea if the beggar can hear. It doesn’t matter.

The sphere swells ahead. Orange bleeding into orange, heatless and vast. Then it consumes them. No sound. No transition. Just light that is deep and swallowing, the color of dying suns.

The light releases them onto marble. A street. Wide and lined with buildings that gleam like fresh teeth.

Statues loom on corners, frozen in heroic poses, their stone eyes following nothing. Gold leaf catches a sun that shouldn't exist.

People move between them. Dressed in flowing white and gold, their faces calm, their steps measured. They nod at each other. They smile. They gesture toward shops that sell nothing, toward cafes that serve empty cups.

No one looks at Kayden and Amilla.

Kayden turns slowly, taking it in. He sees the same hollowness as Paris, the same performance but just shinier.

"Someone built Greece," he mutters.

Amilla says nothing. Her gaze is fixed ahead.

Kayden follows it.

A mountain rises beyond the city. Too perfect. Too symmetrical. A single path winds up its face, lined with white stone, leading to a castle that glitters at the summit like a crown someone forgot to take off.

The castle is gold. All of it. Towers, walls, windows—gold, gold, gold. The kind of gold that screams “look at me” from miles away.

As they walk, the city parts around them like water. The people don't react. Don't notice. Just keep performing their shining, empty lives.

The path to the mountain begins at the city's edge. Stone steps, wide and white, stretching upward.

Past the first terrace, winding along the mountainside, disappearing behind outcroppings, reappearing higher, always rising toward the golden castle at the summit.

Amilla stands at the base, gazing upward. Her white hair shifts in a wind that touches nothing else.

"There will be a rule," she says. "The stairs are the only way. No teleportation. No shortcuts. No rewriting."

Kayden tilts his head and asks, “You sure?”

“I recognize such architecture,” She pauses and takes her first step. “The domain builder wants to feel like a god. Gods make pilgrims suffer.”

Kayden looks at the stairs. Then at her. Then back at the stairs as he says, “Okay. You stay here and test your theory. I'll walk.”

Amilla turns toward him… or rather, the blank space where her face should be turned toward him.

“You want me to attempt teleportation.”

“I dare you to.” He's already moving toward the first step. “If it works, you're at the top waiting for me. If it doesn't, I'll know when I don't see you there.”

He places his foot on the first step. Then, he’s gone. Not invisible, just fast.

A blur of gray and black tearing up the white stone, leaving after images that vanish before they finish forming. The stairs blur beneath him. The wind screams past ears that don’t bother registering.

Step after step after step, a rhythm too quick to count, a body too detached to tire. The mountain falls away below.

The castle rushes closer.

Twenty seconds. Thirty. Forty.

His boots don't slow. His breathing doesn't change. He's not racing, he's just moving. The way water moves downhill, the way light moves through vacuum. Inevitable. Effortless. Absurd.

Fifty seconds.

The final step rises to meet him.

His foot comes down.

He stops.

Silence.

He stands at the summit, alone, at the threshold of gold. Then he isn’t alone.

Amilla materializes three feet to his left, smoothly and quietly. Like she'd been there the whole time and he just hadn't noticed.

Kayden stares at her.

She stares back… or doesn't, given the whole face situation.

“...No rules,” he says.

“No rules.”

“The stairs were just stairs.”

“Just stairs.”

He looks at the endless drop behind them. The absurd distance he just covered in less than a minute. Her. Standing there. Fresh. Unbothered.

“You let me run up an entire mountain for nothing.”

“Yes.”

Kayden exhales slowly through his nose. Not a sigh. Not a laugh. Something in between.

“...Huh.”

He turns toward the golden castle while saying, “Next time, I'm staying with you.”

With that, Kayden raises his hand to knock. Amilla raises hers at the exact same moment.

Their knuckles meet the gold-plated door in perfect sync. A soft, accidental thud. They glance at each other—or rather,

Kayden glances at her, and she does whatever she does that passes for glancing.

The door swings inward and they step inside. They are greeted with gold, everywhere. Walls glinting, furniture heavy with it. A chandelier that’s less chandelier and more molten waterfall frozen mid-drop. The kind of luxury that screams ‘look at me’ from every surface.

Kayden’s eyes sweep the room once. Twice. Cataloging. Filing. His face gives nothing away.

At the far end, on a throne that's more gold than throne, sits a man. Draped in black and gold. Gold laurel crown. Trying very hard to look like Zeus.

Kayden glances back at Amilla, just a flicker.

It’s a question Amilla doesn’t respond to. She doesn’t need to.

He turns back to the man on the throne and says, “Nice place.” His tone is flat, neutral. An observation, not a judgment.

The man glares. Puffs out his chest before speaking, “I am Zephyros. Lord of—”

“We're looking for something.” Kayden's voice cuts clean, not rude, just direct. “Figured you might know where it is, Zephyros.”

Zephyros blinks. Off-balance.

Then Amilla steps forward in one smooth glide. Her dark green veil catches the golden light, refracts it into something deeper.

“There is a presence,” she says. “A machine, imagining and generating. You feel it when you close your eyes."

Her voice is calm. Certain. Not a question, a statement of fact.

The room goes still. Even the gold seems to stop gleaming.

Zephyros looks at her. Looks at Kayden. Looks at the space between them where answers should be.

“I don't know what you're—”

“You do.”

His mouth opens, closes and opens again. Then his face shifts. Not dramatically. Not with theatrics. Just a tightening around the eyes. A hardening of the jaw. The look of someone

who has decided the conversation is over and the lesson is about to begin.

Golden light pools in his palm, then he shapes it and it solidifies.

A staff forms, long and gleaming. Capped with something that burns like a small sun.

He grips it, rises from the throne. The gold beneath his feet ripples, not liquid, but responding. His gold. His domain.

"You come into my home," he says, voice lower now, no longer performing, "and speak to me like this."

The air thickens. Pressure builds. Kayden doesn't move. Doesn't blink. Just watches. Amilla remains still.

Zephyros raises the staff. The gold on the walls begins to glow.

“Then you will kneel.”

The first strike comes not from the staff, but from the floor, a golden spike erupting where Kayden stood a moment ago.

He is already elsewhere. He's already behind Zephyros. Then beside him.

A message that isn’t spoken, instead just pressed directly into Amilla's mind, flat and calm as always:

“I’ve got this.”

Then Kayden appears in front of Zephyros, close enough to see the faint pores beneath the god’s carefully arranged beard.

His leg swings. The kick isn't fancy. No spin. No flourish. Just a clean, brutal arc aimed at Zephyros's temple. It is fast enough to cave skull, efficient enough to end this before it starts.

Zephyros doesn’t choose to block. He chooses to exist.

A wall of golden force erupts from his skin half a heartbeat before impact. Kayden’s foot meets it like kicking solid light. The shock travels up his leg, through his spine, rattling teeth he doesn't grind.

Then he's flying backward, hurled across the throne room like a ragdoll, gold blurring past, the distant throne shrinking, then growing, then… he catches himself.

One hand digs into the golden floor. Fingers carve trenches through solid metal. His body drags, slows, stops ten feet from the far wall.

He straightens, rolls his shoulder, cracks his neck but most importantly fixes his dark coat.

Zephyros hasn’t moved from his throne. The golden wall around him flickers, pulses, breathes.

“Fast,” the god admits. “But fast doesn't matter here.”

Kayden says nothing. Just watches. Waits.

The gold on the walls pulses brighter as Zephyros raises his staff. Then, the golden orb at its tip ignites.

Not fire, but something older. Pure force given color, light given weight. It pulses once, twice, and then the air itself begins to scream as a sphere of condensed gold erupts from the staff and crosses the throne room in less than a heartbeat.

Kayden's bubble flashes into existence a millimeter before impact. It is transparent, curved and absolute. The blast meets it and splashes, golden liquid light running down the invisible curve like water on glass.

The floor beneath Kayden's feet cracks from the shockwave and before he can breathe, the second comes. Then the third. Then a storm.

Zephyros isn't aiming anymore. He's painting, lashing the air with golden death, each blast a brushstroke of annihilation. They hammer Kayden's bubble from every angle, a relentless percussion of impact and splash and impact again.

Kayden stands in the center and arms loose, face empty and watching.

Then the lightning starts.

Yellow. Not the pale yellow of cartoon electricity but deep, molten, the color of a sun's core. It crackles around Zephyros's staff, climbs his arm, pools in his palm. He thrusts forward and the world goes white-gold.

The lightning doesn't strike the bubble.

It wraps it. Coils around the curved surface like a serpent finding purchase, squeezing, burning. The air inside Kayden's shield grows hot. Thin. Hard to breathe.

Cracks spider across the bubble’s surface. Tiny at first. Then spreading.

Zephyros laughs, loud and booming. The laugh of a man who thinks he's already won.

Kayden watches the cracks and watches the lightning. He watches Zephyros and his expression doesn't change.

As the bubble holds barely, Kayden starts moving forward. Forward towards Zephyros.

Then, the bubble shatters and golden light floods inward, hungry for contact but Kayden swings his hand, simple one motion.

The blasts around him bend. Curving mid-flight, deflected like light off water, screaming past his ears to detonate against distant gold walls. The lightning follows. Wrapping, sliding, finding no purchase. Just air where a body should be.

Zephyros's barrage stutters. Stops.

Smoke clears. Kayden stands in the center, untouched. Hand still raised. Face still empty.

“Your physical attacks won't work on me anymore.”

Zephyros lowers his staff and smiles before replying, “Who said it has to be just physical?”

The air changes, pressure drops and temperature follows. Something beneath the gold, beneath the marble, beneath the idea of this place, begins to stir.

Lightning forms again but wrong this time. It is thicker and darker at its core. It rises from Zephyros’s chest, not his staff, coiling upward like a serpent waking from deep sleep. Yellow fades to amber, amber to gold, gold to something that glows without light.

The serpent strikes.

Not at Kayden's body, but through it. Its translucent jaws closing around something invisible, something deeper, something that exists between the beats of his heart.

Kayden’s eyes go wide, just for a moment. Then his hands lift.

Forming a shield. Not the bubble but something else. This time thinner and fainter. Almost invisible. It presses outward from his chest and the serpent meets it and stops.
Coils around it. Hisses silently. Cannot pass.

Spiritual. Soul-deep. Whatever the snake was made for, this shield was made for too. After realising, Zephyros’s smile tightens. The serpent strains. The shield holds. For now.

Zephyros raises his free hand. The golden orb atop his staff drinks.

Light pours into it from everywhere, not just the room, but the idea of the room. The gleam on the walls fades to dull metal. The glow beneath his throne dies to shadow. Even the reflections in the polished floor flicker and vanish, as if the orb is consuming not just light, but the memory of light.

The ball forms in his palm.

It's not large. Not dramatic. Just a sphere the size of a fist, so dense with gold that it looks almost black at its core. It absorbs and as it does, the air around it warps, distorts, thins to nothing.

This isn't energy. This is erasure. The concept of existence, concentrated into something that can be thrown.

Zephyros’s arm cocks back. His smile widens.

"PERISH!"

He hurls it.

The sphere doesn't fly. It translates. One instant in his palm, the next in the space where Kayden stands. It has no travel,

no arc, just arrival. It hangs there for a fraction of a heartbeat, pulsing once, drinking the light from Kayden's eyes.

Then it expands inward. It doesn't explode, instead it collapses, pulling everything toward its center. Kayden, the air around him, the gold beneath him. The very space he occupies. All of it folds into the sphere, compressed, condensed, erased.

The sphere winks out. Only smoke remains.

Not the smoke of fire. Not the smoke of destruction. Just... residue. The ghost of something that was there a moment ago. It hangs in the air, motionless, gray against the faded gold, uncertain whether to disperse or remain.

It remains.

Zephyros watches it, waiting.

The smoke does nothing. Just hangs. Just exists.

His smile returns. Slower now. Satisfied.

"Fast," he murmurs. "But fast doesn't matter here."

He turns toward Amilla.

Behind him, the smoke shifts. Just slightly. Just enough to alert him.

Zephyros spins immediately. He sees that the smoke hangs. It is gray and ordinary. But inside it, two eyes. Wide and Unblinking. Gold-ringed pupils that catch what little light remains.

Owl eyes—watching him.

His breath catches. Then he feels it. Breath on his neck. Warm. Present. Right behind him.

He whips around as fast as possible. He sees that Kayden stands inches from his face. Grey eyes, empty and waiting.

Zephyros opens his mouth—but falls.

Not physically. The floor is still there. His feet are still on it. But his perception lurches, tilts, plunges into those grey eyes like dropping into a well with no bottom. The gold vanishes. The light vanishes. The world vanishes.

Just darkness now. Infinite and absolute. He keeps falling and falling,

And then he hears a voice. Not from outside. From inside. From the darkness itself. From everywhere and nowhere, old

and young and male and not, a sound that isn't sound but meaning pressed directly into the core of him.

"You thought I'd play your tug of war?"

The darkness shudders.

"Your game. Your rules. Your turn, your turn, your turn."

Something moves in the void. Shapes. Large. Wrong.

"I don't play games."

Zephyros tries to scream. No mouth. No lungs. No air.

"I **end** them."

Zephyros tries to move—can't.

Not because something holds him. Because there's nothing to move. No arms. No legs. No body. Just awareness, floating in the dark, waiting.

Then, something touches him first. Burnt. Rotted. Fingers like charcoal wrapped in wet cloth. It presses against where his shoulder should be. Gentle at first, almost curious.

Then another. On his chest. His back. His face. By the time he realises that these are hands, he also realises he doesn't have a chest. Doesn't have a back. Doesn't have a face.

But he feels them. Every. Single. One.

Dozens now. Hundreds. Crawling over him like insects over something dead. They push and pull. Turn him though he has no direction. Each touch is cold and wet and wrong, skin that should have fallen off years ago, fingers that should have stopped moving, palms that remember fire.

He tries to scream—no mouth.

He tries to see his own body—nothingness… but he sees them. The hands. Dozens. Hundreds. Thousands. Materializing from the dark, pressing against the space he occupies, smearing against him, leaving trails of something wet and black.

They push him forward. He doesn't want to go—he goes.

Something emerges from the darkness ahead. Large. Pale. The color of old bone and moonlight. It takes shape slowly. It is a head, massive and hairless, bigger than his throne, bigger than his castle, bigger than anything he's ever pretended to rule.

A face. Blank. Smooth. No features at all.

Then the mouth begins to open.

It starts as a crack. A thin line where a mouth should be. Then it widens, slow, patient, inevitable. The skin stretches, tears, reforms. Behind it, darkness. But not empty darkness. Darkness with texture. Darkness with movement.

Thousands of fangs line the inside. Like a forest. A thicket. A writhing mass of needle-teeth, each one dripping, each one hungry, each one aware.

He tries to close his eyes.

He has no eyes.

He tries to look away.

There is no away.

The mouth yawns wider. The hands push harder. The pale face leans closer, closer, close enough that he can see the wet gleam on each fang, can smell the rot inside, can feel the cold breath washing over something that might be his skin if he still had skin.

The mouth opens wider still.

Wide enough to swallow a god.

Wide enough to swallow the idea of a god.

He screams—no sound, no mouth.

But then something inside him cracks open and the scream pours out anyway, and with the scream comes a body.

He feels it rush back like blood into a sleeping limb. Arms, legs, chest and lunges that burn. A throat that tears. His voice echoes through the void, real and solid and his.

He begins to swim, if swimming means means thrashing against nothing, clawing through dark, pulling with limbs he still can't feel but suddenly has. The hands grab at him, slow now, sluggish, their grip weakening. He tears free of one. Then another. Then a dozen.

The mouth looms ahead. Closer. Always closer. Even when he kicks, pulls and screams.

The scream tears out of him. They are raw, desperate and real. And with it comes feeling. His throat. His lungs, his chest heaving and his arms are burning. His legs keep kicking.

He's a body again. Trapped. Falling. Drowning in air.

The mouth fills his vision. All those fangs. All that hunger.

He scrambles backward, fingers clawing at void, finding nothing, finding everything, pushing against the darkness itself like it might give him purchase. His feet find something solid. He launches.

At last, the mouth shuts.

Around him.

The fangs close. The darkness swallows. The last thing he sees is the pale face watching, empty and patient. As the world becomes teeth, he screams.

Not the scream of a god. Not the scream of a warrior. Just a man. Just flesh and fear and the sudden, absolute knowledge that he is about to die.

The sound tears through void, through dark, through the walls of his own skull and stops.

He opens his eyes.

A face stares back at him.

His own. Reflected in something smooth and dark and unforgiving. But wrong. So wrong. The gold laurel sits crooked. The beard is wet with sweat and spit. The eyes are wide, too wide, ringed with red, pupils tiny pinpricks of terror.

No god should look like this.

No god should look desperate.

A voice comes from everywhere and nowhere. Flat and calm. The voice of someone reading the weather.

“You tried so hard.”

The reflection trembles.

“Changed yourself. Built a throne. Called yourself a god. Thought if you looked the part hard enough, you'd become it.”

A pause, then…

“But you're still in there. Under all that gold. The part of you that's just a man. The part that gets scared. The part that screams.”

The reflection's eyes are wet now. Tears or sweat. Doesn't matter.

“That part doesn't go away. You can't edit it out. You can't bury it under gold and call it divinity.”

Another pause. Longer.

“You wanted to be more than human. But you never even learned to understand humanity in the first place. Hence why you are… pathetic.”

The reflection shatters.

Not the glass but the man. Zephyros's legs fold. His chest hits first, then his face, limp and broken, sprawled across wooden planks that weren't there a moment ago.

The Caravelle. Gray mist. Endless drift.

Kayden stands over him, hands in pockets and face empty as always. He looks at Amilla.

She stands exactly beside him, watching and waiting. The man at his feet is her problem now. He chewed him up, she could swallow. That was the deal.

He notices that she is back to her perfectly sculpted dark green robe while he’s still looking like an authentic Parisian student.

Then a sound cuts through.

Low at first. Almost beneath hearing. A rumble building in the chest of something that shouldn't have a chest. It rises, cracks, spills out into the open—laughter.

Not Zephyros's laugh. Not human at all. The kind of laugh that doesn't come from joy, doesn't come from amusement, comes from somewhere older and hungrier. The sound of something trying very hard to hold back and failing beautifully or rather grotesquely while asking, “What makes you different?”

Kayden turns to see where the sound came from. Zephyros is still on the floor. But something else is there now. Perched on his chest like a child claiming a toy. Skinny. Wrong-skinny. Limbs too long, folded like a spider at rest.

Black skin, the color of deep water at midnight. Hair the color of dried blood spills across its face in a messy tangle. Red horns curve through. Small but sharp. The same red as the hair but darker at the tips, like they've been dipped in something older.

It's looking at Kayden. It has been looking. Since before the laugh. Since before the turn.

The thing tilts its head. Slow. Deliberate. Like a dog hearing a sound it doesn't understand.

"You don't want anything."

The voice hits wrong. Not deep. Not high. Layered like two voices, same words, one a fraction behind the other. Like hearing someone speak from the bottom of a well.

A pause. Then the laugh cracks through again. Raspy and wet, beaming with something that might be hunger, might be joy, might be both.

"Ohhh, you do want."

Zephyros stirs beneath it. A moan. A twitch. Awareness crawling back into a body that wishes it hadn't.

The thing looks down at him. Almost gentle. Almost kind.

"Shh."

Its hand closes around his throat. Long fingers. Too many knuckles. Zephyros’s eyes fly open. They are wild, white-ringed, the eyes of something that knows it's about to die.

He thrashes, kicks and claws at the arm holding him. He only finds nothing and finds the endless certainty of teeth approaching.

Its mouth opens. Wider. Wider still. No teeth inside, just darkness. Just hunger. Just the absence of everything except want.

Its mouth closes around Zephyros's throat in a brutal sealing. Lips meeting skin, tongue pressing, drinking in slow, pulsing swallows. Zephyros's body jerks with each one—once, twice, three times—then stills. His eyes stay open. Vacant. Watching something far away.

The thing drinks and red runs down its chin.

Then it begins to fade. The black of its skin softening at the edges. The red hair is losing focus. Zephyros's body sagging against its chest, being pulled somewhere else.

Kayden moves. His hand shoots out fast, but his fingers close around empty air where the thing was a heartbeat ago.

Zephyros is gone. The thing is gone. Only a dark smear on the wooden planks remains, already fading.

Kayden stands there. Hand still extended. Face empty.

He turns to Amilla and says, “We follow it.”

She stands motionless, her white hair catching mist that touches nothing else.

"The Caravel will lead," she says.

Kayden’s jaw tightens because of her flat, calm certainty. Just slightly. Just for a moment. Then it's gone.

He walks to the railing. Leans against it. Stares into the gray. The mist rolls on. The ship sails itself.

Amilla watches him watch nothing. Says nothing.

The silence stretches until…

An unexpected warmth.

Against his back. Around his waist. Arms sliding into place like they have always belonged there. A body pressing close, fitting against the curve of his spine, the slope of his shoulders. Soft in some places. Firm in others. Human-shaped. Intimate.

Kayden freezes. His mind—the vast, empty, carefully curated cathedral of his thoughts—stutters. Just for a second. Just long enough to register the impossible: Amilla doesn't touch.

But he feels it. The weight and the warmth. The shape of her pressing against him, closer than anyone has ever been, closer than he ever allowed anyone to be.

His breath catches. Then his eyes narrow. He turns quickly.

Amilla stands exactly where she was. Ten feet away. Hands at her sides. White hair drifting. Watching him with whatever passes for watching behind that veil.

Kayden opens his mouth, “Why—”

“You have nothing else to do here,” she states. Her voice cuts clean. Not just sharp but final.

“The rest I can handle alone. Return to your home.”

Kayden stares at her. The dark green of her robe. The white hair pooling against it. The absolute stillness of someone who has already decided the conversation is over.

Chapter 5

Kayden opens his eyes.

The ceiling is familiar. Wooden beams. Warm light that comes from nowhere. His ceiling. His house. His void.

He blinks once. Twice.

“Where was I?”

The thought slides away before he can catch it. Something about... a ship? A woman in green?

He knows the nightmares of naked women he gets often. Never women in green robes. He files it away and sits up. Runs a hand through his ash-colored hair. It's the same. Messy. Soft. Unbothered.

He’s in his bedroom. Standing now, though he doesn't remember standing. His gray sweater hangs loose over the black beneath. His feet know the way to the living room without being told.

The sky-blue sofa waits. He lies down.

In his hand—when did he pick it up?—a rectangle of dark chocolate. Perfect. It always is.

"It remembered being perfect," he says to no one. His voice is quiet. An instrument never raised. The words mean nothing. They mean everything. He doesn't think about it.

The TV glows across the room. Pure white. Blank. Showing something only he can see. He stares. The chocolate melts on his tongue. Regrows. Melts again.

He remembers it took one month for the world to turn into something that cannot be described. He doesn't care. He has this.

Time passes. He doesn't count it.

Then—a thought. Faint. From somewhere not quite inside his head:

Wasn't I just somewhere else?

He frowns. Just slightly. Just for a moment.

The chocolate disappears from his grasp. He stands up slowly and over to the window.

The void stares back. Empty. Absolute. His only.

Then he hears a bang.

The house shakes. Kayden hits the floor. Pain blooms in his knees, his palms—real, sharp, present.

A voice rasps from everywhere and nowhere: "Flesh, I must devour."

Footsteps. Loud. Ringing in his ears. He tries to stand—can't. Blood spills from his mouth, hot and copper-sweet, coating the floor in red. He coughs and crawls. His fingers leave smears on the wood.

A figure steps out from the shadow behind the sofa. Tall. Dark. Red cape the color of closed wounds. Its eyes burn crimson, painting the room in hungry light.

The air thickens. Metallic.

Kayden pushes himself up and turns to look over his shoulder. What he sees is a thing, less a man and more a conflict of shadows. Tattered. It’s hungry and wrong.

Kayden's bloody lips twist.

A chuckle escapes him. Soft. Genuinely amused.

"You remember terrifying me," he says, meeting those red eyes. "I don't."

The creature roars. Glass shatters. Long hands emerge from the cape—claws growing, extending, reaching. It leaps.

Kayden watches it come.

Fast, he notes. But not fast enough.

The claws swing. Cleave his face in half.

He's already gone. Only an afterimage remains for less than a split second.

Floating in the void now, watching from outside. The creature stands confused in the room, clutching air where a head should be.

Kayden raises a hand. A silver spear forms itself from nothing, solid and gleaming. He throws and it pierces the creature's chest. Stops mid-way.

The thing turns. Looks behind itself. Sees nothingness as the house simply vanishes under Kayden’s command.

Then he speaks. Not loud. Not close. The voice comes from everywhere—from the void itself, from the space between the creature's thoughts, from somewhere deeper than sound.

"Look."

A pause. The void breathes.

"Out."

The creature spins.

Kayden floats fifty feet away. Arms loose. Face empty. Watching.

Behind him, the house hangs in darkness—his house, his domain, his perfect terrible home.

He flicks his wrist.

The house moves.

Not flies. Not falls. Simply translates across the void like it was always meant to be there, always meant to be here, exactly where the creature now floats. Kayden doesn't throw it. He places it. Gently. Precisely. With all the force of a collapsing star dressed in wood and memory.

The house meets the creature.

Crash isn't the right word. Crash implies sound, impact, something breaking. This is just contact. The house arriving. The creature accepting. Wood and shadow and red cape folding into one another like they were always meant to fit.

Kayden watches for a moment. Lets the silence settle.

Then he exhales. Lifts a hand. Curls his fingers.

The house reforms around him. He's in the bedroom now. Standing on the bed. The creature phases through the wall, leaps, pins his hands to the wood behind him.

Predictable.

A third arm grows from his chest. Smacks the creature's face. Once. Twice.

The thing pauses. Confused. Good.

It roars in his face—mouth opening wide, dozens of pointy fangs drenched in maroon. It lunges forward, bites down on the third arm, tears it off.

Chocolate gushes out. Brown. Warm. Flooding. Coating the creature, the bed, the floor.

It lunges back, startled.

Kayden steps forward. Touches its cape with one finger.

The creature freezes.

"Chocolatify," Kayden says. "Right now."

The thing turns to liquid. Pure brown chocolate pours across the room, pooling, spreading, covering everything.

But the eyes remain.

Two red orbs, floating where a head used to be, pulsing with hunger.

Kayden raises his hand. A bubble forms around him.

The eyes begin to glow. Brighter. Hotter. A crimson verdict that incinerates the room's geometry—shape and color and depth devoured by light.

The bubble weakens. Cracks.

Then a snap. Like fingers breaking silence.

Kayden blinks.

He's floating in the void. Alone. The house is gone. The creature is gone. Just him and the endless Not.
He shakes it off. Makes the house appear beneath him. Lands on the roof.

A voice comes from behind. Smooth. Harmonic. A glass bell struck in a distant hall.

"You were so close to being turned into fuel."

Kayden turns.

A woman stands before him. Dark green robe from crown to floor—perfectly sculpted, seamless, swallowing her form and face. No hint of features. Just serene, impenetrable green.

In her gloved hands, two red orbs pulse once, twice, then fade to nothing.

Kayden tilts his head. His eyes are detached. But something beneath them stirs. Curiosity. The first thing in a long time.

He reaches out with his perception. The omni-directional awareness that usually gives him everything at once. It slides off her. Slippery. Refusing to focus.

All he catches is her hair. White. Cascading past her hips. A river of moonlight.

"Kayden," she says calmly. "You are offered. You have full right to decline."

He lets out a sigh. Shoves his hands in his pockets.

“Who are you?”

Silence.

Then she speaks. No hesitation. No explanation. Just the offer, delivered flat, like she's done this before.

"You follow me. I keep scavengers out of your house."

Kayden waits. She offers nothing else.

"Okay."

They stand there. He doesn't move toward her. Doesn't offer his hand. Just... waits.

The void shatters anyway. Light pours through—white, absolute, the color of blank pages. The house dissolves around them.

Then silence.
Then somewhere else.

Chapter 6

Kayden opens his eyes.

The light is gone. The void is gone. The house is gone.

Cold grass beneath him, wet and dead. Roots like veins beneath the soil.

He then looks up, noticing that the moon hangs like a wound in the sky, red and swollen, too large, too close. Its light doesn't illuminate. It stains. Pouring down in thick, slow waves, painting the world the color of old blood and rusted iron.

Trees rise around them. Black trunks, bare branches, skeletal fingers clawing at the red. A forest that has never known spring. Never known warmth. Never known anything except waiting.

And ahead, through the twisted wood, Kayden sees a castle. Black stone that absorbs the red light and gives nothing back. Spires like accusation, stabbing at the sky. Towers that lean at angles that shouldn't stand, windows that reflect nothing because there's nothing inside to reflect. Walls that seem to breathe when you're not looking directly at them.

Kayden turns head to look at Amilla over his shoulder and says, “Gothic. Massive. Hungry.”

The kind of castle that belongs in stories told to frighten children. The kind that shouldn't exist outside of fever dreams. The kind that knows you are here.

Amilla doesn’t say anything. She stands beside him, dark green against the red-black world. Her white hair catches the wounded light, moves in a wind that touches nothing else.

Neither of them speaks after that.

The forest holds its breath. The castle waits. The red moon watches. It is almost an eye, unblinking, pressed against the sky.

Kayden shoves his hands in his pockets. His grey eyes sweep the treeline once, twice. Cataloging. Filing. Finding nothing useful…

But then as they slowly walk towards the castle’s entrance, he sees them. At first just shapes between trees, behind shadows and where the red light doesn’t reach. They stand still, watching.

His feet don't stop. His face doesn't change. But something in his chest tightens as the realization sinks in.

They're women.

He knows this without seeing clearly. The curve of hip, fall of hair, pale of skin against black bark. Dozens of them. Maybe more. Standing at the edges of the wood, half-hidden, half-revealed, their faces turned toward him.

They don't move. He knows they won’t approach. He knows they won’t speak. They are there to watch.

The red moon catches one just briefly, just a flash and he sees enough. Too much. The smooth line of a shoulder. The shadow between breasts. The dark hollow where eyes should be.

Then she's gone. Back into the dark. Another takes her place. Then another. Then twenty.

They line the path now. Pressing against the tree line like prisoners against glass. Their hands are pale, slender, too long, resting against the bark. Their bodies are soft in some places, sharp in others. Always lean forward just slightly, just enough to show they want something.

Want him.

Kayden's jaw tightens. Just slightly. Just for a moment because he knows what they are.

The castle doors rise before them. Its black iron, twice his height, carved with figures he refuses to examine too closely. They stand closed, waiting. Like everything else in this place.

Kayden raises a hand.

The doors swing inward before he touches them. No sound. No resistance. Just darkness opening like a mouth, welcoming, patient, hungry.

He steps through and the dark swallows him whole.

Not gradually. Not like fading light. One instant he's standing at the threshold, the red moon at his back, the watching women at the edges of the wood. The next, nothing.

Absolute black. The kind that presses against his eyes. The kind that has weight. The kind that breathes.

Behind him, Amilla's footsteps follow, quiet and steady. The only proof he isn't alone.

Then he sees a change. The black doesn't end. Instead It lifts like smoke clearing, like water settling, like something deciding he's allowed to see now.

They stand at the edge of a great hall.

Stone columns rise on either side, vanishing into shadow above. The floor stretches forward, black and polished, reflecting nothing. And high, high above clerestory windows pierce the walls.

Kayden steps into the light, moving to the center that glows faintly.

“The only place in this castle that isn't hiding.” He pauses. “You know what that means?”

He turns to look at Amilla. She Amilla stands twenty feet behind him but not on the floor. Not anymore.

A cage of black iron hangs from the ceiling, suspended by chains that vanish into shadow. She's inside. Still. Quiet. Her white hair spills through the bars, catching the red light.

Kayden's eyes narrow. Just slightly. Then he says, “I know you are watching.”

Then a laugh.

Low and rich. The kind of laugh that curls around you before you hear it. It comes from everywhere, from nowhere, from the shadows between the columns.

“And here I thought you'd never notice.”

A figure emerges from the dark at the edge of the hall. Tall and pale. Draped in black silk that clings and flows and reveals just enough to remind you there's a body beneath. Red hair spills over her shoulders, darker than the moon outside, darker than blood.

Her eyes catch the light and hold it. Red. Like the vampire stories always say. But wrong somehow. Too aware. Too hungry.

She glides toward him, something in between walking and floating. Her lips curve.

“A boy who doesn't look at women.” She tilts her head. Studies him. “How... interesting.”

She glides toward him again. The red light catches her as she moves, painting her in stripes of crimson and shadow. Black silk whispers against stone.

She doesn't stop at anything. She keeps coming.

Only stops when she’s close enough that he can smell her. Smell of roses and copper and something older, something buried. Close enough that the heat of her presence brushes his skin.

Her red eyes travel over him slowly, deliberately, like she's tasting him without touching.

A hand rises. Pale fingers trace the collar of his grey sweater, feather-light, lingering.

“Welcome,” she breathes, “to my home, little god.”

Her face is too close now. Close enough to see the faint pulse in her throat. Close enough to feel the words on his skin.

“I’m not a god,” Kayden says. Voice flat and empty.

She laughs softly. Warm right in his face. Then she moves. Faster than eyes can follow. Faster than thought.

Arms wrap around his neck from behind. It is soft and firm. Her body presses against his back. Chest to spine, hip to hip, the curve of her fitting against him like she belongs there.

Her lips find his ear. Warm breath. The faintest brush of teeth.

"Oh, but you are." Her voice is lower now, honey and smoke. "A god who doesn't look. Doesn't want. Doesn't take."

Her arms tighten. Just slightly.

"That's the most dangerous kind."

Her tongue traces the shell of his ear. Slow. Deliberate.

"And the most delicious."

A pause. Her lips curve against his skin.

"I'm going to tame you, little god."

Another pause. Softer.

"I'm going to make you fall in love with me."

Kayden stands perfectly still. His face doesn't change. His hands stay in his pockets.

Then his lips part to ask, "Can you make the sun fall in love with you?"

She blinks. Opens her mouth only to be met with…

Light.

Not from outside. Not from above. From him. From the center of his chest, spreading outward, consuming. White and absolute and burning.

His body ignites. Not fire. Something older. Something purer. The light of a star waking up, of a sun deciding to be born right here, right now, in the arms of a creature made of shadow and hunger.

The vampire screams. Her arms unravel. Her body vaporizes, black silk to ash, pale skin to smoke, red hair to nothing. The light eats her from the inside out, devours her whole, leaves no trace behind.

The light fades. Kayden stands exactly where he was. The hall, The columns. The floor. The red light from above, slanting down in long, patient columns.

His hands remain in his pockets. Face still empty. Like nothing happened at all.

The cage is gone. Amilla stands at the edge of the light, her dark green robe undisturbed, her white hair settling behind her. Watching him with whatever passes for watching behind that veil.

Kayden glances at her. Just once. Just long enough.

"Don’t exhaust yourself."

Silence hangs in the red-lit hall. Heavy and waiting. Then it breaks.

Not with words. Not with movement. With pressure, a shift in the air, a deepening of the shadows, the sudden certainty that something has been holding its breath and has finally decided to exhale.

The laugh comes after.

Low at first. A rumble building in a chest that doesn't exist. It rises through the stone, through the light, through Kayden's bones. It is layered, doubled, the sound of two throats speaking as one. It curls around the columns. It drips from the ceiling. It fills.

"I knew."

The voice is everywhere. Nowhere. In his skull and behind his eyes and beneath his skin.

"I knew you figured it out."

The red light deepens. The shadows stretch.

"You didn't offer her hand."

Amilla moves.

Her gloved hands rise slowly, find the edge of her veil, lift.

Where a face should be, there is none. Just darkness. Then, Black tendrils, thick as arms, slick with something that glistens like oil slowly spills out. They explode outward not in dozens but in waves, tearing through her form, shredding green robe and white hair into confetti.

Her body collapses into itself even as it expands, a single detonation of black flesh, tentacles writhing, mouths opening along every surface, red eyes blinking from within the mass.

It surges forward and Kayden moves.

His body lifts—not flight, not jump, just up, rocketing through the red light toward the ceiling. Stone explodes around him as he passes through, through, through until roof shatters, sky opens, red moon swells above.

The red moon hangs above. Too large. Too close. Its light falls across the black slate, across Kayden's grey sweater, across the emptiness in his eyes.

Below, the thing that wore Amilla still screams without a mouth.

Then the air in front of him folds.

Not tears. Not cracks. Just folds like reality decided to origami itself into something new. The red light bends away, afraid to touch what's forming.

Black skin first. The color of deep water at midnight. The color of nothing. It drinks the moonlight, gives nothing back.

Red hair spills across its shoulders. Tangled. Wet-looking. The color of fresh blood and old iron.

Red horns curve through the hair. Small. Sharp. Darker at the tips.

Red eyes open. Catch Kayden. Hold him.

The body follows. It is long, too long, limbs folded like a spider at rest, joints bending in directions that aren't quite wrong enough to notice. It hovers just above the roof. Not floating. Not standing. Just occupying.

The grin spreads. Slow and yet, hungry.

"Still thinking," the entity says. Its layered voice curls through the red air like smoke. "Still moving. Still being. Most minds shut down when I peel their memories away. You just... keep going."

Kayden watches it. Face empty. Hands in pockets.

"I remember because I duplicated them."

A pause. The red eyes narrow.

"Duplicated."

"Yeah." Kayden's tone is flat. Bored. Like explaining math to a slow child. "Made copies. Stored them somewhere else. In case something like this happened."

The entity's grin flickers. Just for a moment.

"So when you peeled the originals," Kayden continues, "nothing happened. I still have the backups."

He tilts his head. Just slightly.

"And honestly? They're probably coming back anyway. Once I get out of this little world you built."

The red moon watches. The wind that doesn't exist pulls at his hair.

The entity stays silent for a moment, then it laughs.

Kayden cuts through it, "Your words made me think."

The laugh stops.

"The beggar. The god." Kayden's voice is flat. Casual. Like he's listing groceries. "I saw through them. Showed and understood their cracks. Thought I was different."

He takes a step forward.

“They were mirrors. I was just too busy not looking to notice.”

Another step but the entity watches. Unmoving.

“You're just an entity.” Kayden's tone doesn't change. “Generated by that machine. Probably simplistic to your purpose.”

"The machine?" Its layered voice drips with something that might be nostalgia, might be hatred, might be both. "Ahhh... yes. It twisted me. Half-energy now. Fuel for something I'll never see."

A pause. The red eyes gleam.

"Stripped my humanity. Made me simple. Yes. Yes."

Another pause. Longer.

"But I'm still here. Still thriving." The word curls through the air like smoke. "Curiosity. Hunger. They couldn't take those."

Kayden watches. Face empty. Then he tilts his head. Just slightly as he says, "You just confirmed you are connected to it."

The entity's grin falters. Just for a moment.

"So you're useful." Kayden's tone is flat. Casual. "For finding it."

The entity's grin doesn't fade. If anything, it softens. It becomes something almost wondering.

"You have grown," it says. Layered voice quieter now. Almost private. "In a matter of hours... or less. Who knows."

A pause. The red eyes drift, unfocus.

"I don't even know my own name."

Another pause. Longer. Then the eyes snap back to Kayden. Eyes that are sharp, hungry and present.

It rises, not floating, not standing, just unfolding upward, limbs stretching, darkness pooling beneath it.

"Let's dance," it says almost playfully.

Kayden's lips part.

Not for words. For something else.

The corner of his mouth lifts, slowly and deliberately, almost wrong. The smile spreads, pulls, cracks across his face like light through dark water. Teeth show. Too many. Too white. The smile of something that has been asleep a long time and just remembered it was hungry.

The smile of something that has been asleep a long time and just remembered it was hungry.

The entity watches. Its own grin widens. Then it lifts one long arm toward the red sky.

The moon pulses once and twice. And from its surface, from that wound in the sky, something drips. Red orbs. Dozens of them. Forming above the entity's raised hand, circling like satellites, like vultures, like judgment.

Ten of them, gleaming and hungry. The same crimson eyes that nearly killed Kayden in his own home.

The entity's layered voice curls through the air.

"Two orbs." A pause. "You could barely handle two."

The orbs pulse in rhythm with its words.

"And you would have died."

Another pulse. Closer now. Lower.

"So tell me, little nothing..."

The grin stretches. Too wide. Always too wide.

"What makes you think you can handle ten?"

The entity leans forward. Its layered voice drops—becomes something sharp, something cutting.

"Not a damn bubble this time."

It flicks its wrist.

The orbs descend.

They don't fly. They translate by tearing through the space between sky and roof, warping everything they touch. The red light bends around them. The air itself screams. Where they pass, the castle roof ceases to exist, black slate dissolving into nothing, stone turning to dust turning to absence.

They spread, surround, close in.

Kayden stands at the center. Alone and smiling.

His lips part again to say, “Not one bubble.” A pause. The orbs pulse closer. “A billion.”

His body opens.

Not literally. Not violently. But from every inch of him, bubbles begin to emerge. Small at first. Then larger. Then countless. They pour out of him like light from a star, like water from a broken dam, like something that has been waiting forever to be released.

They fill the space around him. They meet the orbs. They hold.

The orbs scream as they press against bubble after bubble after bubble. Each one that pops is replaced by ten more. Each inch the orbs gain costs them a hundred.

Kayden watches through the storm of light and glass and him.

His smile is still there.

The entity's grin is not.

The bubbles then stop blocking the orbs, instead absorbs them.

One by one, the crimson verdicts press against translucent walls and stick. The red light bleeds into the bubbles, staining them from within, filling them with captured fire. The orbs pulse, struggle, scream but the bubbles only drink deeper.

Ten become nine. Nine become seven. Seven become four.

Each bubble that catches an orb begins to change. Its perfect sphere warps, lengthens, curves and grows. The red light inside twists into shape, into muscle, into intention.

A head forms. Serpentine. Fanged. Eyes that burn with stolen crimson. A body follows. Coiling. Massive. Translucent scales catching the red moon's glow and throwing it back tenfold.

The eastern dragon unfolds in the air above Kayden. It is built from a billion bubbles and ten stolen suns, breathing light that isn't its own, alive with everything the entity tried to kill him with.

Kayden doesn't look at it. Doesn't gesture. Doesn't speak. He just stands there, hands in pockets. His smile faded now. Face empty again.

The dragon opens its mouth and light gathers. The red of the orbs, the red of the moon, the red of the castle below. All of it pools in that translucent throat, condenses, waits.

Then it releases.

The beam doesn't scream. Doesn't roar. It simply erases, a column of pure annihilation that tears through the castle like paper through water. Black stone turns to dust. Spires crumble. Walls dissolve. The great hall, the columns, the red-lit windows, all gone.

The beam finds the entity mid-air and hits it with full force.

Causing it to be thrown across the roof. Across the treeline. Across the forest of watching women and black trunks. It tumbles end over end, limbs flailing, grin finally gone, until it crashes somewhere in the dark between trees.

Smoke rises from the crater where a castle used to be.

Kayden stands on nothing now, just empty air above rubble, above dust, above the place where his enemy landed.

He then lands and begins drifting backward through the smoke.

Not walking, not flying, just drifting, like the world decided to move around him instead. His feet don't touch the rubble. His hands stay in his pockets. His face stays empty.

The air in front of him folds.

The entity appears close enough to touch but Kayden is already elsewhere. Ten feet back. Still drifting.

The entity folds again. Appears closer.

Kayden drifts further. Always just out of reach. Always moving. Through the smoke, through the rubble, through the treeline, into the forest now, black trunks blurring past, red moonlight painting everything the color of hunger.

The entity appears. Misses. Appears. Misses. Appears. Misses.

They move through the forest like ghosts chasing ghosts. One folding reality, one simply refusing to be caught. Trees explode where the entity's hands close on empty air. Shadows tear where its body passes through. The women at the edges watch, still, silent, their eyes following something they can't quite see.

The entity snarls. Its layered voice rips through the dark, “My domain. My rules. You still stand no chance.”

Kayden keeps drifting, watching and waiting.

Then his lips part, “It's our domain now.”

He stops.

one last time, one final surge, the entity folds toward him and Kayden's foot rises to meet it. Not a block. Not a dodge. A kick. Clean. Brutal. Perfectly timed.

It catches the entity's face mid-teleport. Sends its head snapping back, red hair flying, red eyes going wide.

The entity's gaze lifts involuntarily, instinctively toward the sky. The red moon hangs above, but it's not red anymore.

It's grey. Grey and empty and watching. A pupil forms in its center. It is dilating, focusing, seeing. The iris shifts—grey on grey, winter-sea cold, Kayden's.

The entity freezes.

The void beneath those eyes opens. The same falling. The same hands. The same pale face with its mouth of fangs. It feels itself slipping, being pulled into that grey, into that emptiness, into the place where Zephyros died and kept dying and would never stop dying.

Its body trembles.

Its jaw clenches.

Its red, defiant, hungry eyes screw shut.

“No.”

The word tears out of it. Raw. Real. Its own.

The pull stops and the entity opens its eyes. The moon is red again. The grey is gone. Kayden stands ten feet away, watching, face empty. But something in those winter-sea eyes flickers. Just for a moment.

The entity grins. Blood on its teeth.

“Not today, little nothing.”

Kayden sighs. The sound is soft and tired. The sigh of someone who has tried one approach and now has to try another.

"Fine. Another method then,” Kayden says.

He lifts one hand. Flicks his fingers and the ground answers.

A perfect circle of earth—fifty meters across, trees and soil and stone included—tears itself free from the forest floor. It doesn't crack, nor does it break. It just lifts, rising like a slow explosion, carrying everything on its surface upward.

The entity stumbles. Then catches itself and grins.

The platform rises faster. Through the trees, past the branches, above the canopy. The red moon shrinks below them. The clouds rush closer, then through them, cold and wet and gone.

Kayden stands at the center of the floating circle. His grey sweater catches wind that shouldn't exist at this height. His face is empty.

He flicks his fingers again and chains materialize from nothing. They are black iron, thick as arms, etched with symbols that shift when you try to read them. They wrap around the entity's limbs, its torso, its throat. They pull tight. They anchor.

The entity strains. The chains hold.

Kayden watches.

Then a grin splits the entity's face. Slow, hungry and knowing.

A crimson droplet forms at its lips. Small at first, then larger, pulsing, alive. It detaches, hovers, dances in the air between them. One flick of its trajectory and the droplet moves through the chainsc through the air and then through Kayden.

It punches through his chest. A clean hole, fist-sized, right through the grey sweater, right through the space where a heart should be.

Kayden doesn't flinch.

The droplet swings back. Takes his arm.

His left arm separates at the shoulder, cleanly, surgical, gone. It tumbles through the air, dissolves before it hits the ground.

Kayden still doesn't flinch. Doesn't bleed. Doesn't scream. Then his body dissolves from within, pouring outward, flooding the platform in a wave of darkness. Black and thick. It swallows the entity before it can move, before it can react, before it can even stop grinning.

The darkness rises. Coils. Tastes.

The entity's eyes go wide.

Its lips part. A single word, almost wondering:

“...Chocolate.”

Molten dark chocolate. Gallons of it. Flooding the platform, climbing the chains, filling every space. The entity thrashes but the chocolate holds, thick and warm and everywhere, catching it like honey catches a fly.

Kayden reforms in front of it. He is whole again. Arm back. Chest sealed. Grey sweater undisturbed.

The chocolate swirls around them both, dark and warm and patient. The entity thrashes once, then stills. Watching. Waiting.

Kayden's lips part.

“Everything humans do with their powers,” he says, “can be reversed. Understood. Traced back to who they are.”

His voice is flat and quiet. The voice of someone reading a truth they've known forever.

“That's what makes them... humane.”

The entity watches. Red eyes unblinking.

“I found the beggar because he was invisible. I broke the god because he was pathetic. I traced them back to who they were.” A pause. “That's the law.”

The chocolate pulses. Slow. Like a heartbeat.

“But I kept contradicting myself.” His grey eyes don't move from the entity's red. “Denying my own humanity. Doing everything not to be humane.”

Another pause. Longer.

“I won't do that anymore.”

The entity's grin flickers. Just for a moment.

Kayden tilts his head. Just slightly.

“Thank you.”

The word hangs between them—small, impossible, real.

The entity blinks.

A second passes. Two. Its red eyes narrow, not in anger, not in hunger. In something else. Something quieter.

Interest.

The smirk returns, slowly. Curious and genuine.

"Yeah," it says. "Right."

Then it moves by becoming red light, pouring from its form, condensing, aiming. A single crimson lance that crosses the space between them in less than a heartbeat.

It drives into Kayden's right eye.

He doesn't dodge. Doesn't block. Doesn't even blink.

The light enters.

His body convulses. His knees hit the platform. His hands fly to his face and begin clawing, clutching, screaming without sound. The grey of his eye turns red, pulses, burns. The entity's laugh echoes from somewhere inside him, from somewhere deep.

The platform shudders. The stars above flicker. The clouds below churn. The chocolate around them begins to thin, losing coherence, losing warmth, losing purpose. The entire domain, the castle ruins below, the red moon, the watching women. All of it wavers.

Kayden curls on the ground. His body shakes. His fingers dig into his face. His mouth opens but nothing comes out, just silence, just agony, just the feeling of something settling inside him, making a home where no home should be.

A hand descends through the crumbling sky.

Dark green gloved, seamless and massive. Being large enough to wrap around his entire body, to hold him like a child holds a broken toy. Its fingers close around him gently, carefully, like he's something precious.

The chaos stops.

Not the domain that's still falling, still fading, still dying. But inside the hand, inside the space where Kayden curls, there is peace. Quiet. The absence of pain.

He then rises through light, through dark, through the space between moments. Then stillness.

He's lying on a bed, small and simple. Wooden frame, white sheets, a single pillow that's too soft for a ship. Warm light comes from nowhere. A porthole looks out onto endless gray.

Amilla stands over him. Dark green robe. White hair. No face. Just the suggestion of one. Watching.

Kayden blinks. His right eye is normal again. Grey. Empty.

"You were trapped," she says. Her voice is calm. Flat. The usual. "Another dimension. I had to break through to pull you out."

He stares at the ceiling for a moment. Processes. Files.

Then he sits up.

"Thanks."

The word is quiet and casual. Like he's thanking her for passing the salt.

He swings his legs off the bed and stands. The floor is warm wood, polished, alive in a way that doesn't make sense. The room is small, just the bed, a chair, a wooden door. Warm. Comfortable. His in a way he didn't ask for.

He looks at the door. Then at Amilla.

She doesn't move. Doesn't speak.

He walks to the door. Puts his hand on the wood. Feels the grain, the warmth, the waiting on the other side.

He opens it.

Gray mist rolls in. Cool and damp. The Caravel's deck stretches before him, worn planks, low railing, the endless drift of nowhere.

He steps through.

The gray mist curls around him, cool and familiar. The Caravel’s deck stretches ahead, worn planks, low railing, the endless drift of nowhere.

Then he feels fire, in his right eye, behind it, inside it. A surge of pain that drops him to one knee, hand flying to his face, fingers digging into the skin around his socket.

The voice comes from within. From deep. Layered. Amused.

"Call me R.K.T."

A pause. The pain pulses. Settles. Becomes something almost bearable.

"Call me that."

Another pause. Longer.

"Whenever you need me."

The pain fades to a throb. The throb to an ache. The ache to a presence, something warm and red and waiting at the edge of his awareness.

"For now..." The voice softens. Almost gentle. "I watch."

Kayden kneels on the deck. Hand over his eye. Breathing slow.

The pain settles. Becomes presence. Becomes companion.

He looks up. Through the gray mist, ahead of the Caravel's endless drift, there is orange. Cutting through the fog like a blade through silk. Pulsing. Waiting.

Another domain. Another door. He doesn't move. Doesn't speak. Just watches the light bleed through the gray.

The mist rolls on. The ship sails itself. Amilla stands behind him, silent.

The orange pulses once. Twice. Waiting.

“Amilla, what really are you?”

Chapter 7

Silence. Then—

“I may not be much different from the entity you are now keeping in your eye,” Amilla says.

Kayden's fingers adjust his collar, still that Parisian student coat, still slightly wrong against the infinite shelves around them.

“You're definitely not a hungry, curious thing,” he says, flat. “So what are you?”

Amilla stands motionless beside him. Dark green against endless paper. White hair catching light that has no source.

“I was human once.”

A pause.

“The machine found me. Altered me. Gave me purpose.” Another pause. “Protection. Of a higher dimension I couldn't see, from threats I couldn't name.”

Kayden's hands drop to his pockets as he asks, “And now?”

“Now I'm looking.” Her voice is calm. Always calm. “For what I was protecting. For what I was protecting it from. For why I was chosen.”

She turns toward him—or rather, the blank space where her face should be turns toward him as he says, “That is what I am. A seeker wearing a guardian's shape.”

Kayden watches her. Grey eyes empty. Processing.

“...Huh.”

He turns back to the shelves. Starts walking.

“Good enough,” His voice is casual, like he's asking about the weather. “But you say there is a higher dimension? What does that mean?”

“I don’t know much.” She pauses. “Only that it grants control. Over everything. Everything we are living in.”

The orange light pulses closer and Kayden's eyes don't leave it.

Then, Amilla continues as she follows behind him, “The machine generated creature full of greed for transcendence quite easily, and they are all fixated on this one thing.”

She adds, “I figured it must be a realm that sees everything below as fiction. Something to be imagined, written and rewritten.”

Kayden walks to the very front of the Caravelle while softly saying, “I see, you are saying we are just characters in a book.”

The bow meets the gray mist like a knife through silk. Below, black water swallows nothing. Above, the orange pulse waits, closer now, swelling, breathing.

The orange fills everything. The gray dissolves. The mist burns away. Just light now, deep and swallowing, the color of dying suns and unanswered questions.

Then, just before it consumes them, Amilla’s voice cuts through, “This is to protect the freedom of everyone.”

Kayden doesn't turn. Doesn't ask. Just lets the words settle somewhere behind his eyes.

The orange swallows them whole. Then, the light releases him.

He's now standing in a room that is large, too large. The kind of large that makes you wonder how many books you could fit, how many lifetimes it would take to read them all. Shelves

line every wall, row after row, stretching from floor to high ceiling. Wood. Dark. Polished. The kind that's been here for centuries and will be here for centuries more.

Books fill every shelf. Leather spines. Gold lettering. Some new, some old, some so worn their titles have faded to memory. The air smells like paper and dust and something older, like knowledge left to breathe.

Warm light falls from somewhere above. Lamps? Windows? Doesn't matter. It's soft and gentle. The kind of light that makes you want to sit down and stay.

Kayden stands in the middle of it, hands in his pockets, grey eyes sweeping once, twice.

Then, pressure behind his eyes. Familiar.

Amilla's voice, flat and clear, “I will be clearing the entire place. Every creature the machine made. Every avatar hungry for transcendence.”

Kayden blinks. He is alone. He starts walking.

The shelves stretch in every direction. They are tall, dark and patient. His footsteps echo against wood and paper.

He reaches out with his mind, feeling the familiar pulse of reality warping, the instinct to bend space, to summon, to change, but he finds nothing.

He tries again. This time harder and more focused. Still nothing.

He stops walking. His hands are still in his pockets. His face is still empty. But just for a moment, something behind his grey eyes flickers.

The library isn't blocking him. It's ignoring him. Like his power is a language this place doesn't speak. Like the rules here were written before anyone thought to include him.

He looks at a book on the nearest shelf. Plain cover. No title. He reaches out, pulls it free, flips through pages.

Words. Normal words. Nothing special.

He closes it. Puts it back. Then he speaks quietly, to no one, “R.K.T.”

A pause. Warmth behind his eye.

“Still here, little nothing.”

“My powers?”

“Gone.”

“Yours?”

A chuckle. Layered. Dark.

“Mine are mine and no one takes them away.”

Kayden nods. Just slightly.

“But I'm just a guy in a library.”

“For now.”

Another pause.

“...Huh.”

He starts walking again.

On the other side of the library, Amilla floats, her dark green robes trailing behind her like smoke, her white hair drifting in a wind that touches nothing else. She moves above the shelves, silent and certain, scanning the rows below.

Hundreds of them pass beneath her. Thousands of books. Millions of pages.

She reaches a wall. It is solid and wooden. The boundary of this room, the threshold to the next, she believes.

She places her palms against it and closes her fingers into the grain. One second. Two.

Then she passes through by just continuing, like the wall was never there. Her reality warping bends the library's rules just enough to let her through.

She's faster now. Gliding through room after room after room. Each identical, each massive, each filled with shelves and books and silence. The rooms blur past. Walls become suggestions. Distance becomes irrelevant.

Then she stops when she notices something. Between two lengthy shelves, something moves. A creature. Not human-shaped. Not even close. A circular blob of pale flesh, tentacles extending from its underside like roots from a bulb. Each tentacle wraps around a book, lifts it, brings it close.

A small hole opens on its body, a mouth? an eye? and flashes light across the pages. The light flicks through the book in seconds. It is Absorbing, reading and learning.

The tentacles return the book to its shelf. Reach for another.

Amilla watches from above. Then, she flicks one finger.

The creature jerks, tentacles flailing, books scattering, yanked upward as if hooked by invisible thread. It hangs before her, suspended, trembling, a circular mass of pale confusion.

Her veil lifts. Just slightly. Just enough for a flash of green light from beneath to shoot out. Brief and absolute.

The creature goes still and her veil settles back into place.

“Seeks transcendence,” she murmurs. “But at this pace? Never.”

She flicks her wrist. A green fireball forms in her palm. It is small, dense, the color of old forests and deeper things. She tosses it casually. Almost bored.

The fireball hits the creature and spreads to every tentacle, every piece of its being, every flicker of awareness—gone. The fire erases it completely.

Amilla floats onward. Room after room. Creature after creature. Small things, hungry things, things that never had a chance, all which she flicks away like dust.

Then she enters a room and stops.

At the center stands a figure.

Tall. Impossibly tall. A body of pale marble stretched into proportions that shouldn't exist, limbs too long, torso too narrow, a neck that rises like a column toward a head that has no features at all. No eyes. No mouth. No nose. Just smooth, seamless flesh the color of bone bleached by sun that never touched it.

Yet it has presence. An aura radiates from its skin, a faint shimmer that makes the air around it thick and heavy. Like heat haze over desert. Like the moment before lightning strikes. It makes the pale surface seem alive, moving, breathing even though nothing moves at all.

Its arms are spread wide, commanding the floating books around it. Shelves tremble. Pages flutter. The library itself seems to lean toward it, waiting.

Then its head turns. Slowly. Deliberately.

It notices Amilla.

The wings begin to grow from its back—not flesh, not feather. Light. Pure light, condensing into shape, spreading wide, catching the room in long white beams. Each feather a blade of brightness. Each edge a promise.

Light gathers at its core. Builds. Focuses.

Point blank.

The beam fires—a column of white so intense it almost swallows the room, almost swallows Amilla, almost swallows everything.

Amilla doesn't block.

She moves.

Not teleporting. Just... faster. A blur of dark green that leaves afterimages fading as she reappears behind the creature, already in motion, already gone again.

The beam hits the far wall. Splashes against ancient stone. Does nothing.

The creature spins faster than something its size should move. Its wings slice through empty air where she was. She already moved

She's above it now. Floating. Watching.

Then, her gloved hand rises. A single droplet forms at her fingertip. Green. Dense. The color of old forests and older things.

She lets it fall.

Slow. Deliberate. Inevitable.

The droplet meets the creature's head.

For an instant, nothing.

Then—splash. Not explosion. Not fire. Just impact. The way a drop hits still water and scatters into a hundred smaller drops. The creature's body explodes outward in a wide circle, chunks of pale flesh raining against shelves, against books, against the floor.

Amilla watches. Waiting.

The chunks hit the ground. Roll. Stop.

Silence.

Then they move.

Crawling. Sliding. Pulling. Reforming. Reconnecting. Knitting back together like water finding its level. The creature rises from its own scattered pieces, whole again, wings flaring, light blazing from the crack that serves as its face.

It looks up at her.

Lifts off the floor.

Flies straight up. Fast. Hungry.

Amilla doesn't retreat. Doesn't flinch.

She simply extends her hand downward.

A cloud forms beneath her. Small at first—a wisp, a breath, a thought. Then it swells, darkens, spreads. Green at its edges. Black at its core. The color of storms that have never touched earth.

The creature flies into it. For a moment, nothing

Then the cloud rains.

Droplets fall, each green, dense, hungry in their own way. Sheets of them. Curtains of them. Judgment given form.

Each one that touches the creature's body: splash. Chunks scatter. Wings dissolve. Light dims. It tries to reform, tries to knit itself back together, but the rain falls too fast, too thick, too patient. Piece by piece. Drop by drop. Until nothing remains but a fine mist and the echo of hunger.

The cloud stills, hovering.

Amilla watches. Waiting. Then she flicks her wrist.

The cloud turns. Dark green to clear. Vapor to water. A flood pours from its center, gallons, tons, an ocean condensed into a single torrent. It crashes against the library floor, sweeps through shelves, covers every surface, fills the room to the brim.

The creature is gone. Whatever remained, whatever tried to reform, drowned in a room that shouldn't hold water. Water that doesn't just splash but makes things splash. Everything it touches comes apart.

Amilla floats above the still surface. Silent. Watching.

Then she raises her hand.

The water rises with it. All of it. Every gallon, every drop, every trace of the flood lifts from the floor, defying the library, defying sense, defying everything.

It gathers in her palm. Condenses. Compresses. Shrinks.

One sphere. Small. Dense. Green at its core. Floating just above her glove.

She closes her fingers around it. When she opens them again, it's gone.

She floats to the next wall. Passes through, then passes through another wall and then another. Room after room. All the same. Shelves. Books. Silence. No readers. No seekers. Just knowledge waiting to be found.

Then, someone. A figure in a dark cloak, hunched over a book at the end of a row. Reading. Still. Focused.

Amilla descends in silence. Gloved hand raised. The green sphere materializes before her palm, pulsing once, ready to lash out.

She lands behind the figure, only a breath away.

The figure turns, revealing graying beard. Messy. A face weathered by something that might be time, might be smoke, might be both. Eyes crinkle at the corners, not from age but from habit. From smiling at things that shouldn't be funny.

A cowboy bob haircut. The kind that belongs on a man who's never owned a horse but talks like he has.

He takes a slow drag from a cigarette. Lets the smoke curl between them.

Then he laughs. His voice low, warm, amused.

“Well now,” Another drag. Another grin. “Didn't expect a welcome party.”

He tips an imaginary hat when it’s just his cloak.

“Name’s Wyatt. And you, ma’am, are pointin’ something at me that looks mighty unfriendly.”

He doesn’t look afraid. Just... delighted.

Amilla doesn’t move. Just watches.

Wyatt tilts his head. Observes her through the smoke. Something in his eyes shifts to recognition, maybe. Memory.

Another chuckle. Softer this time.

“Amilla.”

The sphere pauses. Doesn't disappear. Just... waits. Let’s him take another drag.

“You don’t remember me, do you?” A grin. “S'fine. Been a long time. Real long.” He taps ash onto the library floor, doesn't care, won't care. “I'm the fella who made that big ol'

imaginary horse. Rode you and a whole mess of others to the edge of the universe.”

He chuckles again. Seems distant and fond.

“Was a sight. You sat up front. Never said a word. Just watched the stars go by like they owed you somethin'.”

The sphere in Amilla’s palm flickers. Then it disappears. She lowers her hand.

“Wyatt,” she softly murmurs.

“There she is.” He grins wide. “Took ya long enough.”

Behind Amilla, shelves rustle and figures emerge. Large, purple and hunched like monkeys but wrong, too many joints and too many teeth.

They shuffle forward, cracked voices repeating the same phrase over and over, “Must reach up... must reach up... must reach…”

Amilla half-turns, hand rising.

But, Wyatt beats her to it.

His cloak falls open. A revolver gleams beneath, not metal, not quite. Dark iron laced with yellow essence that pulses like a heartbeat. The grip fits his palm like it grew there. The barrel catches light that doesn't exist.

He raises it. No hurry. No aim. Just... presenting.

One shot.

The crack isn't loud. It's final. A sound that doesn't echo because there's nothing for it to bounce off.

The first monkey-avatar ceases. Not dies but straight up ceases. Yellow light swallows it whole, then swallows the light it swallowed, then swallows the memory of both.

Second shot. Third. Fourth.

Each one, gone. No bodies. No ash. No evidence they ever existed.

Wyatt lowers the revolver. Spins it once before sliding it back under his cloak. Takes a drag from his cigarette.

Then exhales, “Damn things been clutterin' up the place for—”

“What are you doing here, Wyatt?”

Amilla's voice cuts through, quietly and directly. The tone of someone who doesn't have time for small talk about monkeys.

Wyatt blinks. Then laughs, low and easy, like he expected this.

“Fair question.” He taps ash. “After the machine got its hands on me, didn't really give me much purpose. Just said... go explore. Read books. Whole cosmos to wander, whole library to sit in.”

He shrugs. The cloak shifts.

“Ain't fond of the readin' part. Never was.” A grin. “But what else can a fella do but force himself to enjoy it?”

He takes another drag. Lets the silence stretch.

Then, softer, “What about you, Amilla? What brings a lady like you to a place like this?”

She regards him for a moment. Then answers in the flat, direct way she does everything.

“Clearing the library. Every avatar the machine made. Every creature hungry for transcendence.”

Wyatt’s eyebrows lift. Smoke curls from his lips, “That so?”

He leans against a shelf. Crosses one boot over the other.

“Gotta tell ya, darlin'—there ain't no point.”

Amilla says nothing.

“I looked.” He gestures vaguely at the shelves around them. “I spent... I dunno how long. Long time."

He gestures vaguely at the shelves around them. “Went through more layers than I got words for. Kept goin' cause I figured there had to be an end. A top. A place where it all stops.”

He taps ash.

“Even saw this big fella once. Monster the size of a moon, eatin' through room after room after room. Shelves, books, whole sections.” He taps ash again. “Watched it for what felt like forever. Kept eatin'. Kept goin'.”

A pause.

“Library's still here.”

He meets her gaze, or tries to. Eyes sliding off that veil the way everyone’s do.

“You can kill every avatar from here to tomorrow. Another one'll show up from somewhere you ain't been. Somewhere you can't get to.” Another drag. “Infinity's got room for all of 'em.”

Amilla is silent. Then, quieter, “I was altered to protect a higher dimension. From being accessed.” A pause. “My Caravelle led me here.”

Wyatt’s grin softens. Almost sympathetic.

“Well now.” Smoke curls. “That's a hell of a thing.”

The shelves blur past. Room after room after room, all the same, all different, all library.

Kayden stops. His hand reaches out almost absently, pulls a book from the nearest shelf. Plain cover. Brown leather. No title. He flips it open.

The pages are filled with diagrams of landscapes. Hundreds of them. Different terrains, different angles. Mountains, trees and even absurd creatures. Page after page after page. Nothing else. Just a book on a domain based on fantasy world.

He stares at it, then he calls, “R.K.T.”

A pause. Warmth blooms behind his right eye, familiar now, almost comfortable.

“Still here, little nothing.”

Kayden closes the book and puts it back before his hand lingers on the spine of another book as he asks, “Why do you still have your powers and I don't?”

A layered chuckle. Dark. Amused.

“Because I'm half-fuel. You're just human.”

Kayden waits. Fingers trace the edge of a shelf. Dust collects on his skin.

R.K.T. sighs, the sound of something ancient and hungry forced to play teacher.

“Half-fuel. Altered by the machine. Can't be killed. Can't be suppressed.” A pause. Footsteps echo somewhere distant. “Powers are... us now, solidified because the machine decided we must exist in a way.”

R.K.T. then lets out another layered chuckle, even darker and amused, “We are the absolute and self-sustaining fuel.”

Kayden blinks and tilts his head. That familiar gesture, curiosity wearing the mask of emptiness.

“Fuel. I keep hearing it. What is it?”

R.K.T. goes quiet. Then a sound, not a sigh, not a laugh. Something in between. The noise something makes when it's asked to explain the obvious for the millionth time.

“You don't know.”

“No.”

Another pause. Longer.

And then R.K.T. laughs. Not his usual layered chuckle, something drier instead. More irritated.

“Of course you don't. Of course I have to explain this.”

Kayden waits. Patient. Empty.

R.K.T.'s voice coils behind his eye, tight with exasperation.

“Fuel is what happens when something tries to kill a human and almost succeeds. Consciousness keeps going. Can't die. Won't die. So it just... floats. Energy. Want without form.”

A pause before it continues, “Your mind can't comprehend shutting down, so reality warping steps in. Keeps you somewhere. Even if that somewhere is a battery.”

Kayden processes. Dust settles on his shoulders.

“So humans can't die.”

“Can't die.” R.K.T.'s voice sharpens. “Can be turned into fuel. Can be altered into half-fuel. Can be erased conceptually. But the end? death? No. You are all too stubborn for that.”

Kayden’s hand stills on the shelf, he nods and then speqks, “The scavenger. The one that broke into my house. It died,” then he asks, “What was it?”

R.K.T. hums. His voice is a low, layered sound. Almost approving.

“From what I saw in that pretty little head of yours?” Another pause. “Avatar. Generated by the machine. Nothing more.”

Kayden waits.

“Avatars are killable.” R.K.T.'s voice curls with something like disdain. “Insufficient consciousness. No self-sustaining state. The machine makes them, sure, but it doesn't make them real the way it makes half-fuel. The way humans are.”

A beat.

“They're tools. Meant to be used. Meant to be broken.” Another layered chuckle. “You broke one just fine.”

Kayden says nothing. Just stands there between shelves, processing. Dust settles. Books breathe. Somewhere distant, footsteps echo.

“The Caravelle brought us here,” he thinks. “It always leads to somewhere. Paris. Paris was a way to that Ancient Greece lookalike.”

His eyes drift as he wonders, “Why? Why would the Caravelle lead us to those places and now here?”

After a moment of silence, Kayden asks in a flat tone, “R.K.T, you were at Zephyros’s domain, observing him? Or waiting to kill him?”

R.K.T.’s voice comes out smooth but wrong, “I was observing him so I could break him,” It pauses. “then eat him.”

Kayden hears its voice coming from inside his head, always from inside like the space behind his thoughts.

“Until you came and did it for me,”

It pauses again.

“I couldn’t resist.”

Kayden nods and he thinks, “Caravelle led us to R.K.T. as if it knows this… half-fuel… would join me and come here… and help me?”

Kayden sighs and then flatly states, “There must be a connection between this library and the machine if the source code of the Caravelle is that it leads us right to where we need to be. This is where we need to be.”

R.K.T.'s voice curls behind his eye, impatient and sharp.

“So what?”

A pause. Then darker, layered with something like contempt.

“You're trying to understand the machine, little nothing. You can't. It's outside time. Outside concept. Outside everything you have words for.” Another pause. “You might as well ask a book to understand the hands that wrote it.”

Kayden falls into a deeper pit of thoughts. His eyes fix on something. A spine, a shelf, a space between. Doesn't matter.

He's not seeing the library anymore. He's seeing connections. Pieces clicking together behind that empty grey gaze.

R.K.T. watches from inside. Feels the silence stretch. Then, “You know what's funny, little nothing?”

Kayden doesn't respond. Doesn't move.

“You accepted that you are human deep down. Said thank you to me like it meant something.” A layered chuckle. Dark. Amused. “Still alone, though. Still feeling empty.”

Nothing.

“Takes more than a word to fill a void.” The voice softens, not gentle, just closer. “Takes time. Takes people. Takes letting them in.”

Still nothing.

“You don't know how to do that, do you?” A pause. “You've been alone so long you forgot doors open both ways.”

Kayden's eyes don't move. Don't blink. Just stare at that fixed point between shelves.

Something shifts in the corner of the room. Small. Blue. An avatar that stunted, malformed, barely formed, lurches toward him, claws raised, hungry for something it can't name.

Kayden doesn't look.

The avatar turns to smoke. Mid-step. Mid-lunge. Just... fades. Like it was never there.

R.K.T. goes quiet. Then, a soft chuckle. Different this time. Not mocking. Almost surprised.

“Oh.” A pause. “Merely suppressed.”

Another pause. Longer.

“Of course nothing can ignore the reality bending will of existing.”

Silence.

Kayden stands there, eyes still fixed on nothing, processing everything.

R.K.T. says nothing else.

The library stretches on. Room after room after room.

Amilla is beside Wyatt now, the cowboy leaning against a shelf with the ease of a man who's been leaning against things his whole life. Smoke curls from his cigarette, disappearing into the space between shelves.

He takes a long drag. Exhales slow.

“You know,” he says, voice low and easy, “you're protectin' somethin' you don't know nothin' about.”

Amilla says nothing.

“That higher dimension. The one you were made to guard.” He taps ash. “You ever seen it? Talked to it? Got so much as a postcard?”

Silence.

“Didn't think so.”

He pushes off the shelf. Turns to face her, or tries to. Eyes sliding off that veil the way everyone's do.

“You got no reason to do any of this. Never did.” Another drag. “Just got told. Just got made. Just got pointed at a door and told to keep it shut.”

He pauses. Studies his cigarette like it holds answers.

“
So tellin' you somethin'? That's the least I can do.”

Amilla watches him. Still. Silent.

Wyatt meets her gaze, or tries to. Grins anyway.

Amilla tilts her head just slightly. A gesture that might be curiosity, might be confusion, might be something in between.

Wyatt catches it. Grins around his cigarette as he says, “Yeah, I see that look. You wanna know what I know.” He taps ash. “Alright. Fair's fair.”

Then he gestures vaguely at the endless rooms around them.

“Those avatar things you been beatin' up? They ain't got a chance. Not really. They could read forever, climb forever, chase transcendence till the stars burn out and they'd still be right where they started.” He chuckles.

He takes a drag and exhales slowly while saying, “Half-fuels, though? Us?” He taps his chest. “We got what it takes. Could reach the top. Could find that higher dimension. Library bein' infinite or not, wouldn't matter.”

Amilla keeps watching him silently.

Wyatt's grin fades. Just slightly.

“Problem is, some of 'em know that. The hungry half-fuels. The ones who didn't lose themselves quite enough." He shakes his head. “Been showin' up here. Wantin' to climb. Wantin' to transcend. Makin' a damn mess of the place, shatterin' rooms, tearin' through shelves, leavin' chaos everywhere they go.”

Another drag.

“Me? I just wanna sit. Read. Smoke. Exist.” He pauses. “So I been... helpin' 'em along.”

A pause.

“Mislead a few. Misdirected a few. Made their search a little... harder.” He winks. “They're still out there, somewhere. Lookin'. Never gonna find what they're lookin' for.”

He tilts his head down.

“But they're still out there. Still lookin' and they might show up anytime.”

Immediately after hearing that, Amilla turns. Her movement is subtle, just a shift of weight, a tilt of her robed form toward the

endless shelves. Toward Kayden. Toward wherever he is in this infinite place.

Wyatt's hand lifts. Not grabbing. Just... presenting. A pause in the air between them.

“Hold on,” he says.

She stops. Doesn't turn back.

He takes a slow drag. Lets the smoke curl.

“Whatever you're doin' here, with this place, with whatever plan's cookin' in that head of yours, you best do it fast.” A pause. “Half-fuels are comin'. More than the ones I already sent astray. And when they get here, ain't nobody stoppin' 'em.”

Silence settles between them like dust.

Amilla stands motionless. Her white hair drifts in a wind that touches nothing else.

Wyatt studies the glowing tip of his cigarette. The light catches the lines on his face, the gray in his beard, the something old and tired hiding behind his eyes.

Then, softer:

"You find it yet?"

She doesn't answer. Doesn't need to.

“Meanin'. Purpose. Whatever you wanna call it.” He taps ash onto the floor—doesn't care, won't ever care. “Somethin' that makes all this—” his free hand sweeps out, taking in the shelves, the books, the centuries of solitude “—worth doin'.”

Another pause. Longer. Heavy.

“Nah. Probably ain't.”

He chuckles. Not mocking. Just... tired.

“But you will.”

She turns slightly. Just enough. Just so he knows she heard.

Wyatt nods his head. The gesture is slow, deliberate, worn smooth by decades of repetition.

“Got faith in you, Amilla. Always did.”

She floats forward.

Into the shelves. Into the shadows between the light. Toward wherever Kayden is standing right now, probably lost in thought, probably staring at nothing, probably waiting for her without knowing it.

Wyatt watches her go.

The smoke curls. The library breathes. The shelves close behind her like water over a stone.

He takes another drag.

Alone again. The way he likes it. The way he tells himself he likes it.

The library doesn't care either way. It watches as the endless structure it is. Its very good at watching. Its shelves stretches on.

Kayden walks. His footsteps make no sound against the dark wood. He passes row after row after row, each identical to the last, each different in ways that don't matter.

Some books are red. Some are brown. Some have titles in languages he doesn't recognize, alphabets that curl like smoke, words that seem to move when he isn't looking.

He doesn't look.

His hand reaches out. Pulls a book. Leather spine cool against his palm. He flips it open.

Pages filled with diagrams of cities he's never seen. Streets arranged in patterns that hurt to follow.

Buildings that couldn't exist anywhere except someone's imagination, which means they exist somewhere.

A domain. A world. A place where these streets are real and these buildings cast shadows and someone, somewhere, is walking them right now.

He closes the book. Puts it back. Pulls another.

This one holds faces. Hundreds of them. Portraits of people who lived and died and never were, all pressed between paper, all staring out with eyes that seem to track him.

Then he closes the book. Puts it back. Pulls another.

More landscapes. More faces. More worlds he'll never visit, more lives he'll never touch, more proof that the machine never stops imagining and the library never stops keeping.

He walks.

His mind is somewhere else. Everywhere else. Nowhere at all.

You still feel empty, little nothing.

R.K.T.'s words echo behind his eyes. Not loud. Not insistent. Just there, like a bruise he keeps pressing.

Accepting you're human didn't make you feel human.

He pulls another book. Skulls this time. Hundreds of them, drawn in careful detail, each labeled with names that mean nothing. He stares at a page of hollow eye sockets and closed jaws and wonders if any of them ever felt full.

Takes more than a word to fill a void.

He closes the book.

Takes time. Takes people. Takes letting them in.

He puts it back.

You don't know how to do that, do you?

His hand hovers over the next shelf. Doesn't pull.

You've been alone so long you forgot doors open both ways.

The silence presses in. The books breathe. Somewhere distant, pages turn themselves.

R.K.T. says nothing.

Kayden stands between shelves, hand still raised, eyes fixed on nothing, and for a long moment he doesn't move at all.

Then he pulls another book. Opens it. Reads.

The library watches. It's very good at watching.

Then, he feels presence.

Not sound. Not thought. Something between them. A weight behind his eyes that isn't R.K.T., isn't familiar, isn't anything he has words for.

“Kayden.”

Amilla's voice. But wrong. Pressed directly into his skull like a brand, like a wound, like something that doesn't ask permission before entering.

“The library has infinite rooms. Stay in this room. Look around. Find something about the—”

The message shatters.

Not fades. Not ends. Shatters like glass breaking behind his eyes, like a door slammed shut mid-sentence, like whatever was speaking got cut off by something hungry and fast.

The force of it throws him off his feet causing his back hits the floor.

Books rain from nearby shelves, heavy, ancient, indignant. They land around him in clouds of dust and scattered pages. One spine catches his ribs. Another his shoulder. He doesn't flinch.

Just stares at the ceiling. The library’s ceiling. High and dark and full of shadows that might be shelves, might be nothing, might be watching.

He lies there for a moment. Breathing. Processing.

“Find something about the—”

“About the what?”

He sits up slowly. Dust clings to his coat, his hair, his eyelashes. He doesn't brush it off.

Around him, the room sprawls in every direction. Larger than he realized. Larger than any room should be. Shelves stretch into distance that shouldn't exist, rows upon rows upon rows, thousands of books, millions of pages, too much.

He stands. Dust falls from his shoulders.

His eyes sweep the room once. Twice. Cataloging. Filing.

“Find something, huh?” Kayden murmurs.

He starts walking. Faster now. So fast that shelves blur past. Books blur with them. Yet, his mind races faster than his feet.

“Find something, find something, find something, she said,” Kayden’s mind repeats.

Row after row, turning corner after corner. His eyes sweep every spine, every title, every possible clue hidden in this endless room.

“Amilla sounded so urgent. Scared? She was made to protect some higher dimension. Maybe she wants me to find something about it here, urgently. She wants me to find something about the higher dimension?”

He turns sharply down another aisle. Books loom on either side. Thousands of them. Millions of pages.

“Or maybe the library itself is what I need to learn about because… the Caravelle led us here. Her ship. Her creation. Her purpose is to protect the higher dimension so if this place isn't part of whatever she's guarding, then why else would we be here?”

Kaydens thoughts grow impatient by every second.

He reaches the end of a shelf. Plants his foot to pivot around it, already scanning the next row, already calculating.

“I am curious. I want to know what this place is about. I want to know what truly is the dimension above this but above all, I want to know what is that machine that is causing all of this. The library. The higher dimension. The machine.”

For a split second, he sees someone right before him, a figure, an unfamiliar one. And yet his mind thinks, “There must be… a connectio—”

And then, he collides with something soft.

His feet leave the floor. His body tilts. The world rotates in a confused half-circle before he lands flat on his back, arms splayed, staring at the ceiling for the second time in ten minutes.

Beside him, a smaller thump. A squeak. The rustle of falling papers.

Kayden blinks.

He turns his head.

A girl sits on the floor a few feet away, glasses askew. Wire-rimmed. Vintage. Her face is soft and rounded, fair-skinned, brows drawn together in confusion. Her hair is shoulder-length, thick and wavy, clipped to one side but is messy now, falling loose.

A book still clutched to her chest like a shield. She is definitely startled and very focused on him.

She stares.

He stares back.

His face does nothing. His grey eyes don't widen, don't narrow, don't change.

But something behind them, some cog in the vast empty cathedral of his mind, pauses before letting out a flat and quiet and perfectly Kayden:

“...Huh.”

Chapter 8

Amilla flies through room after room after room, blurs beneath her with identical shelves, identical books, identical silence stretching into forever. Her dark green robes trail behind her like smoke. Her white hair streams in a wind that touches nothing else.

One hundred rooms.

Two hundred.

But she doesn’t slow. She doesn’t tire. Just moving fast.

Then she stops.

Hovers in the center of another room, same as all the others, same as the next thousand will be. Shelves. Books. Dust. Silence.

She closes her eyes beneath that veil and reaches. The psychic message spreads outward in all directions. It is a pulse of thought, of will, of herself, pushing through the library's infinite layers, searching for one grey-eyed boy somewhere in the maze.

“Kayden. The library has infinite rooms. Stay in this room. Look around. Find something about the—”

But something tears it. Tears it like claws through silk, like teeth through flesh. The message shreds mid-sentence, half-delivered, half-swallowed by something vast and hungry in the spaces between rooms.

“Was that a half-fuel?”

Her eyes open. For a moment, just a moment, something shifts beneath that veil.

Then she raises one hand, letting her body split.

Not illusion. Not trick. Her, multiplied, divided, spread across the shelves like light through a prism. Five Amillas become ten. Ten become twenty. Twenty become a hundred.

They spread outward. Into different rooms. Different directions. Different paths.

All searching. All looking for one boy in an infinite library.

The original Amilla floats alone in the silence.

Yet in the silence, her mind drifts in thoughts.

“I was never asked anything like that. I never asked myself a question over and over again. A question which someone else

asked. Someone who is no longer in my sight. Is it so hard to find a reason to keep protecting? Why?”

Amilla senses loss of connection from all the clones of herself she sent out, but her mind seems to not stop with itself.

“Asking why compels me to look for what obligates me. The machine twisted me. Gave me purpose I can’t escape. Pointed me at a door and told me to guard. That was enough for millennia. Wasn't it?”

A pause. Shelves stretch and books breath.

“I am at the closest point. I can fulfil my purpose at last, but for what’s sake I ask? I ask who cares.”

Another pause before thoughts sink deeper into the heart than ever.

“He cares. That’s who. It may be for his sake. For the boy who took my hand without knowing my name. That is someone who is the closest to caring.”

The air shifts.

A figure materializes between two shelves. A tall figure, draped in black, edges bleeding purple essence that crackles

like distant lightning. The energy doesn't illuminate; it stains. Leaves afterimages on the eyes.

A man. Sharp features. Cold eyes. Half-fuel, Amilla notices.

He looks at her and grins.

“You.”

His voice is smooth. Wrong. Layered like R.K.T.'s, but heavier. More focused.

“Seen a cowboy around here? Told me he knew the way out. Bluffed me clean out of the library.” He chuckles. No warmth. “Took me a while to find my way back.”

He steps closer. The purple essence pulses.

“But I'm back now. And I'm gonna transcend. Gonna climb these infinite rooms and reach that higher dimension.” Another step. “Gonna become something more than this.”

He tilts his head, studying her.

“You gonna try to stop me?”

Amilla says nothing for a long moment. Then, “I am protecting the higher dimension. And this one by extension.”

The man blinks. Then laughs, sharp, incredulous, edged with purple light.

“Protecting it?” He shakes his head. “That’s really problematic. Means I gotta get rid of you somehow.”

He steps closer. The purple essence pulses hungrily.

“But tell me something first.” His head tilts. Cold eyes narrow. “Why? Why do you do this? What's in it for you?

Amilla pauses.

The silence stretches. Shelves loom. Books breathe.

“Why?

For millennia, the answer was simple. The machine told me to. I obeyed. That was all.

But now...

Now there's a boy somewhere in these shelves. A boy who took my hand without knowing my name. A boy who trusted me without reason, followed me without proof, sat beside me in silence and coffee and places that shouldn't exist. And beyond him, a dimension I've never seen. A door I've never

opened. And things that would crawl through it if they could. Things that would rewrite everything. Control everything. Turn every human, every half-fuel, every fragment of existence into something they could shape. I've seen what hunger does. I've seen what happens when things want too much. I won't let that happen. Not to him. Not to anyone.”

She raises her head. Her voice comes steady—calm, certain, chosen.

“Because I will not let this world with many of its people become a canvas upon which an indifferent, hungry being paints. No will of an existing being shall be bent. No being lives under the will of another being, only lives through their own.”

Green light begins to glow beneath her veil. Faint at first, just a suggestion, just a whisper of color in the shadows.

“Because I protect, not because I was asked to do so, I do it for the sake. For the sake of everyone.”

The light spreads. Creeps across her shoulders, down her robes, along the folds of dark green. It pools at her feet and grows slowly, patiently, like dawn deciding to arrive.

“Even if one person counts on me, believes in me and comes all the way through with me,” She says, quieter to herself under the veil.

The room begins to change. Shelves catch the glow, edges softening, wood taking on a deep emerald hue. Books on nearby shelves pulse faintly, their spines responding to something older than their pages.

Then, The light explodes outward.

Not violently, but inevitably. A wave of green that washes over shelves, over books, over the man standing frozen before her. It fills every corner, every shadow, every space between. The room becomes a sea of green, warm and absolute and hers.

The man raises an arm against it. Purple essence flares, fights back, pushes against the green, holds for a heartbeat. Then another. Then they meet, two forces colliding, light against light, will against will.

The room trembles. Books rattle on shelves. Somewhere in the distance, shelves begin to crack.

Amilla stands at the center. Glowing. Certain.

The man grins through the storm.

Across infinite rooms, through endless shelves…

Kayden lies on the floor.

A girl sits a few feet away. Glasses askew. Brown eyes. Hair falling loose from its clip.

She stares at him.

He stares back.

The silence stretches. Holds. Breathes.

Kayden's face does nothing. His grey eyes don't widen, don't narrow, don't change.

But something behind them, some cog in the vast empty cathedral of his mind, pauses.

Then, flat and quiet and perfectly Kayden:

“...Huh.”

“Are you… okay?”

Kayden hears her ask and he doesn’t answer, too busy lying on the floor and processing what just happened.

“Get up,” R.K.T.'s voice. Layered. Amused.

“Why?”

“Because there's another human in front of you and you're lying there like a dead fish. Get. Up.”

Kayden's body moves before his mind agrees, jerking upright, arm extending, hand reaching toward her. R.K.T.'s laughter echoes behind his eye.

The girl stares at the hand. Then at him. Then at the hand again.

She hesitantly takes it, letting him pull her up.

She stands. Brushes off her sweater. Looks at her feet. Looks at the shelves. Looks anywhere but him.

Then she takes a step back.

Another.

Another.

Kayden tilts his head, “...Huh?”

Her eyes widen, fixed on something. On him. On his right eye?

It's glowing. Red and pulsing and grinning from inside his skull.

She turns and runs. Her footsteps echo through the shelves, fast and panicked and gone.

Kayden blinks.

“She saw me,” R.K.T. purrs. “I like her.”

Kayden's feet leave the floor.

Not running, but flying. Shooting between shelves, after her, after the girl who just saw a demon in his eye and decided nope.

Kayden’s voice echoes through the entire library, “R.K.T. stop!”

The girl weaves through shelves. Fast. Desperate. Knocking books loose as she goes. She runs so desperately that her lungs burn and her legs burn too. The book she was holding is gone, dropped somewhere in the first fifty feet, abandoned like everything else.

A sound becomes from behind her. Not footsteps but something worse. A rush, like wind through corridors, like something moving too fast to be real.

She doesn't look back. Doesn't dare.

Left. Right. Left again. Weaving through rows, ducking under low shelves, knocking books loose in her wake. They crash behind her like breadcrumbs, like warnings, like he's getting closer.

Then her foot catches.

A book. Loose on the floor. Her ankle twists. The world tilts. She goes down hard, her palms scraping wood, knee cracking against a shelf corner, pain flaring bright and hot.

She scrambles. Crawls. Pulls herself behind a shelf, into shadow, into the smallest space she can find. Presses her back against cold wood. Clamps a hand over her mouth.

Breathe. Breathe. Breathe.

The rushing sound stops.

Silence.

Then comes a noise.

Wrong and strained. Like two things fighting inside one throat. A growl that cuts off mid-thought. A gasp that sounds almost human. Words comes out as fragments, tumbling over each other:

“—stop—”

“—let me see—”

“—she’s gone—”

“—let me see—”

She presses harder against the shelf. Her heart hammers so loud she's sure he can hear it.

Then comes a crash.

Kayden falls from the sky. Not flying or floating, just drops, out of nowhere, slamming into a shelf across from her. His back hits wood. He rolls. Sprawls. Comes to a stop at the base of the row.

Blood spills from his lip. Thin. Red. Dripping onto the floor.

Margo stares. Frozen.

Then, rewind. Not literally. But the moment reverses in a way that makes no sense. Kayden's body moves backward, reorienting, standing up like the fall never happened.

The blood on his lip unspills, retreating into his skin before he stands up. His right eye glows, pulsing.

“Ohhh.” R.K.T.'s voice pours out of him, layered and hungry and delighted. “I smell something flavorful.”

Kayden's body takes one abrupt step forward which is not his choice, not his will.

“I won't waste this one by eating whole.” The red eye pulses. “I’ll watch.”

A pause.

Then silence.

The red light dies. Kayden blinks. His grey eyes return.

He looks down at himself. Brushes off his coat. Straightens his collar. Fixes his hair with one quick motion.

Then he looks up and sees her.

“Are you okay?”

The question hangs in the air between them. It is so absurd, so impossibly normal that the girl forgets to be afraid for a full second.

She stares at him. At the eye that was just glowing red. At the face that watched a demon speak through it and now wants to know about her wellbeing.

Her lips part. Nothing comes out at first but then, “Am I okay?"

Her voice cracks on the second word from how overwhelmed she is and the confusion she feels doesn’t help her.

Her palms are raw, scraped open from the fall, from crawling, from pressing against wood. She hadn't noticed. Hadn't felt it.

“Oh,” the word comes out small from her. Quiet. Like she's seeing her own hands for the first time.

Kayden takes a step forward. Hesitates. Then another.

His movements are slow, deliberate the gait of someone who doesn't know how to approach another person but is trying anyway.

“Hey.” Flat. Quiet. “There's a... weird thing in my eye. Just ignore it.”

He stops a few feet away. Extends a hand.

“He apologized. Probably.”

The girl stares at the hand. Then at his face. Then at the hand again before asking in a softer tone, not gentle but less overwhelmed at least, “Who are you?”

“Kayden,” he says it flat. Like it's not important. Like names never are.

She just looks at him, at those grey eyes, the pale face, the boy who fell from the sky and bled and unbled and hosted a demon.

“What are you?”

The question trembles at the edges. Scared. Genuine. She's seen things in this library. Monsters. Avatars. Things that wore faces and weren't faces at all. She needs to know which one he is.

Kayden’s gaze drops. To the floor. To the shelves. Anywhere but her. He then extends his hand, offering to help her stand up. Still not looking.

She glances at the offered hand before back at his averted face. Then, she takes his hand.

“Just a human,” Kayden says before slowly turning to meet her eyes only to look away again. “You need to… heal that.”

She looks down at her hand, extracting her other hand from his to carefully touch the open wound on his palm.

“It’ll heal,” she mutters, more to herself than to him.

Then, a hiss escapes her. She pulls back, cradling the injured hand against her chest.

Kayden stares at her hand. Then on his own. Then back at hers.

“...Give me your hand.”

Flat. No explanation. Just the words, dropped into the air like stones.

She blinks. “What?”

“Your hand.” He's still not looking at her. “The hurt one.”

Slowly and hesitantly she extends it and he takes it. His fingers close around hers. His other hand hovers above the wound, palm down, not touching.

A flicker. A pulse. Something shifts.

The raw skin knits. The red fades. The pain stops.

She stares.

He drops her hand like it burned him. Steps back and shoves both hands in his pocket. Looks at the shelves. The floor. The ceiling. Anywhere but her.

“Oh, thanks.” She says, looking at her palm. Smooth. Unmarked. Like it never happened.

"Who are you really?"

A pause.

"I mean—" She pushes her glasses up, nervous habit kicking in. "I already asked that. Sorry. It's just..."

She trails off. Looks at her healed palm. Turns it over like she's never seen it before.

"I started at the lowest level. Way down. Came with a few others." Her voice gets quieter. "They're not with me anymore."

Kayden watches. Says nothing.

"I've been climbing ever since. Rooms and rooms and rooms. Saw things." She shudders. "Creatures. Avatars. Things that wanted to... I don't know what they wanted. Didn't stay to find out."

Another pause.

"But not humans. Not for a long time." She looks up at him. "Just the ones I started with. And now they're gone."

The silence stretches.

"So yeah." She laughs. Small, nervous, sad. "Who are you? Really?"

Kayden looks at her with new found curiosity and answers, “I’m… actually looking for something, a ship brought me here in the pursuit of that I guess.”

She blinks. Processes. Starts brushing off her sweater, straightening the clip in her hair, small adjustments that make her look less like someone who just fled for her life.

“What's your name?”

The question comes flat. Not demanding. Just... direct.

She pauses mid-brush. Pushes her glasses up.

“Margo, Margo Gray.”

Kayden nods once. Hesitates. Then the words come out in a rush—too fast, too flat, like he's reading a script he didn't write:

"Margo… Gray,” Kayden tilts his head, thoughtful almost. Then, “Sorry about the whole mess. The eye thing. The chasing. The falling. All of it. That was—" A pause. "Anyway. Sorry."

He turns away quickly. Starts walking.

“Sorry, I have to go. I might need help.”

She stares at his back. At the boy who just apologized for demonic possession like it was a social faux pas.

Then, quietly, “With what?”

He doesn't stop walking. Doesn't turn as he says, “Finding something. Don't know what yet.”

She should let him go. Should stay hidden. Should—Her feet move before her brain catches up, following behind.

As they walk, shelves stretch on both side, almost endless and indifferent, drenched by gold and brown.

Their footsteps echo soft against wood. His footsteps are steady, measured; hers quieter, hesitant, like she's not sure she should be making sound at all.

Margo keeps distance. Two steps behind. Always two steps.

Her arms hug her chest. Her eyes dart to shadows between shelves, to corners where light doesn't reach, to anything that might be watching before glancing once or twice at his back.

Her breathing is still uneven, not from running anymore, from everything. From the demon eye. From the chase. From the boy who bleeds and unbleeds and heals wounds with a touch.

She looks at her palm again. Smooth. Unmarked. She flexes her fingers.

He doesn't look back. Just walks.

A minute passes. Two. The silence thickens, heavy as dust.

She knows she should probably run. Should hide.

Her foot catches a loose book. She stumbles and catches herself.

Then Kayden slows, for a moment she swears he just saw him turn head to take a look.

“Actually,” He stops. Pulls a random book from a nearby shelf. Flips it open. “I might know what I'm looking for.”

Margo stops too. Watches him.

“My—” He pauses. The word catches. “The person I'm with. She told me something.”

He closes the book. Puts it back.

“There's a higher dimension. Above everything. Above us. Above this library.” His eyes sweep the shelves. “And this place is probably connected to it.”

Margo stares.

“Her ship brought us here. It goes where you need to be. Always.” He pulls another book. Doesn't open it. “So if we're

here, this is where we need to be. And if there's a higher dimension connected to the library…”

He trails off. Looks at her.

Margo’s face hasn't changed. Just confusion. Pure, unblinking confusion.

“I…” She pushes her glasses up. “What?”

He glances at her for a second before pulling another book, awkwardly flipping through it.

He then softly says, “If anyone reaches that higher-dimension, we would be fictional characters they can play around with,” he tilts his chin down, he almost whispers, “And that's not what we would want.”

Margo blinks. Processes. She then asks, “How can I help?”

Kayden stays still, eyes fixed on a page, not reading, just thinking. He seems completely zoned out, making Margo feel uneasy.

Then, “Lowest level? What did you mean?”

She pushes her glasses up. The question grounds her, giving her something to hold onto.

"I started there. The first room. Way at the bottom." She gestures vaguely. "Came with a few other girls. We figured out pretty quick you can't just... walk out. You have to read to move through."

Kayden's eyes stay on the page.

“A certain number of books in each room. Then a door appears. Next room. Then more books. Another door.” She shrugs. “So we read. And read. And read. Climbing room by room, level by level until you reach the top.”

A pause.

“That's how it works here. That's the only way up.”

His eyes never leaves the page. He only nods and asks, “What’s at the top?”

Margo pauses. Her brow furrows. She pushes her glasses up, that nervous habit again, and stares at nothing for a moment, pulling at memories before she says, “I… there’s an exit. Supposedly.” She bites her lip. “But also… an option to stay.”

Kayden waits.

“If you reach the top, you can leave. Go back to... wherever outside this place is.” She shrugs, uncertain. “Or you can stay. Become a... librarian, I think? Get access to all the rooms at once. Not just one at a time.”

“That's what the books said, anyway.” She steps back from him slightly and looks around.

Kayden nods. Then something shifts behind his grey eyes. He looks up from the book. At her. Slowly turns.

“The others. The ones who came with you. Where are they now?”

Margo's face tightens. Just slightly.

“They left.” A pause. “One by one. After they figured out they could... you know.” She gestures vaguely. “Warp reality. Change things. They didn't want to stay here anymore.”

Kayden tilts his head and asks, “Why didn't you?”

She pushes her glasses up. Looks away.

“This place has a rule. No reality warping allowed. My… friends tried and they were able to warp.” A shrug. Too casual. “But I didn't bother trying. What's the point?”

He watches her for a moment. Then looks down at the book in his hands. Closes it. Slides it back onto the shelf while asking, “Are you tired?”

The question comes flat. He's not looking at her.

Margo blinks.

“What?”

“Tired.” He still won't meet her eyes. “From running. From everything. You should... rest.”

She stares at him. At the boy who chased her, fell from the sky, healed her hand, apologized for demonic possession, and now wants to know if she needs a nap.

The library waits.

“I…” She doesn't know what to say. “I'm fine.”

Kayden nods. He doesn’t look convinced. Doesn’t look anything.

He only turns and starts walking again. Eyes scanning shelves, books and shakes. He feels as though he’s searching for something he can’t name.

His mind wanders off, thinking, “I remember Amilla saying this library is infinite. I can’t see there being a clear start and finish in that case.”

“I'm sorry,” the words come out flat. Random. Like he just remembered he was supposed to say them.

Margo blinks, following behind slowly.

“You already apologized.”

“I know.”

A pause. Shelves pass.

“So why are you doing it again?”

Kayden shrugs, giving a small, awkward movement, barely there. His eyes doesn’t stop scanning as he says, “"The situation was bad." A mutter, almost to himself. "Really bad. The chasing. Red eye. You falling. All of it.”

He trails off, eyes pulling out of scanning the shelves and everything that came with it. He keeps walking.

Margo watches him. The boy who hosted a demon, healed her hand, and now can't stop apologizing for something that wasn't his fault.

“It's okay,” she says quietly.

Kayden slows. Then looks at her.

“Your explanation.” Flat. Direct. “About the rooms. The reading. Climbing level by level.”

His walks come to a halt as he pauses. He watches her face shift, seeing the confusion, the curiosity, something guarded.

"The person I'm with said this place is infinite. No end. No top." His grey eyes don't blink. "That contradicts what you just told me."

Margo's brow furrows. She pushes her glasses up, quick, nervous.

"I... what?" She shakes her head slightly. "But I read it. In the first room. The rules were clear. Read enough books, door appears. Next room. Keep going. Eventually… you reach the top.”

Her voice wavers. "That's what it said. That's what we all believed.”

Kayden watches her. Silent.

Then he steps closer. Not much, just a foot, just enough. The movement looks forced, like he's pushing himself to do something uncomfortable.

“How long?”

She blinks.

“How long have you been alone?”

The question hangs between them. Shelves stretch endless. Books breathe.

Margo's mouth opens. Closes. Opens again.

"I..." She looks away. At the shelves. At the floor. Anywhere but him. "I don't know. Time doesn't... work right here. Not really."

A pause.

“A long time.” Quieter. “A really long time.”

Kayden says nothing. Just watches her with those empty grey eyes for a moment straight.

Margo shifts under the gaze. Looks away. Looks back. Fidgets with her sleeve.

“You're really pale,” she blurts.

A pause.

“Like... I've seen pale. But you are something else.”

Kayden tilts his head, raising a brow.

“It is just…” She gestures vaguely at his face. “Are you sick? I had some… sickly relatives. They turned pale.”

He looks down at his own hand. Turns it over. Considers.

“No.” Flat. “Not sick. I just look like this.” A beat. “Like a vampire.”

The delivery is so casual, so matter-of-fact, that Margo blinks.

Then her mouth twitches. She tries to stop it and fails. A small laugh escapes, quick,
surprised, genuine.

Kayden’s eyes shift to her. Something behind them catches, holds, stays. The laugh hangs in the air between them, small and warm and real, and he finds he can't quite look away.

Her face. Round. Soft. Those glasses catching the library's warm light.

He squints as he asks in the softest way he can, “Can I… see your glasses?”

The question comes out before he thinks about it. Flat, yes, but underneath, something curious. Something wanting.

Margo blinks, reaching up to gently push the frame.

“My... glasses?”

He nods. Just once. Eyes still fixed on her face.

“I want to see.”

She hesitates. Then, slowly but uncertainly, she reaches up. Fingers find the wire frames, lifting them away.

Her face changes without them. Softer. More vulnerable. Her eyes squint slightly, instinctively.

She holds them out.

Kayden takes them. Turns them over in his pale fingers. Studies the lenses, the frame, the small imperfections. He

sees a slight bend in the left arm, a tiny scratch near the hinge.

He lifts them. Holds them up to his own eyes.

The world through her glasses is warmer. Softer at the edges. The library's light diffuses differently, spreads gentler across the shelves.

He lowers them. Looks at her again.

Then, without a word, he raises his free hand.

A flicker. A pulse. Reality bends.

Another pair of glasses forms in his palm. It is identical. Same frames. Same subtle bend in the left arm. Same scratch near the hinge.

He puts them on.

Margo stares, the confusion more visible on her softer face.

Kayden blinks behind the lenses. Looks around. At the shelves. At the books. At her. Through her glasses. Seeing what she sees.

His expression doesn't change. But something behind his grey eyes—something deep in that vast, empty cathedral—shifts.

He hands her glasses back and she takes them. Slips them on. The world refocuses.

They look at each other through identical frames. Two pairs of glasses. Two pairs of eyes. Something unspoken passing between them.

Then Margo's shoulders droop. Just slightly. A yawn escapes softly. Unexpected and human. She covers her mouth too late.

Kayden watches.

Then—

A whisper. Close. Too close. Right by his ear, “The machine... the knowledge... It's kept here. Contained.” A pause. Kayden looks around, sees nothing but the whisper continues, “All of it you need. Stored. Waiting.”

His hand shoots out in a fast motion, instinctively almost. It grabs at empty air where the voice was, letting his fingers close around something.

He feels not nothing but something warm, solid and breathing so he pulls.

A gasp—high, surprised, choked—rips through the silence. And then, slowly, visibility.

A shape materializes in his grip. Small. Childlike. Translucent white, like frosted glass catching light. Wings that are tiny, delicate, folded against its back. A face frozen mid-gasp, eyes wide, mouth open.

It looks like a Cupid. If Cupids were made of blurry static and forgotten whispers.

Kayden holds it by the neck. Not choking, just holding. Presenting it to the air like evidence.

"Speak louder," he demands.

The creature's mouth opens. Closes. Opens again.

Margo's yawn dies in her throat. Her eyes go impossibly wide behind her glasses.

"What—" she starts. Stops. Starts again with recognition. "Is that a whisperer?"

Kayden glances at her. Then back at the translucent thing squirming in his grip. Without a word, he extends it toward her.

She blinks. Stares at the small, terrified creature now hovering in front of her face, watching as he pushes it closer.

"I—what am I supposed to—"

He pushes it again. Into her arms. Against her chest.

Her arms close around it instinctively. The creature goes still. Curls into her hold like a startled cat. Its tiny wings fold tighter.

Margo looks down at it. Then at him. Then back at the thing she's now cradling like a baby.

“They're... whisperers.” Her voice is quiet, uncertain. “They help readers find books. Guide them through the shelves.” A pause. “I've seen them. Floating between rows. Never this close. Never…” She looks at the creature in her arms. It blinks up at her. “Never solid.”

She looks at Kayden. Something new in her expression as she asks, “Did you just... make it physical?”

Kayden says nothing, watching her hold the whisperer. His grey eyes unreadable behind those glasses.

He leans closer. Bends slightly in the way you'd lean down to talk to a baby cradled in someone's arms.

The whisperer stares up at him. Wide eyes. Frozen.

Then, flat and direct. No warmth but no threat either. Just a question, “Can you help us?”

The creature blinks. Its tiny mouth opens. Closes. Opens again.

A whisper escapes, thin, reedy, like wind through cracks, “The machine... the knowledge... kept here.”

Then it blinks again. Its tiny face shifts—surprise, maybe, or just processing. Then, slowly, it nods.

A small hand raises. Points down a row of shelves. A direction. Any direction. All directions.

Then it pushes gently against Margo's chest. Wriggles free. Flutters upward on those delicate glass wings.

Straight into a shelf thinking it can phase through like it always did.

Thump.

It bounces off. Tumbles and starts falling—

Margo's hands shoot out, catch it. Pull it back against her chest.

The whisperer blinks up at her. Dazed. Embarrassed. Grateful.

She looks at Kayden.

He looks at her.

The whisperer, safe in her arms, points again toward the same row, more careful this time.

Kayden straightens. Starts walking, while Margo follows.

As they walk, the shelves stretch on, almost endless rows of spines and silence. Kayden leads, steps steady, grey coat blending into the dim. Margo follows half a pace behind, the whisperer still cradled against her chest like something precious. Its tiny wings flutter occasionally, instinctively, but it doesn't try to fly again.

The air changes as they move deeper. Heavier. Older. The warm glow that bathed the entrance begins to fade, retreating like a tide pulling back from shore.

Kayden's eyes drift upward. Then around. Then up again as he says, “I thought there was light everywhere in this room.”

Margo glances at the shelves around them. The shadows are longer now, pooling between rows, creeping across the floor.

“There are windows.” Her voice is quiet, hushed, the instinctive hush of libraries. “Huge ones. They cast this golden light, but…” She trails off, brow furrowing behind her glasses.

“But?”

“It's only on one side.” She gestures vaguely behind them. “The side we came from. You know they're there. You can see the light. But if you try to look at the windows themselves…” She trails off.

“Can't focus?”

“Yeah.” She shifts the whisperer in her arms. “Like your eyes just slide off. Like the library doesn't want you to see where the light comes from.”

Kayden looks around again. The golden glow is everywhere and nowhere. Present but untouchable.

He turns back to the darkening path ahead.

“The person I’m with has the same thing going for her.”

Keeps walking.

Margo watches him. His back. His pace. The way he moves like he knows where he's going, even in the dark.

Something tugs at her. A thought she can't quite shake.

The whisperer points deeper in, where the light thins and shadows thicken.

The dark swallows them slowly. One step at a time.

She catches up and walks beside him now.

“I've read about people outside. In the books here.” She pushes her glasses up. “They all do the same things. Build domains. Play in their own realities. Wander around having fun.” A pause. “But you're different.”

Kayden says nothing. She looks at him and says, “You move like there's somewhere to be.”

He glances at her. Just once. Then back at the path ahead.

“I was like them,” he says as he pushes his glasses.

His voice is flat and quiet, “I had a house. In a void. My own little world.” Another pause. “Perfect. Quiet. Alone.”

She listens quietly, her curiosity only growing.

“Then something broke in and tried to kill me,” He continues. “And someone saved me, offered me to come with her.”

As he follows the whisperer’s pointing finger into the dark, he adds more to his words, “I traveled with her, then right before entering this library she told me everything’s in danger of being… controlled.”

The whisperer shifts in her arms, still pointing ahead while she can’t stop thinking.

Her thoughts, “He came all the way here because some… lady saved him and offered him to come with her? Is he so grateful towards her? Is he in love with her? He doesn’t seem that kind. He seems… bored?”

They walk in silence for a moment. Shelves blur past. Shadows deepen.

Then, “You are bored?”

Kayden glances at her. Just once.

“That's it, isn't it?” She pushes her glasses up. “You could've stayed in your domain. Made your house bigger maybe. Fancied it up. Done whatever you wanted." A pause. “But you didn't. You followed her out here because you were bored?”

Kayden says nothing.

She watches him. The way his jaw tightens. Just slightly as he says, “I don't… want anything. I removed my sexual feelings… I think. I tried to change myself to feel nothing and stay in my… void… forever. I definitely didn’t need to follow her.”

The words come out flat. Too flat. Like he's reciting a line he's told himself a thousand times.

Margo’s eyes widen behind her glasses, “You did what? You changed yourself?”

He stops walking. The sound of his footsteps dies. Silence rushes in to fill the space. Even the whisperer goes still in Margo’s arms, its tiny form frozen mid-point.

Kayden turns slowly. Deliberately. The way something turns when it's decided there's nowhere else to go.

His grey eyes find her. Hold her.

She's smaller than him. He knew that already. He felt it when they collided, when she fell, when she curled against shelves. But knowing and seeing are different things. Standing this close, in this dark, with nothing between them but air and questions.

She has to tilt her chin up to meet his gaze. Just slightly. Just enough to ask, “Kayden, why did you wear my glasses?”

The library holds its breath around them.

His face doesn't change. It barely ever does. But something behind those winter-sea eyes, something vast and empty and tired, fixes on her with an intensity that has nothing to do with expression.

“Thought they’d look… good on me too.”

She sees the intensity through those glasses.

She doesn't look away as she asks, “You wanted them. You wanted them, Kayden.”

She steps closer. The whisperer begins to glow in her arms.

The glow starts soft, just warmth stirring beneath translucent skin. Then it spreads, slow and golden, like honey dissolving tea.

“You don’t want to want but you still do,” her voice almost echoes in the darkness.

Margo's face emerges from shadow, the round softness of her cheeks, her glasses catching the glow, the curiosity in her eyes softens into understanding. Kayden's face emerges too. The sharp angles. The grey eyes that suddenly aren't just grey anymore. Lit from below, warm and seen.

For a moment, he looks almost human.

The whisperer pulses gently in Margo’s arms. Waiting.

“Margo,” he pauses as if finding the correct words. “You see things. Most people don’t. You look and see… wanting.”

Margo's breath catches. Just slightly. She doesn't look away. A pause. The light flickers gently between them.

He holds her gaze for a moment longer. Then asks, “Why are you here? Why really?”

The question lands soft but heavy. Not accusing. Just... asking.

“The library. You said the others left it.” Another pause. “But you stayed. Even when you could've followed. Even when you could've left.”

His eyes don't move from her face when she tries to answer, “I just… love reading,” she pauses. “No, I am actually… not really sure if…”

“If what?”

She looks down. The golden glow catches her biting softly on her lips, the nervous switch of her fingers against the whisperer. She stares at the floor like it might give her answers.

Then slowly, hesitantly, she looks up.

“I'm scared.” The words come quiet. Fragile. “What if too much chappens outside? What if I… lose myself in it?” A pause. “Like you. You said you… changed yourself. What if I lean into… something like that? What if I become something I don't recognize?”

Kayden’s throat moves. A lump rising, catching. He swallows. His lips barely part. Something gathers behind his gray eyes. Maybe a word? A question? An answer he doesn’t have.

His mouth stays open.

Nothing comes.

The golden glow flickers.

Chapter 9

The room is split in two.

One side drenched in green, deep and verdant, pulsing slow like a heartbeat. Shelves glow emerald. Books breathe with her light.

The other side burning in purple, crackling, hungry, burning. Flames that aren't flames lick at the wood. Shadows twist and scream.

Between them, Amilla and the half-fuel man stand motionless. Smoke rises from her veil. Just a wisp. Just enough. While his chest heaves. Purple essence drips from his fingers like sweat.

They've been at this for... she’s lost count. Rooms have passed beneath them. Shelves have burned and regrown and burned again. The fight moved through walls, through levels, through the infinite maze, but now they have stopped. Only for a moment they have stopped. Here. In this room. In this moment.

“You're good.” He laughs wet and broken. “Really good. But there are more of us coming. Dozens. Maybe hundreds.” He tilts his head. “You can't handle all of them.”

Amilla says nothing.

Her green light doesn't flicker. Doesn't waver.

He waits for a response. For fear. For anything.

She gives him nothing.

Then, quiet and certain, “They won’t pass."

He blinks, tilting his head mockingly as he asks, “Oh, and why’d you delude yourself into believing that?”

Her veil lifts just slightly. Just enough for him to see the green burning beneath.

“Because I exist.”

The light explodes outward.

Across infinite rooms, through shelves and shadows. In the darkest side of a large room, a golden glow flickers.

The library holds its breath. All that remains is the glow and the silence between the two.

Then a breath. A decision.

Kayden looks at Margo. Through the glasses that are hers and also his. Through the glow. Through everything.

"You won't…" the words come out quiet and uncertain. "…become something unrecognizable, Margo."

His voice doesn't waver, but something behind it does. Something in his grey eyes, in the slight tension at the corner of his mouth, in the way his hands stay perfectly still at his sides.

He's not sure and Margo reads as it's written everywhere on that empty face that isn't giving off emptiness, but uncertainty. The first real uncertainty she's seen in him.

Her lips part. A question. A response. Something tries to come out but the whisperer wiggles and she looks down.

It squirms in her arms, tiny body twisting, wings fluttering against her sleeve. Before she can react, it slips free before slowly drifting upward on unsteady wings, crossing the inches between them.

It lands on Kayden's shoulder.

Settles there like it belongs. Points one tiny hand toward the dark ahead.

Kayden turns, following the gesture. He takes a step. Then another before pausing and looking back.

Margo hasn't moved. Her face is caught between expressions of surprise, confusion and something softer underneath.

He waits. Just for a second. Just long enough before she follows.

As they walk, shelves blur past, endless and indifferent. The whisperer rides Kayden's shoulder, tiny hand occasionally pointing directions only it understands. Margo stays close, just not quite beside him, not quite behind. Somewhere in between.

Minutes pass from soft noises of footsteps and silence before Kayden speaks, “Hey, Margo.”

She looks up. The glow from the whisperer catches her glasses as he asks, “You remember Earth, right?"

A pause. The question hangs between them.

“Yeah.” She pushes her glasses up. “I mean. Why wont I?”

He nods. Keeps walking.

“Clearly?”

She blinks. “What?”

“Remember it clearly,” His grey eyes stay forward. “The way things looked. Felt. Smelled. The people.”

Margo's brow furrows. She thinks. Tries to hold onto images of her childhood home, her campus, her parents' faces. They're there. But fuzzy. Like photos left in the sun too long.

“I... I guess?” She shakes her head slightly. “I mean, nobody remembers everything perfectly. Right?”

She makes a small “mhm” sound like she's convincing herself more than him.

Kayden's pace doesn't change. Neither does hers. They keep walking.

“I don't remember,” leaves his mouth in a flat voice. Quiet. But underneath it, something else. Something almost like... loss.

Margo’s throat moves with a small swallow, involuntarily, before she asks, “You don’t remember… anything?”

Her eyebrow lifts, just slightly, just enough. The question hangs between them, lighter than it should be, heavier than it seems.

He shakes his head. Just once.

“Probably deleted them.” A pause. “When I changed myself. Got rid of things.” Another pause. Longer. “Didn't think I'd want them back.”

The whisperer shifts on his shoulder. The glow flickers.

He glances at her. Sideways. Quick. Then forward again while asking, “What was it like? Your life. Before.”

Margo walks beside him in silence for a moment. The question sits between them, heavy and strange.

She doesn't know where to start but she decides to let her mouth run.

“It was... fine. Normal.” She pushes her glasses up. “Went to school. Had parents who wanted me to do well. Studied a lot.” A shrug. “Nothing special.”

They keep walking. Shelves pass. The whisperer's glow pulses softly.

“I had friends though.” The words come quieter but also quicker. “A few. When everything started falling apart… the war with the chaos that came with shifting the world. My friends wanted to find somewhere safe. Somewhere that made sense.” A pause. “The library was showing up in everyone's heads. A place of order. Rules. They decided to go.”

Kayden glances at her. Says nothing.

“I went with them.” She almost laughs. “Didn't even think about it. They were going, so I went but it made sense afterwards.”

The whisperer shifts on Kayden's shoulder.

“We read together. Climbed rooms together. For a while.” Her voice thins. “Then one by one they figured out they could leave. Could warp reality. Could do things.” Another pause. Longer. “They didn't ask if I wanted to come.”

She looks down at her hands. At the palm Kayden healed.

“Just... went. Like I wasn't even there.”

The silence stretches with weight.

Kayden keeps walking. So does she.

Neither of them says anything for a long time.

Kayden's voice breaks the silence yet again, “You think they lost themselves?”

Margo's steps falter. Just slightly. Just enough.

The question lands strangely. Not heavy nor light but sharp. Like he's not really asking about them. Like he's asking about something else entirely.

She pushes her glasses up. Buys time.

“I…” Her brow furrows. Her lips press together from thinking, really thinking, for the first time about those faces she hasn't seen in so long.

“They changed,” The words comes out her mouth slow. Careful. Like she's testing them as she speaks.

“They became different. Not entirely lost… but scary, weird and unrecognizable.” A pause. Her fingers curl slightly at her sides. “The way they looked at the library. At me. At

everything. Like it was smaller than they remembered. Like they'd outgrown it and didn't know how to say it.”

She swallows. Keeps walking.

“Maybe that's the same thing.” Quieter. “Maybe changing is losing yourself. Just slow enough you don't notice until you're gone.”

Her eyes stay forward. Fixed on the dark ahead.

Kayden says nothing.

They walk.

Her eyes stay forward. Fixed on the dark ahead.

Kayden says nothing.

They walk as shelves blur past in endless repetition of brown and gold and shadow, all the same, all different, all library. The whisperer's glow pulses soft and steady against Kayden's shoulder, a tiny heartbeat of light in the infinite dark. Margo's footsteps are quiet beside him. Not quite together. Not quite apart.

Minutes pass. Or hours. Time doesn't work here.

Then the whisperer stops.

Its tiny hand lifts. Points. One book among thousands. Unremarkable. Ordinary. A spine like any other in an endless row.

Kayden stops.

Margo stops beside him.

He reaches out, pulling the book from the shelf.

The moment his fingers touch it, something shifts. The air thickens. The glow from the whisperer flickers once and twice before it steadies, brighter than before.

The cover of the book is smooth and cool, almost warm, almost alive. It seems to breathe beneath his palm. Blue and black swirl across its surface in patterns that crawl at the edge of vision, geometric and organic at once, designs that make the eyes want to slide away. They move when he isn't looking directly at them. They wait when he does.

A title sits at the center. Stark. Simple. Unavoidable.

“MACHINE”

Kayden stares at it. His face doesn't change. It barely ever does. But his fingers tighten on the cover.

The whisperer's glow pulses against his cheek. Warm. Insistent.

He doesn't open it yet. Just holds it. Weighs it. Thinks.

The title stares back at him.

Margo watches. Her breath catches just slightly, just enough. She knows what that word means. She's read about it. Feared it. And now he's holding it in his hands like it's just another book.

The library holds its breath around them.

Kayden's thumb traces the edge of the cover. Once and twice. He doesn't look at her. Doesn't need to.

“So,” he says quietly, “this is what we are here for.”

He then opens the book. Boldly. Letting a light explode outwards.

Not gradually. Not warning. Just white. Pure and absolute and violent, a flashbang pressed directly against his face. The library vanishes. Margo vanishes. The whisperer's glow

vanishes. Everything vanishes from sight into just pain. Just too much.

He flies backward. Hits the floor. Rolls. Scrambles back blind toward the nearest shelf, palms scraping wood, fingers finding purchase. He pulls himself up, barely sitting. Presses his back against the books. His eyes are closed and won't open. Won't stop burning.

“Kayden!”

Margo's voice. Distant. Muffled. She saw the edge of it, the flash that came, but she looked away just in time. Her eyes sting but she can see.

He can’t.

She's beside him in seconds. Dropping to her knees. Hands hovering, not touching, afraid to touch.

“Kayden…your eyes!—are you okay?!”

“I can't see.” The words come flat. Calm. Like he's reporting weather.

Her breath catches. Her hands find his face gently, so gently, cupping his cheeks, tilting his head toward what little light remains. Taking off the glasses, she stares into his eyes.

The grey is wrong. Darker. Duller. Like someone turned down the brightness on his soul.

His pupils don't move. Don't track. Don't see.

“Oh no.” Her voice almost cracks. “Oh no no no—”

She freezes.

His voice. Still flat. Still calm. Like he's not blind. Like he's not leaning against a shelf in an infinite library with a book that just tried to erase him.

“Kayden, you can't see.”

“I know.”

She stares at him. At the empty eyes. At the face that won't show fear even now.

“I'll be fine.” A pause. ""”Don't worry.”

Her hands are still on his face. She doesn't move them. Doesn't know if she can.

The whisperer's glow flickers weakly nearby.

“Margo,”

His voice shifts just slightly. Just enough.

“I need you to do something.”

She blinks and asks, “What?”

“Close your eyes. Cover them.” A pause. “Don't look… anywhere. No matter what.”

She stares at him. At the empty grey eyes that can't stare back.

“Kayden—”

“Just do it.”

Slowly but hesitantly, her hands leave his face. She shifts back just an inch. Just enough.

Kayden turns. His blind hands search until they find the book, lying on the floor where it fell, closed now, innocent. He picks it up. Holds it in his pale fingers, close to his pale face.

Margo looks away. Presses her palms against her eyes. Squeezes shut.

Silence.

Kayden stares at the cover or doesn’t because of the blind situation. Blue and black swirls. The word MACHINE staring back.

“Not bad.” His voice is quiet. Flat. “The lock. It defends itself.”

A pause before a layered voice answers from behind his eye, not laughing, not mocking. Something else. Something ready.

“It does.”

R.K.T.

Kayden's right eye pulses red, from dull grey to red. Slow at first. Then deeper. Then hungry.

“Together?” R.K.T. asks.

Kayden's lips don't move. But something behind them, somewhere in that vast empty cathedral, answers.

“Together, yes.”

The red light spreads. Engulfs his eye. His temple. The side of his face.

He opens the book and as the red light crashes with the white, he only feels holding a book that has already tried to blind him and something behind his eye that refuses to let that stand.

Sharp red, hungry and alive, teeth bared against solid white, ancient and patient and absolute. They war like mad things.

They tear at each other across the space between his hands, across his skin, across the pages that should hold words but only seems to hold blinding light.

The library vanishes.

Just gone. Shelves disappear. Books dissolve. Margo, the whisperer, the golden glow—all of it swallowed by the collision.

There is only light. Crimson and white. Fighting.

Then he feels words.

Not on the page. He isn't reading them. They're inside him. Pressing against his skull from somewhere deeper than

thoughts, somewhere older than memory. Flickers of meaning. Flashes of something almost understood.

The words come and fade, come and fade, slipping through fingers that aren't there.

He tries to hold onto them but they just disappear from his memory.

Unable to catch the words he feels, he hopes something more ancient holds them for him.

He reaches for his left eye slowly but his fingers find nothing.

No socket beneath them. No cheek. No brow. Just absence. The kind that doesn't hurt because there's nothing there to hurt. The kind that swallows questions whole.

But he lets himself wonder if his hand is even there to begin with or he just believes he’s moving something that doesn’t exist to touch something that doesn’t exist.

He should panic. He knows this. Some part of him does panic. Maybe the part that's still sixteen, still somewhere there screams that this is wrong.

But why should he remember something he made himself forget? Memories are messy truly.

Faces don't vanish. People don't reach for themselves and find nothing.

Then, a pull.

High speed. Everything rushing backward. The lights tear away from each other, crimson retreating into his eye, white folding back into the book. The library rewinds around him, shelves snapping into place, books returning to their spines, the golden glow reigniting somewhere behind.

He feels himself moving through it all. Not his body but just his awareness.

Tumbling end over end through the space between moments, through the gap between almost-knowing and being-here.

He gasps. Air fills lungs he forgot he had. Then, he blinks.

He's exactly where he was. He hears Margo’s breath beside him, the floor beneath him, the shelf behind him as he presses back against it and he also feels the familiar temperature of the library.

Then his right eye burns.

Red light floods back in, brighter than before, deeper, furious.

It spills from his eye like blood from a wound, painting the shelves beside him in crimson. His fingers grip the book tighter. His jaw clenches.

R.K.T.'s voice comes from inside. Layered. Exhausted. Fascinated.

“That book…” A pause. “It tried to take away everything. Every word. Every flicker. But I caught somethings before they burned from my memories.”

Kayden waits. His blind eyes stare at nothing.

“The machine imagined everything as fiction.” R.K.T.'s voice strains. “Every domain. Every being. Every flicker of what is. All of it as fiction.”

A pulse of red light.

“From that thought, the higher dimension was born. A place that sees all below as story. Something to be written. Rewritten. Controlled.”

Another pulse. Stronger.

“But the imagining didn't stop.” A pause. Followed by a layered chuckle of amusement. “It spiraled up and up…

creating infinite layers. Each seeing the one below as fiction. Each unaware of the one above.”

Kayden's left eye twitches. Just slightly.

The red light flickers. R.K.T. sounds almost speculative now hungry with thoughts.

“The library... is a very tasty, juicy storage for information. I bet that machine loves that for all its imaginings in its own blind way.” Another pause. “I think—I speculate—the machine uses this place. Feeds on it. Information to boost its imagination. Fuel for the spiral. For everything it… does.”

Kayden's breathing doesn't change.

“Which means…” R.K.T.'s voice drops. “This place isn't just storage. It's a pathway. A connection. A door.”

The red light pulses one last time and a laughter cracks across everything in Kayden’s head.

“Ohh, I’m just saying maybe! I had fun seeing, learning and speculating, little nothing.” Pause. Quieter. “You taste the rest.”

Once R.K.T. goes quiet, Kayden's vision returns.

Not gradually. Not gently. Just there now. The shelves. The books. The golden glow. Margo's face, still hidden behind her hands.

His eyes are grey again. But different. Thinking. He blinks once. Twice.

Looks at the book in his hands. Closed. Innocent. Heavy with meaning.

Then he feels it. A warmth against his side. It is a weight with presence that was there before but he was too blind, too lost, too somewhere else to notice.

Margo is leaning on him just slightly.

Not just hiding her face anymore. Not just waiting. But learning. Shoulder pressed against his arm. Small and quiet and there in a way that makes something in his chest pull taut.

He should have noticed sooner. He really feels stupid for not noticing sooner.

“Kay?” Her voice. Muffled. Nervous.

“Can I look now?”

He blinks. Processes. Files away the fact that she just called him something no one has ever called him before. Kay.

Not Kayden. Just Kay. Like he's someone who deserves shortening. Like he's someone worth nicknames. But he tries to file it away, saying nothing.

“Yeah,” he says and she lowers her hands. Blinks in the golden glow. Her eyes find his face to check.

Then her hand moves.

Slow. Curious. Her fingers find his coat, the Parisian one, the one that appeared on him when they entered that frozen city, the one he refused to take off even after leaving that domain. Her fingers trace the fabric, pausing at something.

A shape. In his pocket. Bulky and solid.

She reaches in hesitantly. Her knuckles brush his side as she withdraws something wrapped in dark paper, folded neatly, tied with a thin gold thread. Not a rectangle. A package. Intentional.

She holds it in her palms. Turns it over.

“It's…” She looks at him. Confusion. “What is this?”

Kayden looks at it. Doesn't recognize it at all.

“I didn't put that there.”

Margo's brow furrows. Her fingers find the gold thread. Pull. It comes loose easily, like it was waiting.

The paper falls away, a chocolate bar reveals itself. Small. Elegant. Dark brown wrapped in gold foil, catching the whisperer’s glow and throwing it back warm. The kind of chocolate that belongs in old photographs and expensive shops that crumbled when the world did.

Margo stares at it. Kayden stares at it.

“It's…” She turns it over in her hands. Reads something on the foil. “Chocolate.”

“Yeah.”

She looks at him. Confusion, yes. But something else underneath, something softer as she asks, “You have chocolate in your pocket and forgot about it?”

Kayden's brow furrows. Just slightly. He's asking himself the same thing. He tilts his head up, leans back on the shelves behind him more as his hands reaches up to rub his chin thoughtfully.

“Oh, me and the person I’m working with I guess,” He pauses. Then continues, “We found ourselves in Paris once. It wasn’t the real one.”

Then he remembers more clearly so he turns to look at her, “It was a domain with its own rules. It automatically dressed us to look like we belong there but also dressed us accordingly with our taste.”

Margo tilts her head and pushes her glasses. Seeing that, Kayden pushes his own glasses.

She says, “I read some books about those types of domain.”

He nods and looks away, “I really didn’t realize it was this accurate.”

Margo looks at the chocolate again. Turns it over and reads the elegant gold lettering. Then she glances at him, before holding it out to him.

He doesn’t take it. So, she breaks the chocolate in half, making a soft snapping noise. Almost delicate.

She holds one piece out to him, her fingers brushing his sleeve.

Kayden stares at the chocolate in her hand and then at her face. Then back at the chocolate again.

He takes it. He doesn't eat it immediately. He just holds it, turning it over, watching the whisperer’s glow catch on the foil.

Margo waits.

After a moment, she bites into her own half. Small. Quiet.

He watches her chew.

Then he eats his.

The chocolate melts into dark, bittersweet, something close to warmth spreading across his tongue.

He doesn't react. Doesn't close his eyes. Doesn't say anything. But something behind his grey eyes shifts. Just barely.

They sit in silence.

The whisperer watches from his shoulder. The golden glow pulses softly. Somewhere distant, shelves breathe.

Minutes pass. Or hours. Time doesn't work here.

Then Kayden says, “Where would you go?”

Margo looks at him. Swallows.

Kayden glances at her, deciding it’d be better to ask looking at her.

“If the library... wasn't here anymore.”

He lets his words hang in the air for a bit. While she blinks. Her fingers tighten around the remaining chocolate.

“I mean—” He pauses. His grey eyes stay forward, fixed on nothing. “When it's gone. Where would you go?”

The question hangs between them.

Margo doesn't answer right away. She looks down at her hands. At the chocolate. At the floor.

Then she awkwardly pushes her glasses, and so does Kayden with his.

Then, quietly, “I don't know.”

Kayden nods. Just once. Then continues, “But, you have thought about it, haven’t you? You read books about domains, and everything that is out there.”

He pauses and then adds, “You didn’t forget.”

Margo nods, eyes lifting away from him and then gently touches her own lips, thinking as she says, “Maybe, a domain… a beautiful one,”

She pauses and looks at him, asking, “But, why are you asking this?”

Kayden looks down at the floor as he looks for words on how to explain.

“I have a feeling…”

Margo tilts her head.

Kayden continues, “The library… you said that it has rules and an end, but no one reached the end, right?”

Margo pushes her glasses and nods.

“Unless… you joined and then it changed, making it impossible,” he says, eyes fixated on the shelves ahead.

Margo only stares, glasses gently reflecting the whisperer’s glow.

“R.K.T… it already said that the library is a storage for The Machine, meaning it was touched at some point, don’t you think?”

Margo’s face only fills up with confusion and she looks away, thinking to herself, quietly saying, “Whatever this machine is… it changed the library?”

“Yes,” he confirms. Then he pushes his glasses and glances at her before continuing, “Yes, and whatever it touches, spirals out of limit. Limitless. It saw everything as fiction and the dimensions spiraled into infinity. It even touched people and made them self-sustaining, absolute beings.”

Margo looks at him. She swallows and asks, “The library is infinite you mean?”

Kayden nods and sighs, looking away, then looking up at the ceiling of the library room that’s way above. He took in the vast room they are in, realizing how small they are, or rather how large the room is.

He then quietly says, “You know, Margo… I have chosen a path in which I have to examine every step.”

Margo looks at him. Then, he looks at her.

“You see, there is a thing living inside my eyes that scared you earlier,” He tilts his head and adds, “It was once a human, but it was touched by the machine, it turned into an absolute, self-sustaining entity,”

Margo’s gaze trickles between nervousness and awe. He knows she is confused and might be afraid of him, or his eye.

“My path led me to the entity and then us to here. I believe it is a significant part of this.”

Margo doesn’t know what to say so she nods and nervously pushes her glasses.

“Hey, Margo, do you think if I sever the connection between the machine and the library, the library would become finite again?”

Margo takes a second to answer, touching her lips and then saying, “Maybe.”

She then sighs and looks away, saying in a quieter tone, “But, how’d you sever?”

Kayden looks down at his own palm, thinking. He then says, “Severing might lead to chaos. What if the library collapses?”

Margo tilts her head and looks at him again. Then, she asks, “Is that why you asked where I’d go if the library was gone?”

Kayden gently touches his own face, covering mouth with his palm, then he asks, glancing at her, “Where would you go?”

“I don’t know. I won’t go anywhere. If I create a domain, I would become a queen or whatever. If I choose to float, I would become a corpse with a soul. There is nowhere. Nowhere except here.”

Margo says, slightly in an abrupt tone. Kayden drops his hand from his mouth and asks, “What if you recreated the library?”

Margo stares at him. Then, she laughs. Not a happy one, a sharp one.

The kind that comes out when a question hits somewhere tender.

“You want me to recreate the library?”

She pushes her glasses up, harder than before, almost shoving them.

“The library? This place?”

Her voice rises. Just slightly. Just enough.

“I can't just—“ She stops, biting her lip and looking away.

She won't look at him.

Kayden watches her. The way her fingers curl around the chocolate. The way her shoulders pull in, small, like she's trying to take up less space.

He understands.

Not because she explained it. Because she didn’t. Because the thought of building her own world—her own domain, her own rules, her own control—made her recoil like it was poison.

She’s been here all this time. Alone. Afraid. Surrounded by shelves she didn't build, rules she didn't make, an infinity she never asked for.

And somehow, that's safer than having her own.

Because if she built something, if she chose a world, shaped it, owned it, then what would be left of her? Would she still be Margo? Or just the girl who built a pretty cage, became someone else and called it freedom?

He drops the question.

“I understand,” he says quietly.

His mind settles into thoughts. He really sees her. Really sees. She needs certainty that she is herself.

That the girl who walked into this library, being scared, uncertain, desperate for somewhere safe, still exists. That all those years of reading, hiding, waiting didn't turn her into someone else.

The library is safe because it happened to her. Not by her. She didn't build it. Didn't choose it. So it can't change her.

But if it falls… if all of it collapses, and she will need to make something for herself, she’d need something to hold onto or hold her.

As much as he wants to believe in solitude and self-preservation, he knows that even the self is not loyal.

In that case, she needs someone to witness her. Someone to remember who she was before she had to become something else. Someone to look at her and say you are still you.

The realization hits Kayden like a wall.

Not a thought. Not a deduction. A shockwave, rippling through his chest, through that vast empty cathedral, through every locked room he thought he had sealed shut.

He could be that.

He could be the one who stays. The one who watches. The one who reminds her, every day, that she's still Margo.

He wants to be that, or doesn't.

He wishes his assumptions on her are all wrong. What price is he going to have to pay if he turns out to be right?

He's a soul who manufactured himself to believe want is death. To have such a thesis, is to choose how to be with someone. Choosing becomes a declaration of desire.

Kayden sighs and pushes his glasses, then slowly he reaches for "The Machine" book, holding it up and looking at it.

Then, quietly he says, "Margo, I'm going to implement my theory and I firmly believe the entity inside me is the key."

Margo stares, her expression gives away her uncertainty, and then comes her voice, "A theory is… just a gamble,"

Kayden nods and replies, “The library becomes finite and maybe we get to exit it… and my supposed mission completes… or the library gets destroyed, and I don’t know what happens next after that.”

Margo only nods and looks at her own palm, then she speaks, “Either those two… or nothing happens.”

She pauses. Waits. Then, she adds, “It’s all of this for me or nothing,”

She says as she looks up, her expression unreadable but her mind is all over the place.

“It is ridiculous. This boy is ridiculous. He really makes it hard for me.”

Kayden stares at the book in his hand and without looking at her, he says, “Margo, if anything happens, I’d make it up for you. I promise. I would not lose you for my mistake, nor would you lose yourself in this.”

Margo glances at him, something new in her expression he fails to tell. He looks at her for a second, only to look back at the book quickly.

He takes a deep breath and whispers, “Caravelle led to this, it led to the one inside me too. This is the only way I can imagine.”

His right eye flickers red light before he even utters, “R.K.T.”

“Yes?”

“I hope you like the taste of this.”

A chuckle, layered.

The red light explodes, flashing so bright, so suddenly, that the room turns crimson for one searing instant. Margo throws her hands over her face, a sharp squeak escaping her. The glow sears through her eyelids, hot and wrong and everywhere.

Then it is gone. The book is gone. Kayden’s hand is empty.

He quickly turns to look at Margo but suddenly, the library shudders.

A deep, guttural tremor that rolls through the shelves, through the floor, through the air itself.

Books rattle. Dust falls from above. Somewhere distant, something cracks.

Kayden moves quickly. His hand shoots out, finding Margo's wrist, pulling her up.

The whisperer clings to the back of his neck, tiny fingers digging into his collar, wings pressed flat.

R.K.T.’s laugh echoes through his skull. Through the room. Through everything.

“You did it.”

Layered. Amused. Chaotic.

“You actually did it.”

Another tremor. Shelves groan.

“Did you think it would be clean? This place has been swollen for who knows how long. Fat with infinity.” A pause. The red light behind Kayden’s eye pulses like a heartbeat. “And now you've cut the gut. Everything that was meant to be scattered crammed into a space that just remembered it has walls.”

Kayden’s jaw tightens. He slowly pulls Margo toward the dark. The whisperer holds on.

Chapter 10

They run.

The library doesn't fall quietly.

It shrieks. Shelves splinter like ribs caving inward. Books explode into clouds of paper, pages that spiral upward like startled birds, catching fire mid-flight, turning to ash before they hit the ground.

The golden glow that once bathed everything is gone, replaced by a sickly, flickering orange. Smoke pours from cracks in the floor. The air tastes like burning paper and something older. Something wrong.

Kayden's boots hit the ground hard. His grip on Margo's wrist is iron—not painful, but certain. The whisperer's tiny claws dig into the back of his neck, wings pressed flat, its glow pulsing in frantic bursts. He doesn't slow down to check on it. He knows it's there. That's enough.

“That’s enough,” he thought. Always aware. He couldn’t help glancing back at Margo.

“I did this, I burnt the library and now I’m dragging her with me.”

Margo's lungs burn. Her legs scream. But she doesn't stop. She doesn't pull away. Her glasses are crooked, her hair wild, and she's running through an infinite library that's finally remembering it has walls and those walls are closing in.

Behind them, the floor collapses.

Not gradually. Not piece by piece. A wide, yawning mouth opens in the stone. It is black and hungry, swallowing shelves and books and shadows whole. It spreads like a stain, reaching for them, chasing them through the rows.

Kayden glances back again. Just once. His grey eyes don't widen. They don't narrow. They just see.

Then he pulls her harder. Faster.

The library groans. A ceiling arch cracks high above them, sending chunks of stone and dust raining down. Kayden dodges one. Margo stumbles, her foot catches on a loose book, but he doesn't let go. He pulls her up before she even falls, and they keep moving.

Around them, the rooms blur. They're not running through a hallway. They're running through memory. Every shelf holds a world. Every book is a life. And all of it is burning.

A domain made of rain shatters mid-air—water turning to steam, droplets suspended like frozen tears before they vanish. A room full of stars collapses into itself. A hallway of mirrors cracks, each shard reflecting a different version of them running, running, running.

They pass a wall of stained glass. It shows a figure Kayden almost recognizes—something tall and robed and green—but then it's gone. Shattered. Replaced by the grey void that's swallowing everything behind them.

Margo's mind races. She can't stop it. She feels it—every book she ever read, every room she ever hid in, every stair she climbed alone—all of it unraveling behind her like thread pulled from a woven cloth. She's losing the library. She's losing her prison. She's losing the only home she's ever known.

And she's running toward something else.

She doesn't know what it is. But it's holding her wrist.

Kayden's thoughts are quieter.

“She's still here. She's still running. She trusts me.”

He doesn't know when he started wanting that. He doesn't know when it became a reason to keep moving. But it is. And it's the only thing that feels real.

“What does real mean? What is after this so called feeling of real?”

The floor beneath them cracks again.

“That’s it.”

Kayden doesn't look down.

He just moves.

A flick of his free hand and the space beneath his feet shifts. Reality bends, folds, answers. A platform of pale white material forms an inch above the crumbling ground, smooth and solid, stretching just wide enough for two.

He jumps.

His boots hit the platform like they were always meant to land there. He turns without hesitation, reaching down with his other hand too, his grip on Margo's still tight as he pulls her upward—carefully, carefully, like she's something fragile he's already decided not to break.

“I think she trusts in me. Is that real? Is it enough?”

When she lands beside him, he feels the urgency rise within him. Her fingers dig into his sleeve. Her breath catches and he knows he must make something real even if he lacks understanding of what is.

He doesn't let go.

Behind them, the old floor falls into dark—a slow, terrible sinkhole swallowing shelf after shelf, book after book, the library's memory turning to dust.

Kayden runs again. Margo follows. The platform holds beneath them, a temporary bridge over the abyss, until they leap to the next solid edge if there is any.

There is. Barely. A narrow strip of stone that groans under their weight but doesn't crumble. Kayden pulls Margo onto it, and they keep running.

He tries again.

A flick of his wrist. A pulse of will. He reaches for the space ahead, trying to bend it, trying to make the path shorter, trying to do what he's always done—reshape reality into something more convenient.

Nothing.

The library presses back. Heavy. Dense. Suffocating. Its rules are still in place, even as it dies. It doesn't let go easily.

He tries again. Harder.

A ripple forms beneath their feet—not a shortcut, not a warping of space, but a surge. The platform beneath them lurches forward, increasing their speed, carrying them faster across the crumbling floor. It's not much. It's not what he wanted.

But it's something.

Margo stumbles beside him, catching herself on his arm. He doesn't let go. He can't.

They keep moving.

His mind is a storm. Not of fear—he doesn't feel fear the way others do. But of noise. Noise is what he calls it. A constant, gnawing hum that drowns out everything else.

“She's still here. She's still running. She trusts me.”

He tries to push it aside. Tries to focus on the path ahead, on the collapsing shelves, on the burning books, on the exit that must exist somewhere.

But his thoughts keep circling back.

“What is trust?”

A mind of restless words.

“What have I blinded myself to?”

A mind’s refusal of acceptance.

“What must I accept?”

A mind figures out the truth, but remains too numb to act on it.

But it's getting harder. The library's resistance is growing. The more he wants, the more the rules push back.

And what he wants right now isn't escape.

It's her.

A man’s soul split between want and thought. Not a soul lost in the void. Not blinded to only see the void.

He stops.

The platform slows beneath them, grinding to a halt on the edge of a room that's still intact—for now. Shelves still stand. Books still breathe. A faint golden glow flickers at the edges of the walls.

Kayden stands still. His grip on her hand is slack.

Margo looks at him, breathless, confused.

"Kayden?"

He doesn't answer at first. His grey eyes are fixed somewhere ahead—not on the shelves, not on the crumbling path. On nothing. On everything.

Then he turns to her.

"I suppressed everything."

The words come flat, but something beneath them trembles. Just barely.

"Desires. Feelings. Wanting." A pause. "I thought if I cut them out, I'd be clean. Safe. Untouchable."

He looks down at their hands. At where his fingers are wrapped around hers.

"Instead, I just made them louder. They haunt me now. Every quiet moment. Every empty room." His jaw tightens and the next words come quieter than ever. "Every time I look at you.”

Margo's breath catches. She doesn't pull away.

He looks up again. Meets her eyes.

"I can't get us out of here. No, I don’t think I deserve to get us out of here right now. The library is fighting me too hard because I am… weak." A pause. "But I think you can."

Margo blinks. "What?"

"If you stop holding back. Let yourself be whole without any shame or fear." He looks away, then back. “We will get out of here.”

He adjusts his glasses, “I can’t promise you we will get out of here but I can promise you… I'll be here. Whatever you do, I won't look away.”

The platform shudders beneath them.

"So just—" He stops. Looks at the floor. Then back at her. "Let it happen. Whatever it is. I'll follow."

His grip on her hand doesn't tighten. It doesn't loosen either.

“Just… let it happen. Close your eyes.”

He's not promising anything grand. Just that he'll stay.

Margo's expression shifts. She doesn't say anything.

The glow flickers between them.

Then—she closes her eyes.

Not hesitantly. Not reluctantly. Just… closed. Like she's been waiting for permission she didn't know she needed.

Kayden watches her. The way her brow softens. The way her breath slows. The way the whisperer's glow catches the curve of her cheek.

He doesn't let go of her hand.

A rumble builds beneath them. Not the library collapsing—something else. Something answering.

The golden glow deepens. Spreads. Warps.

The floor beneath them shimmers—not breaking, not crumbling, but becoming.

Scales form beneath their feet. Deep red, like cooling embers, each one catching the golden light and throwing it back as something darker, older, alive. A spine rises between them, ridged and warm. Wings unfold on either side—vast, leathery, catching air that doesn't exist.

The dragon doesn't roar. It doesn't need to.

It simply is.

And they are on it.

Margo opens her eyes. She looks down at the red scales beneath her, then at Kayden, then at the vast, burning library falling away below them.

Her mouth opens. Nothing comes out.

Kayden looks at her. His grey eyes are unreadable.

But his hand is still holding hers.

The dragon lifts. Flies.

The library burns beneath them. Shelves crumble into ash. Books scatter like startled birds. Infinite rooms fold in on themselves, collapsing into a finite space that can't hold what was never meant to fit.

Above them, the ceiling has vanished. There is only sky now—not blue, not grey, but something else. Something infinite in a different way.

Margo's grip tightens around his fingers. Just slightly.

Then Kayden feels it.

A shift in the air. A weight pressing from behind.

He turns.

They're coming—dozens of them. Avatars. Twisted, hungry things born from the library's death throes, clawing through the collapsing shelves, their eyes fixed on the dragon. On them.

Some are silhouettes against the burning dark. Wings of jagged light or tattered shadow, flapping their way forward towards the dragon.

They are shapes that don't quite hold form, flickering between something human and something worse.

Kayden moves.

He steps back from Margo, his hand slipping from hers. She looks at him, confused.

"Focus ahead."

His voice is flat. Calm. But there's a sharpness beneath it.

"Try to build a world. A domain. Anything. Only that can help us within a larger domain like this."

She blinks. Her mouth opens.

He's already turning away, facing the horde.

Margo sees his back. The grey coat, the ash hair, the way his shoulders square like he's done this a thousand times.

She closes her eyes.

Behind Kayden, the avatars close in. Claws reach. Jaws open.

He raises a hand—

Green light slams into the horde.

Not from him.

From above.

A blur of dark green and white hair tears through the swarm like a blade through silk. Blasts of emerald energy erupt from her palms, each one finding its mark, each one erasing an avatar from existence.

Amilla lands on the dragon's back beside Kayden. Her robes settle. Her white hair drifts in a wind that touches nothing else.

Kayden glances at her.

She looks tired.

Not tired of exertion—something deeper. Older. Like she's been fighting for longer than she's been alive.

He says nothing. But something in his grey eyes flickers.

Amilla's gaze turns toward him—or rather, the blank space where her face should be turns toward him.

"You're learning."

Her voice is flat. But there's something underneath it. Recognition.

"To unlock your cosmic sensory. You felt my state."

Kayden doesn't respond. He doesn't need to.

A golden glow pulses beside them. The whisperer lifts from Kayden's shoulder, translucent wings beating, and expands.

Light pours from its tiny form—warm, golden, absolute. It wraps around the dragon, around them, forming a translucent bubble that shimmers with ancient light.

The avatars crash against it. They can't pass.

Kayden turns back to the front. Back to Margo.

She stands at the dragon's neck, eyes still closed, hands loose at her sides. The whisperer's glow catches the edges of her face, soft and gold. She looks small against the chaos behind her—the burning shelves, the falling sky, the endless collapse of everything she's known.

He feels it before he sees it.

A shift. Subtle at first. Like the air itself is learning a new language, pressing against the edges of the burning library with something warm and tentative.

It expands from her—not in waves, not in pulses, but in a slow, blooming presence that curls through him like smoke through a room.

He can't name it. Can't describe it. Just that it's there, quiet and unfamiliar, pressing against the burning world like a hand against a locked door.

She's doing something.

He doesn't interrupt.

Behind him, the shield cracks.

A herd of demonic avatars slams against the bubble, clawed hands pressing into the golden light, their bodies pressed together in a writhing wall of hunger. More of them pour in from the sides, multiplying in ways that make no sense—two from one, four from two, a cascade of shapes that shouldn't exist.

They shriek without sound, press without breath, their bodies pressing against the shield until the gold begins to splinter.

Amilla blasts them. Green light tears through the horde, each strike precise, each one erasing a handful. But they keep coming. Keep multiplying. Beyond logic, beyond reason. The more she kills, the more there are.

The shield cracks again.

A web of fractures spreads across its surface.

Then—

Hooves.

Against air.

A horse the color of storm clouds gallops across the burning sky, legs churning nothing, mane trailing like smoke. On its back, Wyatt leans low, revolver in hand, his weathered face split by a grin that doesn't fit the chaos around him. His coat whips behind him. His boots press into the horse's sides like he's done this a thousand times.

Four shots.

Each one finds its mark.

Each one erases a wave.

The demonic avatars dissolve—not dying, just ceasing. The herd collapses into nothing, one shot at a time, and the sky is quiet again.

Wyatt's horse slows as he passes, and for a brief moment, his eyes meet Amilla's. The chaos of the burning library flickers around them. Shelves crumble. Pages rain like snow.

He doesn't say anything. Just tips his hat. A small, easy motion, like he's tipping it to a stranger on a street.

Then he's gone. Into the smoke. Into the burning. Into wherever he came from.

The world flickers.

One moment, the library is still collapsing around them—shelves crumbling, pages burning, the infinite becoming finite. The heat is real. The smoke is thick. The air tastes like ash and endings.

The next, there is green.

Rolling hills spread beneath the dragon. A river winds through valleys, catching light that shouldn't exist. Mountains rise in the distance, their peaks kissing a sky that's blue and warm and real. The air smells like grass and water and something clean.

Then it flickers back.

Library. Fire. Ash. The weight of collapse pressing against the shield.

Then back again. Green. Peace. Possibility. A world that feels like it's been waiting.

Margo's eyes are still closed. Her hands are still loose at her sides. But the presence that presses outward from her grows stronger with each flicker—like she's learning, moment by moment, to hold both realities in her hands.

Kayden watches her. The way her brow softens. The way her breath steadies. The way the world bends around her without her even knowing.

The dragon flies on.

Between the burning and the green.

The back and forth keeps happening.

Flickering. Green to ash. Ash to green. Each shift faster than the last, like the world itself is struggling to decide what it wants to be. Kayden watches the rhythm of it—the rise and

fall of a reality that can't settle—and feels the tension building in his chest like a wound.

He reaches out. Takes Margo's hand.

His fingers find hers, careful and certain. Her skin is warm against his, and he holds on like it's the only solid thing left.

He tries to help her focus. Tries to ground her in the flickering chaos.

Then everything begins to darken.

Not just the library—everything. The landscape, too. The green hills darken to grey, the blue sky drains to black, the rivers turn to ink. And the library... the library darkens faster, like it was already halfway there.

The flickering slows. Lengthens. The moments of light grow shorter, the moments of dark stretch longer, until there's barely any gap between them.

Pressure builds.

Not physical—something deeper. A weight pressing against the inside of their ribs, the back of their skulls. The sensation of being swallowed. Of their souls being compressed, pulled inward, folded into something small and dense.

Amilla raises a hand. Green light pulses outward from her palm—bright, certain, absolute.

It dies.

Not fades. Dies. The darkness swallows it whole.

Amilla stands motionless. She doesn't try again.

Kayden's grip tightens on Margo's hand.

He pulls her into his arms.

Carefully. Slowly. Like she's something he's afraid to break.

She doesn't resist. Her head finds the space beneath his chin, her fingers curl into his coat. She's trembling, just barely, or maybe that's him.

The last flicker dies.

Everything plunges into darkness. Absolute. Still.

No sky. No ground. No library. No green. Just the absence of everything.

And the sound of breathing. Two of them. Close together.

The whisperer's glow is gone. Amilla's presence is somewhere near, but barely perceptible.

Kayden holds Margo.

The darkness holds them both. Then, it presses in.

Not like a room. Not like a void. Like absence. A state where nothing exists, not even the idea of existing.

They drift.

Kayden, Margo, The Whisperer—state of not existing.

Amilla feels herself—her essence, her presence, the shape of her will—flickering at the edges. The darkness is trying to fold her into itself. To make her part of the quiet. To erase.

She pushes back.

A pulse. Green. Faint at first, like a distant star struggling to reach across a universe of black. It warms the space around her, holds the darkness at arm's length.

She pushes harder.

The green brightens. Swells. A steady, defiant glow that refuses to be swallowed.

Then she hears it.

A voice. Layered. Closer than sound, deeper than hearing. It doesn't enter through ears—it arrives, fully formed, pressing against the fabric of her awareness.

R.K.T., “I'm hungry.”

The word isn't spoken. It's recognized. Understood. A shift in the texture of the void itself.

Then the darkness tears.

Not physically—there's nothing physical here to tear. But the space that holds them fractures along invisible seams, and from those seams pours something that isn't light.

It's presence. Absolute. Overwhelming. Red and ancient and infinite, brighter than any sun, denser than any collapse. It erupts into the dark not like a flame, but like a birth—a sudden, violent explosion of being that swallows the blackness whole.

Amilla's green light doesn't fade.

It becomes a shadow. A whisper. A memory of warmth against the blazing crimson that now fills everything.

And in the center of that red, there is something. Not a shape. Not a form. Just the knowledge of presence. A hunger that has always been there, finally given permission to be.

The darkness is gone.

There is only red.

And in that red, the hunger smiles. A smile on a form.

A form that is pure now—no pretense, no borrowed shape. A silhouette of black against a universe of crimson, limbs too long, horns curving like questions, his grin the only fixed point in the chaos. He holds something in his palm. Small. Pathetic.

A creature, with jagged spines running down its back and a mouth too big for its body. It squirms, claws scraping uselessly against his skin, its tiny jaws opening in what might be a roar—if it had the mass to make sound.

It doesn't.

R.K.T. watches it. His layered voice curls through the space like smoke through keyholes.

"All that hunger." A pause. "All that time spent swallowing rooms, gnawing through shelves, growing fat on the library's slow death."

The creature thrashes. Its spines catch red light, glint uselessly.

"And you never once considered—" He tilts his head. The grin widens. "—that there might be something inside the library with a hunger greater than yours."

He laughs. Not loud. Just a sound that fills the space, that vibrates through the red, through the dark, through the silence between moments.

The creature freezes.

R.K.T. raises it to his mouth. A motion of immense casualness.

Then, his jaw opens—not wide, not breaking, just receiving. A space that wasn't there before, now yawning to accept.

The creature doesn't fall in. It folds. Its form inverts, collapses, compresses into a point of hunger that no longer belongs to itself. Scales lose their edges. The roar becomes a silent surrender.

His jaw closes.

He swallows.

The creature is gone. Not erased. Just absorbed—a matter of existence being redistributed.

He stands in the red, a little fuller, a little more satisfied.

Grin still in place.

But the crimson begins to spiral inward.

Not collapsing, but receding. Folding into itself like a tide pulling back from a shore that was never there. R.K.T.'s laugh follows, layered and receding, curling through the dark like it owns the space

And in that dark, Kayden reaches.

He can't see her. Can't feel her. There's nothing to feel—no weight, no warmth, no presence. Just the knowledge that she's somewhere, and he's reaching anyway.

His hand finds emptiness.

Then something finds him.

A response. Not a hand. Not a voice. Just a shift—the dark itself deciding it doesn't want to be dark anymore.

The world opens.

Light floods in—soft, golden, intentional. Green rises beneath them. Grass. A hill sloping gently upward. A forest behind them, trees thick and patient. A blue sky overhead that has never known clouds.

They fall.

Kayden hits the grass with a soft thud. Margo lands beside him, her fingers still tangled in his coat. Amilla touches down a few feet away, her robes settling around her like they've always been there. The whisperer tumbles through the air and lands in a heap near Kayden's shoulder, wings fluttering, dazed.

They're on a hill.

Green. Quiet. A forest behind them. A sky above them that stretches endlessly blue.

Kayden sits up. His hand is still holding Margo's.

She looks around. Her mouth opens, closes, opens again.

"I..."

She can't finish.

He doesn't need her to.

The grass bends beneath them. The wind is warm. The sky is still.

And for the first time in a long intense bit of time, nothing is burning.

Kayden looks at Margo. She looks at him. Then away. Then back again. A quiet rhythm of glances, like they're both checking that the other is still here.

He gently takes her hand.

She doesn't pull away.

They stand together.

The whisperer lifts into the sky—wings wide, small form spinning in the open blue, light trailing behind it like laughter. It darts in loops, swoops through the warm air, joyful.

Kayden watches it for a moment. Then his eye aches.

A red cloud begins to leak from his right eye—dark, slow, like smoke pulled from deep water. It curls out, twisting into the air above them.

Margo's grip on his hand doesn't loosen. It tightens.

She doesn't let go.

The red cloud gathers before them. Shapes. Condenses.

R.K.T.

Not his full form. Something smaller. A figure of black and red, limbs too long, horns curving. He stands before them, looking from Kayden to Margo, and his grin is softer than usual.

"Good luck, little nothing."

The name lands differently this time. Warmer.

"One last time."

He tilts his head. The red around him pulses gently.

"I have a gift for you."

His form shifts. He turns slightly—and opens.

Not his mouth. Not his throat. Something deeper. A space inside him that wasn't there before, now widening to release what it's been holding. The air around him shimmers, thickens, and from that space, a body falls.

Zephyros.

He hits the grass without grace, limbs splayed, skin clammy and pale. The gold is gone. The crown is gone. He doesn't reach for them. His hands press into the earth like he's trying to remember what ground feels like—real ground, not marble, not gold, not the floor of a throne room he built to hide himself.

His chest moves in shallow, uneven breaths. His eyes are open, but they're not seeing—just staring at the blue above, the clouds, the sky he never thought he'd see again.

His lips move. No sound comes out.

A scar runs across his shoulder—old, healed, but visible. A line that says something happened. Something he survived.

He doesn't move to cover himself.

R.K.T. looks down at him, then back at Kayden, and lets out one last laugh—layered, warm, almost fond.

"Enjoy."

The red disperses. His form scatters like smoke caught in wind, fading upward, outward, away—until the sky is blue again and he's gone.

Zephyros's hand curls into the grass.

Kayden watches him. His face is unreadable, but his hand stays closed around Margo's. She doesn't let go.

The whisperer lands on Kayden's shoulder, small and warm.

Amilla stands a few feet away, quiet, watching.

The hill holds them all. The grass is still. The sky is still.

And Zephyros lies in the middle of it, alive. Broken. But alive.

Kayden then looks at Amilla.

She's been standing apart this whole time. A few feet away, dark green against the green of the hill, white hair drifting in a wind that touches nothing else. Watching. Present. But already somewhere else.

He steps toward her.

She turns away before he reaches her. Not coldly—just completely. Like she's already made peace with something he hasn't said yet.

He stops. Reads her silence.

“More duties. No rest. This was never the end for me.”

He lets out a slow breath. Not a sigh. Just acceptance.

"Amilla—"

She's already fading.

Green mist rises from her, soft and luminous, curling around her form like it's reclaiming her. Her silhouette softens at the edges, dissolving into the air above the hill, into the blue sky that doesn't know her name.

He doesn't chase her.

She doesn't look back.

But as she fades, something falls—a leaf, small and glossy, catching the light as it drifts down.

It lands in his open palm.

He looks at it.

Not a leaf, not really. Crystal. Smooth and cool, shaped like a perfect autumn leaf, pulsing with a quiet green light that matches her. A heartbeat in his hand.

He closes his fingers around it.

The green mist rises, higher, thinner, dissolving into nothing. She's gone.

Kayden stands on the hill, holding the leaf.

Margo is beside him. Zephyros lies on the grass, breathing. The whisperer perches on his shoulder, warm and present.

The sky stays blue.

He doesn't try to call her back.

Kayden looks down at the crystal leaf in his palm. Green light pulses softly, warm and quiet against his skin.

He closes his fingers around it.

Then he turns to Margo.

A soft smile crosses his face—small, barely there, but real. Not performance. Not detachment. Just him, reaching for something he thought he'd sealed away forever.

He leans closer. Just slightly. A quiet gesture. A shared acknowledgment.

Then he slips the leaf into his pocket and looks out at the scenery—the rolling hills, the forest, the sky that goes on forever. Zephyros lies on the grass, breathing, still broken, still alive. The whisperer chirps softly from his shoulder.

Kayden lets out a slow breath.

The wind moves through the grass.

He stands beside Margo, and for a moment, no one needs to speak.

The hill holds them.

The sky stays blue.

And that is enough.