

Bad Infinity
by Brett W. Urban

For N. I hope we meet again one day.

> “Trees cover up a multitude of sins.”
> — Bob Ross

The knife slips from my grasp. Blood dribbles down my forearm and spirals into the bathtub drain as a ragged sigh leaves my lips. There’s no need to pretend I’m fine anymore. The night is over. The identical faces with their practiced expressions are gone, leaving me and my self-loathing alone to close up shop.

I’ve wanted to die for fifteen years, but a quick slice would have to suffice for tonight. When you mix and match coping mechanisms, you never quite know what cocktail of misery you’re going to brew. A recurring terror of mine is dulling the sharp emotional release of a good cut with a reckless swig of vodka. You get weird when you’re manic-depressive.

Earlier, Johnny and Bethany celebrated their recent marriage by inviting me to be a miserable seventh wheel at an Italian dinner. I spent the evening pushing a plate of spaghetti around with my fork, punctuating the silence between vivid suicidal fantasies. A toxic blend of longing and jealousy choked me through most of the courses.

Do they actually think I’m normal?

I get paranoid about how much they can see beneath the surface. I only ever let the confession start and stop at mild depression. In casual conversation, they hear about my modern management strategies—mindfulness, meditation, breathing exercises. I **hate** mindfulness and meditation. I **love** chemical oblivion. When the darkness hits, I lose the motivation to perform the most basic rituals of human existence. I’ll gladly burn every last cent I have on whatever substance mutes the interior noise.

“Any news about Brandon and the orchestra?” Dana, one of the wives, asked around a mouthful of chicken parmesan.

I had completely forgotten Mike and Sati had a kid.

“Did I forget to mention it? He definitely earned a spot, but they won’t finalize chair seating for another couple of months.”

“Fantastic! I’m so proud of your little guy!”

“Our *little guy* turns seventeen in two months! Time flies!”

The banality was suffocating. I fumbled through my pockets, found my weed vape, and muttered an excuse to slip away from the table. One deep pull and the panic became manageable. Two pulls and I stopped giving a shit. Three and I forgot why I was inhaling in the first place.

When I drifted back, the table was already dropping credit cards onto the receipt tin. I reached for my wallet, but Johnny rose and gripped my arm.

“Don’t worry about it, Nicky.” He was laying it on thick.

“Heh. Worry about what?” I retreated behind a stiff grin.

“I know you haven’t worked in a few months. Just wanted you to know I’m here for you, man. Alright?”

“Great, man. Really appreciate it. Doing fine, though. Tell Beth thanks. Had a great time.”

Sweat immediately broke across my collar. I grabbed my coat and bolted out into the raw evening air. How the hell did he find out about me getting canned? Did they all think of me as a stray bum, perfectly happy to mooch off their bourgeois charity? I could afford a plate at some mediocre WASP trattoria. I despised the clean facade I maintained. I didn’t want this life, and I knew it was only a matter of time before they realized I was bipolar, too.

I took three hard drags off the vape and locked onto the neon glow of a liquor store across the avenue.

Talking to a therapist is a farcical ritual designed to convince me I belong among the functional. Googling the clinical criteria for depressive psychosis while nursing cheap vodka in a lukewarm bathtub—now that’s pure brilliance.

I checked my phone, holding out for a sympathetic message that never arrived. Instead, an unread notification from my former employer sat in the inbox. I set the screen face-down. I gave up formal therapy as last year’s resolution; I refuse to keep funneling booze, drug, and hooker money into the mental health industrial complex. This porcelain tub would have to serve as my sanctuary.

I shook my head, hoisted myself out of the water, and immediately slipped onto the linoleum. Tears stung my eyes. I scrambled to my feet only to lose my footing again, catching the porcelain rim at the count of three. I dragged myself into an uneven limp toward the living room

end table, navigating a minefield of tangled cables and accumulated debris.

The drawer handle slipped past my wet fingers twice before I jerked it open. Inside: rolling papers, a lighter, and a crushed bag of weed. I rolled an ugly, lumpy joint, sparked it, and stepped onto the front porch.

I took a massive drag, holding the smoke until the edges of my vision collapsed into black static. The best hits are the ones that leave you teetering on the edge of consciousness. For seven seconds, the cognitive feedback loop died, and I could hear the outside world for what felt like the first time in months. Just crickets.

Maybe there was still some stray beauty left in this world. Maybe there was an actual answer. Maybe I could pull it together, find meaning, salvage happiness, maybe even love again. Then the dissociation rolled in like a cold front, and the void swallowed whatever optimism had flickered. I'd be thirty in six months, and some mornings I lacked the willpower to tie my sneakers.

Rage surged, plateaued, and dissipated into numbness. I hated whichever sector of my psyche orchestrated this unending torture. I almost wished I were superstitious; believing I was possessed by a demon would at least grant the misery some dramatic flair. Reducing it to faulty neurochemistry rendered the suffering utterly meaningless and sterile.

The past flickered across my retinas in sharp, agonizing fragments. I took a sharp breath, flipped the lit cigarette around, and drove the glowing cherry straight into the crook of my inner elbow.

My eyes snapped wide as the searing pain incinerated the stray thoughts. I hissed an exhale through clenched teeth and watched the empty asphalt.

Inside, the landline began to wail.

I stumbled back indoors, tripping over a pair of mildewed sneakers on my way to the hardline. The plastic receiver slipped through my damp fingers, clattering against the floorboards before I scooped it back up.

"Hello? You know it's almost three in the morning?" Irritation spiked my tone.

"Nicholas, it's Beth. I'm sorry. I didn't know who else to call. You're his best friend, and I can't do this anymore. I found files on John's laptop a week before the wedding, but I was terrified. I didn't want to blow up my life, and I've been so hormonal—"

"Stop." I inhaled slowly through my nose.

Catharsis. At least I wasn't the only shipwreck in the harbor tonight. But she couldn't come over; the bathroom looked like a minor abattoir.

"I'll come get you, B. Sounds like you need some grease and fresh air."

Beth struck a match and lit both of our cigarettes. That first exhale brought an immediate unraveling of tension. She trailed two fingers along my bare forearm, and I flinched when her fingertips brushed the raw blister of the fresh burn. I averted my eyes.

"You're doing it again."

I stared up at the water-damaged ceiling, then toward the curtained window.

"Look at me."

I didn't move.

"Nicholas. *Look. At. Me. Right now.*"

Vestigial emotions clawed their way up my throat. Anxiety flared in my chest, accompanied by the familiar rot of shame and fear. *Get me out of here.*

"All of a sudden you're playing the concerned caretaker?" I sneered. "I thought I was just here so you could fuck away your husband's betrayal."

She exhaled a heavy sigh, shook her head, and flicked ash into the ceramic tray.

"Are you seeing anyone? Getting help?"

"I've gotten help."

"Help that actually works?"

"Sure."

I hated how easily I defaulted to being a detached prick. Her brand-new husband was chasing college girls on side accounts, and the best I could offer was serving as a warm anatomical distraction. Beth and I had survived seven years together before my manic unravelings and chemical habits wrecked the foundation. She had always been patient, rarely passing verbal judgment. The physical chemistry remained intact, at least. I hadn't anticipated feeling anything resembling genuine tenderness tonight.

“Why don’t you worry about Johnny and let me manage my own disaster?” I tried to scrub the venom from my voice, but the delivery came out flat.

“It’s finished. I can’t believe I actually said the vows. I’m just thankful we don’t have any kids tying me to that prick.”

She wasn’t crying. Pure spite has a way of cauterizing grief. I draped an arm over her shoulders, accidentally tapping hot ash onto her bare collarbone.

“Shit... sorry.”

We shared a dry, involuntary laugh. She looked up into my eyes, and for a split second, a real current passed between us.

“Do you still love me?” she asked, her gaze dropping to the smoldering tray in her lap.

I took a slow drag. “No.”

I snatched my keys from the laminate counter. The motel room reeked of stale tobacco, bad decisions, sweat, and cheap disinfectant. Beth’s text lit up my screen, asking me to fetch coffee. I pocketed the phone.

Half the time, navigating her emotional weather patterns was impossible; she oscillated between suffocating adoration and bitter resentment with zero middle ground. Her raw intensity routinely bypassed my rational defenses. Two decades of worsening bipolar swings had eroded my impulse control, and I was delusional if I thought I could hold boundaries when my baseline was this low.

I dropped into the driver’s seat, slipped the key into the ignition, and paused as a wave of nausea pinned me in place. Guilt, predictable and heavy. I let out a long breath, checked the notification again, and shifted into reverse to find the drive-thru.

I returned balancing a caramel frappuccino in one hand and an oversized black roast in the other. Inside the room, Beth was pacing with the receiver pressed to her ear.

“I never said I was coming back. I don’t give a damn if you think it’s hysterical—we’re done. I want nothing to do with you or your little sorority groupies. Talk to Dina if you want your clothes back. Goodbye.”

Trying to time my entrance, I bumped the door frame with my elbow, splashing scalding coffee across my wrist. The sting was sharp and grounding.

“How was the road?” she asked, tossing the phone onto the bed.

“Are we really doing the domestic small-talk routine now?”

“Jesus, Nicholas. You really don’t care about anything anymore, do you?”

That landed harder than I cared to admit. I kept my mouth shut and handed over the iced drink. She walked to the bathroom, returned with a damp hand towel, and draped it over my reddened wrist. At least the maternal instinct died hard.

“When was the last time you were actually in love?” she asked, her tone shifting into an interrogation.

“I honestly don’t remember.” I braced for the inevitable trap.

“I still love you, you know.”

“Bitch, please.”

“You’re just not ready to face it.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Forget it.”

She propped her laptop on her knees, dividing her focus between aggregate news tabs and social media feeds.

“Find anything interesting?” I asked, leaning against the headboard.

“Nothing that concerns you.” She smirked, her wire-rimmed glasses slipping slightly down the bridge of her nose.

I offered a weak smile, grinding my knuckles together until the cartilage popped. I reached for a cigarette before remembering she had announced her fifth retirement from smoking earlier that morning.

For an inexplicable fraction of a second, the floral motel wallpaper seemed to ripple, expanding and contracting like a breathing lung. I blinked hard, shook my skull, and stared out the

double-paned window. Outside, a pale sun broke through the overcast sky while a gust of wind violently rattled the branches of an oak tree. The sudden glare nearly blinded me.

I planted a dry kiss on Beth's forehead and slipped out to the sedan. The emotional exertion left me hollowed out. *Hollow man protocol engaged.*

Existential dread circulated through my bloodstream. I've long operated under the premise that the cosmos is fundamentally predatory, forever probing for a weak seam in your armor so it can drag you under and devour you whole. The only rule is survival: don't get eaten.

Beth was the solitary person who had ever made me reconsider that nihilism. I had told her as much back during our undergraduate years before my immaturity and self-sabotage shattered the dynamic. She despised how flippant and callous I became whenever I was loaded or posturing. Breaking ingrained behavioral loops is a bitch. I would have cleaned up for her once—though admitting that aloud was unthinkable now. Answering her late-night call had been a massive tactical error. This trajectory was destined for a ditch.

I turned the ignition, and the amber low-fuel light flared instantly. Fantastic. I checked my leather billfold: completely drained from buying vape pods, menthols, and cheap vodka. I couldn't afford a tank of gas until next week's unemployment deposit cleared.

I pulled onto the avenue and charted a route south toward an old acquaintance's place. Suburbia dissolved into strip malls, then faded into a desolate industrial corridor lined with rusted pumpjacks, gravel pits, and rotting wooden shanties. A gray ceiling of clouds rolled across the sky, dragging my mood down with it.

I tapped the steering wheel, checking my phone for a stray ping from Beth. Silence. I sparked a menthol, cracked the window, and caught myself just as I started cataloging her flaws. *I'm the rot in the equation,* I reminded myself. *Not her.*

I dragged the smoke down to the filter and tossed the butt into the slipstream.

I eased off the accelerator and drifted onto the gravel shoulder. Fingers trembling, I grabbed the vape pen and took a lung-busting pull, but the coil produced nothing. Maybe that was for the best.

I fumbled through the center console for cigarettes, forgetting how ruthlessly Beth burned through a fresh pack. Toss her a single smoke and you might as well surrender the entire carton. Digging into the depths of the glove compartment, I unearthed a half-drained disposable

e-cigarette. I took a desperate drag; it tasted like an oxidized horseshoe dipped in synthetic marshmallow.

Desperate for an actual buzz, I pulled out my phone to locate the nearest roadside package store, but an abrupt sensory glitch froze my thumbs.

My neck jerked to the left. A faint hum vibrated through the air—a hollow, rhythmic frequency resembling an off-hook dial tone. Then came a voice: distant, muffled, yet unnervingly familiar. It wasn't echoing from the speakers; it was broadcasting from deep within my parietal lobe.

A violent tremor seized my hands. A white-hot migraine cleaved through my cerebrum like a butcher's cleaver. I clamped down on the plastic mouthpiece so hard the casing cracked against my molars. My torso seized in an agonizing spasm; one rib felt as though it were sliding beneath another, cutting off my airway.

Kaleidoscopic flashes erupted across my field of vision before collapsing into total darkness. Still marginally conscious and starved of oxygen, I slapped the door latch with a clenched fist and tumbled out onto the asphalt.

Coarse gravel bit into my palms. It felt as if a pair of hands were physically tearing my hemispheres apart. Rain began to patter against the hot engine block. Unable to brace myself any longer, my limbs turned to lead. I gasped for an inhale that refused to fill my lungs, and my forehead struck the roadbed with a dull thud.

A uniform expanse of slate gray. Horizon and pavement merged into a singular, suffocating mass.

I shoved my palms into the dirt and shoved my torso upward, roaring through the agony and disorientation. Thunder rumbled without a storm. No landmarks, no cardinal directions. On my knees, I patted down my pockets and found them thoroughly cleaned out. I settled into a rigid cross-legged posture, attempting a rudimentary meditative breath to regain equilibrium.

After several minutes—or perhaps an hour—my optical focus calibrated. An endless ribbon of tarmac stretched into infinity in both directions. My car was gone, my pockets were barren, and the crystal on my wristwatch had shattered. The frozen hands read 1:01.

A string of profanities died in my throat as a searing, localized burn punched through my lower back. I doubled over with a breathless wheeze. More impacts followed. Bright crimson splatter bloomed across my peripheral vision. I threw myself flat against the dirt.

The acrid stench of aerosol paint filled my nostrils, followed by guttural howling roughly fifty

yards behind me.

Adrenaline flooded my system. Grunting like an enraged beast, I hauled myself to my feet and spun around. A hulking, balding man clad in a rubber gas mask, stained tank top, and shredded denim was trudging down the center line, screaming garbled threats through his filter. He kept squeezing the trigger of a customized hopper. I threw my weight in erratic zigzags, burning the last reserves of my stamina to throw off his aim.

He closed the distance to twenty feet. The moment his marker let out a dry mechanical click, I launched forward, burying my skull directly into his chest protector.

We crashed into the dirt. A psychotic fury took the wheel. I clamped down on his sagging jaw with my teeth while pinning the marker against the gravel. He shrieked in muffled terror through the rubber mask as I tore the weapon from his grip.

I brought the heavy aluminum frame down on his face again and again in a rhythmic, feral delirium. Viscous red paint mixed with genuine gore across my sleeves. I couldn't stop the piston of my arm.

By the time his features were reduced to an unrecognizable mash of tissue and cartilage, I collapsed backward across his motionless thighs, gasping and sobbing uncontrollably. The tears dried as quickly as they arrived, replaced by the ragged heave of my chest.

I stood alone under the gray sky. I hurled the broken marker at his corpse, wiped my blood-streaked hands on his thinning hair, and sneered at the road.

Clarity returned in a cold rush. I scrambled back to the body and rifled through the pockets. In his waistband, I located an ancient Motorola flip phone. I rapidly punched in Beth's number from memory. It rang out to voicemail. Left with no alternatives, I dialed 911.

I hesitated, listened to the operator's automated dispatch tone, dropped the phone beside the corpse, and exhaled through dilated pupils.

Above, a pallid moon had somehow ascended into the sky. Stumbling through the ditch, I dragged my battered frame back to the center line and began the endless march.

Five days later, I was back in the bathtub, a fresh bottle of Comrade Vodka stationed on the porcelain ledge, fixating on the serrated utility knife I had used to scrape mildewed caulk from the corners of the tiles.

My replacement burner lacked a contact list. I had deliberately nuked my primary email

accounts and gone entirely offline to starve out my paranoia. It hadn't done a damn thing. Beth had pounded on my apartment door every afternoon since the highway incident. I never made a sound. She was probably losing her mind with worry, but I didn't possess the bandwidth to absorb another person's panic.

I sat upright in the cold water, killed the remaining third of the bottle in three long swallows, and hurled the glass against the opposite wall in a sudden flash of disgust.

The shards scattered across the cracked linoleum. I stared at the debris, cursing my childish temper, until my attention locked onto a specific fragment near the sink.

The glass was liquifying. It softened at the edges, flowing outward to absorb the surrounding shards, gathering mass as it pooled across the floor. I blinked rapidly, rubbing my temples. The molten puddle began to crawl toward the tub, creeping over the rolled porcelain lip like mercury and dissolving into the bathwater.

A chilling constriction wrapped around my calves. The clear, viscous fluid climbed past my knees, tightening around my thighs and rising toward my ribcage. I thrashed against the sides, but the substance held me with hydraulic force. As the slick layer sealed over my mouth and cut off my breath, I quit fighting, surrendered to the current, and shut my eyes.

A violent pounding on the entryway jolted me upright.

I scrambled out of the dry tub, stepping directly onto sharp glass fragments, but my alcohol-soaked nervous system barely registered the punctures. Through the frosted pane of the front window, the blue and red strobe of a patrol cruiser washed over the living room walls.

I threw on a flannel robe, slipped into slippers, and cracked the door. The night air was biting.

"Evening. Is this the residence of Nicholas Young?" the stockier of the two officers asked, resting his thumbs on his duty belt.

I gave a sluggish nod.

"We received a request for a welfare check from an acquaintance of yours. Stated she hasn't been able to reach you in several days."

His partner offered a tight, practiced smile. "We just need to verify that you're safe, sir. Not planning on harming yourself—"

"Or others?" A pathetic, nervous chuckle escaped my throat.

"Yes, sir. Mind if we step inside for a moment?"

From the dark porch behind the officers, the puddle of molten glass was creeping forward. I blinked hard against the glare. The liquid mirror slid across the welcome mat, encircling their boots.

"You doing alright, Mr. Young?" the first cop asked. The glass was already scaling their trouser legs, turning their uniforms completely translucent. I could see the porch railing straight through their torsos.

"Huh? Yeah. I'm fine. Just woke up, still shaking off the cobwebs."

"I asked if we could step inside." The anomaly was at their waists now, rendering them walking glass silhouettes.

"I'd prefer you didn't. I'll call my friend right now. Thanks for checking in!" I plastered on a wide, customer-service grin and firmly clicked the deadbolt into place.

I let out a shaky exhale. Instantly, my burner phone buzzed on the kitchen island. I snatched it up, dizzy from the sudden movement.

"Yo, N," my dealer rasped.

"Finally. Where the fuck have you been?"

"Dude, you left a message like three hours ago."

More fists hammered against my front door.

"I need percs or vics. Whatever you've got on hand. Prefer percs."

"Got both."

"I'll buy the lot. Usual spot?"

"Usual spot."

A jolt of pure dopamine bypassed my fatigue. I fumbled through the pitch-black hallway to the sofa. My wardrobe had degraded entirely to black cotton and dark denim, blending seamlessly into the faux-leather couch. I grabbed my jacket, hurried out the back door, and made it down the alley to the red compact sedan I had rented from Apprise Rent-A-Car.

“Nicholas!”

I stopped at the driver’s door and suppressed a groan. Beth was marching across the gravel lot, her face twisted in rage.

“Hey, Beth. Look, I’m sorry, I lost my phone, had to get a new—”

“Shut your mouth and give me your keys right now.”

Knowing precisely where that conversation ended, I yanked the door open, threw myself inside, hit the power locks, and dropped the shifter into drive, tires kicking up gravel before she could reach the door handle. I silently prayed she hadn’t kept Morgue’s contact info.

Thirty minutes ticked by on the dashboard clock. I sent a text. No reply.

An hour passed. I dialed the number. Straight to a dead tone. Morgue was nowhere to be found.

Part of me was profoundly relieved; dealing with him was always an exercise in psychological degradation. The other part of me was furious that this scrawny, megalomaniacal degenerate was probably passed out in his own filth in some flophouse while I was going through cold sweats. Morgue—self-appointed high priest of an ‘esoteric’ circle of androgynous occult neo-fascists—despised anyone knowing he funded his spiritual revolution by slinging pharmaceutical diversion. I got heavy Manson-family vibes from the guy. Street rumors alternately pegged him as a trust-fund baby bankrolled by eccentric millionaires or an active FBI asset. From my dealings, I was fairly certain he was both. A conspiracy blogger could write a dissertation on his network. I, however, just wanted my chemical anesthesia, and I was ready to drown him in a retention pond if he didn’t produce the pills.

I swept the asphalt perimeter for the tenth time.

I cut the engine, locked the sedan, and walked toward the illuminated plate-glass facade of the Soul Foods supermarket. The winter sun had dropped below the treeline twenty minutes ago. Rounding the concrete corner toward the loading docks, I spotted a figure crumpled on the asphalt in front of a green commercial dumpster. Long dark skirt, oversized down jacket, scuffed combat boots—all black.

“Hey. You alive over there?”

Silence. No visible respiration. I nudged the heavy boot with my sneaker.

I crouched down, grabbed the hood, and lifted the head by the matted hair. A cold knot

tightened in my gut. Thick, coagulated cords of dark blood anchored the face to the asphalt. I recoiled, coughing violently.

It was him. The smeared white face paint and bleached platinum hair were glued together in grotesque crusts. His titanium facial piercings lay scattered across the oil stains like loose teeth.

“Jesus... Jesus fucking Christ.”

I forced myself to search his layers, pulling three sandwich bags filled with assorted oxycodone and hydrocodone capsules from his interior lining. Deep in the inner pocket, I also found sterile rigs and a black, gummy sphere of tar heroin wrapped in a paper towel.

I peeled the heroin away from the towel and noticed a ten-digit telephone number scrawled hastily in blue ballpoint underneath. I shoved the tar back into his coat, pocketed the pills and the paper towel, and stood up.

After taking a steadying breath, I walked into the grocery store, informed the startled floor manager that there was an unresponsive person behind the dumpster who needed emergency services, and slipped back out to the rental before the sirens could start.

My nervous system was frayed to the raw wiring. I sat at my laminate kitchen table, staring at the grease-stained paper towel in my palm, thoroughly saturated with oxycodone.

Things were never supposed to unravel this way. Or maybe this was the inevitable mathematical conclusion. What had I anticipated from an undergraduate philosophy degree? I wasn't cut out for secondary school academia, and nobody at the local fast-food drive-thru wanted to hear Marcus Aurelius quotes while I manned the fry station. I used to burn with purpose. Now I was an ineffectual depressive who couldn't look in the bathroom mirror without chemical assistance. What happened to the grand intellectual crusade? My existence had degraded into a rotating carousel of base comforts, bourgeois neuroses, and avoidance strategies. **Sapere aude**, my ass.

The walls were closing in. I pushed away from the table, collapsed onto the sofa, and clicked the television on with the remote.

I cycled through late-night news broadcasts, televised poker, infomercials, and cartoons for an hour until the remote abruptly ceased responding. I sighed, opening the side table drawer to find fresh AA batteries.

The screen began to flicker with high-frequency static. I looked up. The television was cycling channels entirely on its own, accelerating until the audio blended into a shrill mechanical whine.

I popped the battery cover off and swapped the cells. The power switch did nothing. None of the manual buttons on the bezel responded.

An ear-splitting test tone erupted from the stereo speakers. On the screen, a pair of cold, vertical-slit reptilian eyes locked directly onto mine.

A digitized voice boomed through the room:

“Hell hath no limits, nor is circumscribed in one self place; for where we are is hell, and where hell is must we ever be.”

I scrambled for my menthols, grabbed the crushed pack off the counter, flicked my lighter, and burst onto the front porch. The heavy stench of burning timber assaulted my senses.

“Nick, where the fuck were you?”

I froze. The voice was unmistakable. I squeezed my eyes shut, pretending my auditory cortex was just misfiring.

“I stood behind that dumpster for over an hour waiting for you. That’s bad business, man.”

I reached into my pocket for the napkin, but the lining was empty. The bag of pills had vanished as well. I swallowed a dry lump in my throat and forced my head around.

It was Morgue. His face was a horrifying, asymmetrical ruin of pulverized bone and hanging strips of necrotic flesh. Gobs of brown and crimson matter sloughed off his exposed cheekbone.

My stomach heaved. I vomited bile over the porch railing and collapsed face-first into my own sickness.

My eyelids snapped open.

Cobalt. An infinite, oceanic blue stretched in every direction.

Black circles appeared across the void, inflating into three-dimensional spheres that soared and plummeted around me, ricocheting off a non-existent floor. Luminous white apertures opened across the field, swallowing the spheres whole.

One oversized sphere failed to clear the circumference of its target aperture. The white circle contracted like a razor aperture, slicing the sphere cleanly in two.

Lying open like a severed eggshell, the bisected core hemorrhaged a luminescent, prismatic

fluid. The fluid pooled, morphing in rapid succession into a blooming rose, a towering ash tree, and a segmented scarab.

The scarab spun a silver filament around itself, forming a cocoon that ruptured to birth an obsidian panther. The cat bounded across the void toward me, its spine elongating and shoulders broadening until it stood upright as a golden lion.

The lion bowed its head, and a rooster's crowned skull violently punched through the underside of its jaw in a mist of dark blood. I glanced downward: writhing serpents had replaced the creature's legs.

The composite chimera shifted, melting into the silhouette of an athletic human woman. She drifted closer, radiant golden hair cascading over her shoulders, her irises blazing with pure white radiance.

She opened her mouth, erupted into a manic laugh, and detonated.

Prismatic shrapnel scattered across the blue void. Where a single fragment struck the invisible floor, a perfect circle drew itself around the point. The fragment collapsed into a dense central dot.

The circumscribed dot—the ancient solar hieroglyph—flared blindingly white, turning searing crimson.

A gravitational vortex seized my spine, twisting my limbs as it pulled me into the burning center. I screamed as the aperture swallowed me whole.

“Sir? Can you hear me? Dispatch, we’re gonna need a bus at this location. Subject is breathing, no immediate trauma. ETA five minutes.”

The air was frigid. Snowflakes were drifting down from a charcoal sky. My skin felt curiously numb to the frost.

A patrolman noticed my eyes moving and held up a gloved hand. “Easy there, son. Can you sit up?”

I gave a sluggish nod.

“Are you Nicholas Young?”

Another nod.

“Mr. Young, we need you to accompany us down to the precinct to clear up a few matters.”

“Wha—?” I coughed, tasting copper and bile. “What’s this about?”

“Can’t discuss details out here. You can ride in the back of the cruiser or follow in your own vehicle.”

“I’ll... grab my keys. Give me two minutes.”

The officer keyed the shoulder mic on his epaulet. “Dispatch, cancel the bus. Subject is ambulatory.”

I weighed the absurdity of the situation and opted for passive compliance. Snow melted against my neck. It had been late September when I walked outside—how had it become winter? I hurried back inside, grabbing my wallet and phone from the kitchen counter.

My old sedan keys were gone. Digging into my coat pocket, I pulled out a heavy key fob for a vehicle I didn’t recognize. I tapped the phone screen: *Thursday, December 13th.*

Panic hammered my ribcage. Two and a half months were completely missing from the ledger. How long had I been lost in that blue abyss? I rubbed the base of my skull, checking for scars or incisions, but felt only cold skin and tangled hair.

I stepped onto the driveway, clicked the unlock button on the fob, and watched the amber lights flash on a cream-colored crossover SUV I had never purchased. The interior smelled of factory leather.

I leaned out the driver’s window, yelling to the cruiser that I was right behind them.

“Right this way, sir.” The escort officer spoke with the flat cadence of an automaton running on low voltage.

He navigated me through the administrative lobby, down a fluorescent corridor, up three flights of concrete stairs, and halted before a frosted glass door. The black placard read: *Deputy Chief of Operations*.

Why am I here? It had to be connected to Morgue’s corpse behind Soul Foods. Or the maniac with the paintball gun on the highway. God, how had I managed to bury the memory of bludgeoning a man to death? None of it felt anchored in reality.

The officer opened the door and ushered me inside. The heavy oak slammed shut behind me, followed by the definitive mechanical clunk of a deadbolt. Wonderful.

“Evening. Chief Deputy Reynolds.” The man behind the mahogany desk looked up, his jaw working a wad of dip. “We’re both busy men, so let’s dispense with the pleasantries. We know what you and your network are running, and we don’t tolerate it in this county. We’ve maintained an equilibrium here for generations, but that never seems to satisfy your type, does it?”

“Sir, I genuinely have no idea what you’re talking about. I’m just an unemployed—”

“Keep your mouth shut and listen.” He spat a brown stream into a plastic trash can. “You know what happens when your people push the boundary. We push back.”

The overhead fluorescent tubes flickered violently as he spoke. I felt like an actor trapped in someone else’s fever dream. I nodded dumbly.

Reynolds pulled open a center drawer and slid a thick, wax-sealed manila envelope across the desk.

“Take this back to your handlers. Ensure this entire mess reaches a quiet, tidy conclusion. If my deputies catch any more ‘local disturbances’ from your circle, you won’t be walking out of this office next time.”

Desperate to escape the suffocating room, I cleared my throat, snatched the envelope, and tucked it into my coat. The escort unlocked the heavy door and marched me back down through the precinct.

Once out on the municipal steps, I broke into a brisk walk, the winter wind turning my breath to vapor. They hadn’t even offered a courtesy voucher for gas.

Across the intersection, a neon OPEN sign glowed from a vintage diner window. I hurried inside to escape the freeze. Muzak carols hummed over the speakers while the aroma of dark roast ground my nerves.

I took a booth in the corner, ordered a large black coffee, and unknotted the string on the manila packet. Inside sat a heavy steel key sealed in an antistatic pouch, several pages of technical diagrams, and a thick stack of sequential hundred-dollar bills—easily ten grand.

The waitress dropped off my mug, and I quickly rewound the string.

A man in a sleek nylon tracksuit slid into the booth across from me.

“Johnny! Ayo! Where you been hiding, bro? Whatcha got in the package? Mind if I sit? Man, it’s

been a minute!”

“I think you’ve mistaken me for someone else—”

He slammed a heavy fist over the envelope, his synthetic smile vanishing into a predatory glare.

“I don’t know what kind of game you’re running, pal,” he hissed through clenched teeth, “but if you don’t slide that package across the table **very discreetly**, I will personally toss a molotov through your mother’s bedroom window tonight.”

My mouth went completely dry. I slid the manila packet toward his chest. “I don’t want any trouble.”

“Smart boy. Who are you? What happened to Coop?”

“I don’t know anything,” I whispered, panic rising. “I don’t know what any of this is.”

“Neither do I, honestly,” he chuckled, tapping the envelope against his knuckles.

I made a move to slide out of the booth, but his steel-toed boot shot under the table, wedging my shin against the pedestal.

“Not so fast. If this package is compromised, my people will want collateral. In five minutes, we walk out that front door together. You get behind the wheel of your truck, and I sit in the back. You will **not** play hero, you **will** follow instructions, and you **might** walk away with a finder’s fee. Understood?”

I dug my fingernails into my palms, trying to force myself awake. Instead, the diner air grew impossibly thick, and my peripheral vision started to blur.

“Fine,” I muttered. “You’ve got the wheel.”

We took an unmarked bypass ramp I had never seen on any state map, driving for two hours until the concrete gave way to packed gravel, then rutted red clay.

Winding up the spine of a barren ridge, a whitewashed compound materialized through the headlights. A commercial satellite dish and a pair of directional PA horns were bolted to the corrugated roof. Enclosed within an eight-foot perimeter of chain-link and concertina wire sat an industrial prefabricated shed with blood-red sliding shutters.

Tracksuit instructed me to idle near the gate. We stepped out into the biting wind. He produced

the antistatic bag, extracted the heavy steel key, and popped an oversized padlock on the shed's main doors. Rolling back the corrugated steel revealed rows of shrink-wrapped pallets loaded with heavy cardboard cartons.

I began edging back toward the SUV when the sharp *snick* of a utility blade cutting plastic echoed from the interior. Curiosity overruled my self-preservation instincts; I peered into the dim structure.

The man snorted a massive line off the blade, hacked up phlegm, and broke into a breathless, manic laugh.

"Ayo! Get your ass in here, we've got inventory to sort!"

"Look, man," I stammered, "I'm not part of your outfit."

"I'll throw you a grand in cash. *Plus*, I won't slit your throat."

I exhaled slowly. "What is this stuff?"

"Quit playing innocent. It's TP#054. *Spice*. Think clinical-grade ayahuasca laced with synthetic PCP and high-octane dissociatives. Pure experimental fire."

"Why would anyone voluntarily put that in their skull?"

"Man, you really are a clueless farm boy, aren't you? We're operating right outside the primary metropolitan node, and you act like you were hatched yesterday. Every heavy hitter in the circuit runs this daily. It turns the volume on reality all the way up—let's put it that way."

"Fuck it."

I leaned down and snorted a thick line straight from the steel blade.

Instantly, my brain felt as though it had been cleaved down the longitudinal fissure. The perceptual universe underwent simultaneous unification and radical fragmentation. Words, vectors, and crystalline geometric lattices crowded the visual field of my right eye; rich, saturated hues and raw emotional currents flooded my left. I felt entirely hollowed out, yet capable of filling the void with pure intent.

"Woah... what the fuck is that? What are you doing?"

The pool of liquid glass had reappeared. It manifested five yards away on the concrete slab, expanding rapidly as it flowed toward my companion. I stood frozen, my optical focus locked on the advancing mercury-like sheen—directing it without moving a muscle.

Adrenaline spiked, merging with the synthetic high. A sinister thrill took over; I concentrated my willpower on accelerating the flow.

The man scrambled backward, but his boots were already caught. The molten glass climbed his denim trousers, turning his lower body entirely translucent. He froze mid-stride, calcifying into a brittle, frosted statue.

I delivered a hard kick to his chest; a muffled shriek died in his throat as his entire torso shattered into a cloud of glittering, powdery dust.

I gasped, the horrific realization of what I had executed punching through the chemical haze. I dropped his knife, sprinted to the SUV, threw it into gear, and tore back down the dirt road.

Headlights erupted behind me. Two scrambler dirt bikes roared into view, flanking the SUV on both shoulders. A volley of small-arms fire peppered the quarter panels.

Pop-pop. Both rear tires blew.

I slammed the brakes; the SUV whipped ninety degrees to the port side, rolled three times over the embankment, and plummeted into a boulder-strewn ravine.

“He ain’t got the manifest!”

“You think dispatch fed us bad intel?”

“I don’t give a fuck, I’m telling you the stash ain’t in the vehicle!”

“Check the glove box again, dipshit.”

“Fuck you!”

Five gunshots tore through the ravine, followed by an abrupt, ringing silence.

I cracked my eyelids, trying to lift my forehead off the deployed airbag. Pain flared along my cervical spine, forcing me back against the crushed headrest. Heavy footsteps crunched over the shale, growing louder. I went limp, holding my breath as a high-intensity flashlight beam cut across the shattered windshield.

Rough hands patted down my jacket and waistline. The biker grunted in frustration and stepped back. A radio clicked.

“Yeah, negative on the product... I don't know, we ran the intercept like you ordered, but the car's clean... No, haven't hit the shed yet... We saw the rollover! Alright... heading up the ridge now... Whatever.”

The radio cut off, followed by the kickstart of an engine and the whine of a dirt bike tearing up the trail.

I waited two full minutes before dragging my bruised limbs through the blown driver's-side window, dropping onto the dry dirt. I had to clear the area before whoever was on the other end of that radio sent a cleanup crew.

A quick visual sweep revealed the second biker lying facedown in a pool of dark blood. I reached down, unholstered his black 9mm pistol, checked the slide safety, and slid it into my inner jacket pocket.

His leather billfold contained no driver's license, only an unbranded gold credit card with no embossed name. His burner flip phone showed full bars.

I pocketed the gear and hobbled over to the surviving dirt bike. I had never ridden one outside of video games, but with a suspected concussion and cracked ribs, walking twelve miles of mountain road wasn't an option.

I pulled out my smartphone, skimmed a thirty-second tutorial on starting a carbureted four-stroke, opened the petcock, engaged the choke, and kicked down on the starter lever. On the third try, the engine roared to life.

I stalled twice before finding the clutch engagement point, then accelerated into the darkness toward the highway.

The freezing headwind lashed my face, rattling my jaw until my teeth ached. This was an unmitigated disaster. The shooter was probably halfway up the ridge, and once he found his dead partner at the shed, he'd circle back to sanitize the scene.

My immediate instinct was to dial Beth, but I was certain she had written me off for good.

Ahead, the illuminated green siren of a Starflux coffee shop emerged from the darkness. I pulled into the asphalt lot. *Great. I'm walking into a franchise carrying an unregistered firearm.* I tucked the pistol deep into my waistband and focused on maintaining a neutral stride.

Inside, the warm air reeked of steamed milk, roasted beans, and synthetic vanilla. The

corporate sterility offered a bizarre, welcoming illusion of safety—provided you had the capital to participate.

The teenage barista stammered a greeting. I ordered a large dark roast and reached for my wallet, only to remember it was sitting in the mangled SUV.

Panic flared. I laughed awkwardly, pulled out the dead biker's billfold, and handed her the unbranded gold card, keeping my jacket pinned shut over the holster. Social anxiety made a graceful exit impossible.

She swiped the magnetic strip; the register chimed with an approved authorization. I carried my cup to a corner booth, cursing my recklessness. I opened the burner's contact list to find Beth's number, but the directory was entirely empty. Figures. I had probably purged it during a manic purge.

I stood to toss the paper cup when an overwhelming stench hit me—like copper, ozone, and burnt hair.

Time dilated to a crawl.

A blinding muzzle flash. Screams. Gunfire shattered the storefront glass.

I prepared to dive for the restroom corridor when a gloved hand locked onto my jacket collar, forcing me down behind the service counter. I twisted around to see a woman with auburn hair wearing a black domino mask, screaming orders I couldn't comprehend.

Behind her, a luminous white portal ringed in pulsating violet light expanded across the linoleum. She kicked my legs out from under me, grabbed my collar, and dragged me backward into the glare.

White glare. It burned behind my retinas.

I couldn't move; industrial nylon restraints pinned my wrists and ankles to the steel frame of an interrogation chair. My thoughts felt thick, swimming through dense fog.

Twenty yards away in the gloom, a high-resolution monitor cast a pale blue wash over the angular face of an operator. Behind his chair stood a tall female silhouette. Every few moments, his fingers rattled across a mechanical keyboard, followed by a thoughtful stroke of his chin.

The woman noticed my open eyes and stepped toward me, her combat heels clicking against a floor that seemed to stretch into infinite shadow. *How massive is this hangar?*

"What's your name?" she asked, stepping into the pool of light.

"Wha—?"

"Your name. What. Is. It?"

"Who's asking?"

Her backhand snapped across my cheekbone, splitting my lip. "Don't waste my time. State your name."

We locked eyes.

"Nicholas."

"Nicholas who?"

"Nicholas Young," I spat, clearing blood onto the concrete.

"Good. I'm not your enemy. At least, I don't have to be. Do you know why you were pulled out?"

"I'm pretty sure I'm in an intensive care unit dying from an overdose," I rasped. "None of the last seventy-two hours makes a shred of sense. I'm done asking questions."

Her expression softened with a flicker of clinical pity. She stepped behind the chair and flicked open a switchblade. I braced for the cold steel of an execution, but felt the tension in the nylon straps go slack.

She produced a glass ampoule from her tactical vest and held it beneath my nostrils.

The room dissolved into pitch black.

"Zero-four-eight-one-one."

I blinked away dried crust, rolling my neck to work out a vicious knot. A pair of wired earbuds fell from my collar onto my lap. My clothes had been swapped again: gray heather sweatshirt, dark cargo trousers.

"Zero-four-eight-one-one."

A tired mother and her young son shuffled toward a beige laminate service counter where a bored clerk stamped bureaucratic forms. Their voices were muffled, as though submerged under six feet of water. I shoved the earbuds into my pocket and pushed through the automated sliding doors toward the exit.

Sunlight hit me like a physical wave.

It smelled like mid-July. A kid tossed a tennis ball across a manicured lawn while a golden retriever sprinted in pursuit. Sedans cruised down the residential boulevard at twenty miles per hour. An ice cream truck jangled its synthesized melody two blocks away. A postcard of suburban tranquility.

Where the hell am I?

My hip vibrated. A flip phone. I flipped it open to find an incoming MMS: a high-contrast photo of a pale, dark-haired woman wearing an olive bandana staring into the lens, followed by a string of furious profanities. I couldn't tell if she was threatening me or flirting.

Inside my pockets sat a leather wallet and a lanyard holding two brass keys. The wallet held forty-three dollars in cash, a foil-wrapped condom, and zero identification.

I crossed the avenue to a corner bodega to buy a pack of cigarettes.

"Dante!"

A girl on a fixed-gear bicycle—roughly my age, with the left side of her scalp shaved clean and the rest of her dark hair falling loose over her shoulders—hailed me from the curb. She slid a pair of dark sunglasses over her eyes. "Hello? Earth to Dante?"

The clerk rang up my menthols. I tossed two bills on the counter, grabbed the pack, and walked out without waiting for change. I realized I had forgotten a lighter and turned back around.

"Dante!" She was leaning against the outdoor brickwork, smoking, holding out an orange disposable lighter.

"Need one for the road," I muttered, annoyed by the shaky register of my voice.

"Keep it."

"Thanks." I lit the menthol and pocketed the plastic lighter.

"The road"? Aren't you registered for classes this semester? Where are you even walking to?"

Why did her cadence ring so familiar? How did I get deposited here? I looked back at the civic building I had just exited, but the facade looked entirely generic. *Am I awake?*

“Keep being an aloof prick. Later!” she yelled, kicking off the curb.

“Wait! Do we know each other? Is Dante actually my name?”

She glanced over her shoulder with an incredulous smirk. “How blasted are you? Call me if a more interesting demon takes over your body.”

She banked hard down the hill and vanished around the tree-lined corner.

A swollen full moon hung suspended in the night sky, clouds tearing past its face in ragged strips. I was down to my final menthol. I had been walking for miles along a shoulder devoid of headlights.

Judging by the quarter-mile driveways and iron security gates recessed into manicured tree lines, this was an enclave of excessive wealth. The houses were invisible beyond the foliage. What had I eaten for breakfast? Who was occupying the White House?

Tires squealed against asphalt behind me.

“EAT SHIT!” a woman screamed from the approaching curve.

She rounded the corner on her bike with aggressive momentum, canvas courier bags swinging wildly from the handlebars. She locked onto me and skidded to a halt.

“Dante!”

A wave of relief swept through my chest, instantly poisoned by sharp paranoia. She held out a lit cigarette, the filter already notched with teeth marks. I couldn't resist; I leaned in and took a heavy drag. Adrenaline snapped my spine rigid.

“What's wrong with you, dude?” Her concern seemed entirely unfeigned.

“Where am I? How did you—” A panic attack tightened around my trachea.

“Breathe. Deep breath. Take another hit!”

“This isn't standard tobacco.”

“Pretty sure there’s *some* tobacco in the blend.”

An unnatural surge of vitality flooded my limbs. The fatigue evaporated; my spatial orientation locked into crisp focus.

“Where are you headed?” She reclaimed the smoke.

“I’m trying to get back. I think... I think I’m under interrogation in a black site.” I sounded completely unhinged, but the conviction was absolute.

“Right...”

“Why do you keep manifesting everywhere I go? What is this construct? How did I get placed here?”

Her dark eyes widened before narrowing into a dismissive scoff. “Catch you later, dude.”

She stood on the pedals and accelerated into the mist.

All distinguishing topographical features melted into a uniform corridor. Pavement, cicadas, tree frogs. The humid air draped over my shoulders like a wool overcoat.

Dawn cracked the horizon in bruised shades of violet. The sound of rushing creek water and soft humming drifted from beyond a roadside ridge. My legs moved on autopilot, carrying me up the dew-soaked embankment.

I found her for the third time, sitting on a flat stone at the water's edge.

Before my conscious mind could process the distance, I was sitting directly beside her on the moss. How long had we been perched there? Her sunglasses were gone, revealing striking hazel-brown eyes. Minutes drifted by in silence as she hummed, washing the dust from her bare shins.

The silence curdled into acute panic. *I was supposed to be somewhere.*

An infant’s shrill cry cut through the dawn. I turned.

She was standing before me in an antique lace wedding gown, cradling a newborn whose fluid stained the bodice crimson. My limbs turned to lead. She stepped forward, lifting the child toward my chest.

The moment my fingers brushed her skin, the tableau unraveled.

Her hair, flesh, and skeletal frame collapsed into gray dust. The grass, timber, and surrounding ridge ignited in silent chemical fire, collapsing into ash. The entire landscape dissolved, erased from memory.

“Looks like the subject accepted the parameters,” a familiar feminine voice echoed from an adjacent room. Pale blue luminescence framed the doorway of what resembled a clinical workspace.

“Would he even retain the memory if he did?” a male voice responded.

“I guarantee he got the short end of the trade. Heavy emotional charge on the transfer. Think he’ll debrief?” She sounded genuinely intrigued.

“Am I... dreaming?” The words scraped past my vocal cords.

I struggled to prop myself up on the cot. They had relocated me while I was under. The red-haired woman stepped through the doorway, clicking on an industrial desk lamp. She offered a chilled electrolyte drink and a dense nutritional bar. The thought of ingesting solid food turned my stomach. *Why does the texture of the room feel artificial, like injection-molded plastic?*

“We don’t have much time for orientation,” she said crisply. “You were under for nearly nine hours. We can hold a fixed frequency in this sector for maybe twelve before drawing unwanted attention.”

“Who are ‘they’?”

“Dream moderators. Architects who get defensive when external variables disrupt their systemic designs.”

My cognitive bandwidth was entirely overloaded.

“Static is ramping up across the spectrum,” the male voice barked from the inner office. “I’m initiating teardown. Get him extracted in one piece.” A heavy metal fire door slammed.

The woman turned to me, her expression deadpan. “If you had to choose between your previous mundane reality and the territory you’ve navigated over the last three days, which would you pick?”

I stared back with glassy detachment.

She grimaced. “Do you actually want to remain a background extra in your own narrative?”

“I’d prefer to roll the credits...” I glanced at my swollen, bruised feet.

“Then I’m riding back with you.”

“‘Riding back’? What the hell does that mean?”

She slid her wire frames down her nose and focused her gaze on an open expanse of the concrete floor. A fine fissure of brilliant white light split the slab, widening into a vertical seam. Dissatisfied with the aperture's expansion, she produced a glass ampoule from her tactical vest, uncorked it, and took a sharp inhale.

Her focus narrowed; the seam flared outward at double the speed.

I shook my head, my jaw frozen. She crossed the room with terrifying composure, clamped a hand onto my bicep with hydraulic force, and hurled me directly into the fluorescent spindle.

A blunt impact struck my bicep, snapping my head back.

A spent cigarette filter rolled beneath my bare thigh. I was propped against the headboard of a cheap motel mattress. Beth was asleep under my right arm. I coughed, the inhalation tasting of burnt carpet and stale tobacco.

The sudden movement woke her; she gagged, scrambled over the edge, and vomited dry bile into the plastic wastebasket.

“Beth?” My voice was barely a croak.

She reached for an open can of seltzer on the nightstand, took two desperate swallows, and wiped her chin. “I have to get this documented. Before the decay sets in. They’ve reinforced the cognitive dampeners.”

She snatched a legal pad and ballpoint from the desk, scribbling furiously for thirty seconds. She tore the sheet off, folded it into a tight square, and tucked it into her bra cup.

“Listen to me,” she said, turning with wide, dilated pupils. “We were in an extraction bay two minutes ago. The amnesia is going to take hold faster than I calculated. Your consciousness is far more deeply enmeshed in the collective architecture than we budgeted for. The protocol

should hold regardless. I'll brief you when the window opens."

A profound wave of exhaustion washed over me. *Why not just end it here? Would physical death even register in this layered simulation?*

"Brief me right now, damn it. What is happening to my brain? Am I comatose? Am I having a psychotic break?"

"Just remember one foundational rule: it's an engineered construct. Maintain lucidity. Push for more lucidity at every transition! Don't let the script take over!"

Time seemed to skip a track. The nightstand phone let out a piercing electronic chirp.

We both flinched. She snatched the receiver.

"Beth speaking. Yeah. Fantastic. Do me a favor and choke on your excuses. Thanks! Bye." She slammed the handset down and glared at the drawn blinds. "I already despise this woman's baseline programming. I can't wait to decouple."

The room settled into an unsettling, quiet equilibrium. The profound absence of existential purpose returned, wrapped in the grim, comfortable familiarity of suicidal depression.

"What's the itinerary today? Would you grab us some coffee while I jump in the shower?" She stepped into the bathroom and clicked the door shut.

The mundane request triggered an instinctive spasm of alarm. If my conscience was still operational, it was screaming a warning. *The folded paper.*

"Hey, do you still have the notes you scribbled earlier?" I called out, moving toward the door.

Outside, a commercial lawnmower roared to life, drowning out her muffled reply.

"The paper in your bra! We need to audit that before we step out of this room!" I shouted over the two-stroke engine.

Two heavy thuds echoed from inside, followed by the shattering of ceramic tile. The mower abruptly died.

"Beth?"

No answer.

I threw my shoulder into the hollow-core door. It gave way, revealing Beth gripping her bleeding thigh over the linoleum, staring at a pair of heavy tailor's shears. Fractured shards of mirrored glass were scattered across the floorboards.

"The script adapted," she breathed, her voice trembling. "It just adapted in real time. This isn't passive unconscious drift anymore—someone is running active interference on our node. We have to move."

I grabbed a clean bath towel from the rack, wrapped it tightly around her leg to compress the laceration, and hauled her into the bedroom.

I tossed the car keys onto the bedspread. "Get down to the passenger seat and engage the locks. Keep continuous pressure on that towel. I'm right behind you."

I turned back to the threshold, rooted by a perverse curiosity.

"Nicholas! Stop playing around! Move!"

My depressive detachment flipped into reckless fascination. I leaned against the frame and peered inside.

The bathroom was actively rendering itself. Dark and light geometric polygons were stitching together across the empty space—gaining texture, specular reflection, and physical volume. What had been a writhing canvas of unformed digital clay a fraction of a second prior coalesced into the identical bathroom: pristine white tile, dry floorboards, fresh towels folded neatly over the bars. Not a single drop of blood remained.

My cerebral cortex throbbed. I hurried past the bed, sprinted down the exterior breezeway, and hit the parking lot. The morning sun was blinding through a blanket of advancing storm clouds.

I hopped into the sedan and turned the key. Beth threw herself into the passenger bucket, slamming the door so hard the trailing edge of the bloody towel caught in the jamb.

I dropped the transmission into gear and pulled onto the thoroughfare.

"I'm trapped in an engineered nightmare," I muttered.

"*We* are," she corrected, checking the rearview mirror. "I'm still tethered to this proxy, but at least my executive ego knows I'm not Bethany."

"So my entire biography was synthetic? The seven-year relationship, the depression, the job loss?"

Her gaze hardened. “The architecture we’re dealing with isn’t human, and it doesn’t adhere to democratic rules. It will weaponize your own somatic memory against you if you leave an opening. We need a dense, high-entropy environment to talk. Somewhere loud, with heavy human foot traffic.”

The Crafty Swaggart was an ostentatious sanctuary for the municipal bohemian class, occupying a renovated warehouse in the historical district. Indoor smoking was still grandfathered in, and the local art crowd took full advantage of the loophole.

The venue was packed. A local painter was showcasing large-format expressions of adolescent trauma along the exposed brickwork, while an acoustic guitarist in the back corner murdered mid-tempo alternative covers. Blue smoke drifted lazily through the track lighting.

“Back corner booth,” Beth instructed, her eyes darting across the room. “Secluded enough?”

My baseline anxiety was ramping up; sobriety always shrunk my psychological footprint. “That works.”

She steered me by the belt loop into a vinyl booth and slid into the bench opposite me.

I couldn't help myself. “So you’re definitely not Beth. Do I get an operational handle?”

Her expression was carved from slate. “Asphalt.”

“Can I be Macadam?”

She didn't crack a smile. We sat through five minutes of chain-smoking, shared paranoia, and defensive scanning until a barista dropped off two mugs.

“Where did the actual Bethany go when you hijacked her vessel?”

“There is no baseline Bethany to hijack. I didn't steal a soul; I occupied an archetypal node. She was an unconscious construct before I arrived, and she remains unreal now. Are you truly this uninitiated? A prodigy burnout is still a burnout, I suppose.”

She took a sip from a ceramic mug I had no memory of ordering. Her gaze swept the patrons with unblinking precision. Gradually, her breathing leveled out. The mug vanished, replaced seamlessly by a smoldering cigarette between her knuckles.

“We’re stable for the moment. I don't know how much analytical psychology you absorbed

during your decades of self-medication, but the Beth you spent seven years loving was simply an externalized fragment of your own psyche.”

I blinked. “I endured this exact lecture from an undergraduate comparative literature major once.”

“Shut up. She was an *anima drone* generated from your own psychological substrate. An NPC constructed from your interior expectations.”

“So why does that make her less valid than me?”

“She possessed functional reality, but zero autonomous consciousness. If she evaporated, your core identity would persist. The inverse is not true.”

“Carl Jung never claimed archetypes possessed physical, somatic mass in three-dimensional space.”

“Have you never studied the scarab beetle anecdote? Objective synchronicity?”

“Fine, but my skepticism holds.”

Nearby art patrons began turning their heads toward our booth. The acoustic music faded into a low drone.

Asphalt leaned in, her brow furrowing. “Believe the theory or don’t—we lack the luxury for philosophical debate. Your personal unconscious is an immersive simulation you inhabit until biological death. Every person, stray dog, and traffic light you perceive is generated by its rendering engine. But your personal simulation maintains continuous, real-time exchange with external nodes—like my partner and myself. We all interface and evolve across the shared medium of the collective unconscious.” She took a slow, deliberate drag. “And through that collective channel, we executed an extraction to pull you out of your private purgatory.”

My vision swam. “Extracted me from hell? For what purpose?”

“Your internal baseline was collapsing into systemic failure. The degradation was exceeding tolerable limits. An outside party evaluated your latent capabilities as more valuable than your neuroses. They hired our team to intervene.”

Dizziness hit me in waves. The stares from the surrounding tables were no longer discreet; every face in the café was turned directly toward our booth.

“You’ve been tunneling deeper into the psychic bedrock,” Asphalt continued. “Another month of unmoderated descent and your ego would have suffered complete structural disintegration.”

“Disintegrated into what? What is the baseline matter of this place? I watched an entire tiled room construct itself from floating polygons.”

“We’ll get to ontology later. For now, reference Heraclitus: **Panta rhei**. Reality is primordial fire—pure energy in perpetual, turbulent flux.”

The paranoia was vibrating in my teeth.

“I projected my consciousness into this anima shell to navigate your subjective sector. If I deploy high-order volition here, the environmental monitors will flag the anomaly and purge my node entirely.”

“Where is **your** personal dream located?”

“It exists concurrently. Over time, proximity forces adjacent dreamspaces to overlap. That’s how cultural movements, mass panics, and world wars originate.”

“This is clinical schizophrenia,” I whispered.

“Can you reconcile any of your recent experiences with classical materialism?”

“I’m out. This is a bad trip.”

I shoved myself up from the vinyl bench. My knee caught a side table, sending a ceramic plate crashing to the hardwood. The café music ceased instantly.

The entire crowd rose in unison, their expressions vacant, staring at Asphalt and me.

Asphalt lowered her head, bolted from the booth, and made a break for the front vestibule. Three men intercepted her near the counter. She drove a sharp elbow into the bridge of the first man’s nose and delivered a brutal knee to the second man’s groin.

I began waving my arms, yelling nonsense to draw the perimeter away from her, and threw my shoulder through the cluster near the door.

I burst through the foyer into the freezing night air. Asphalt had already vanished.

The crowd trudged through the double doors behind me, moving at a relentless, synchronized march. I broke into a dead sprint.

Two blocks down, I collapsed onto the concrete curb of an empty EstatePharma parking lot, gasping for oxygen. No pursuers. No cigarettes. I stared at my shaking fingers—they felt like

rented appendages.

My phone buzzed: *Beth. Asking where I disappeared with the coffee.*

My brain felt as though a serrated blade were cutting through the corpus callosum.

“Dante!”

No.

“*Dante!*”

Not this again.

“*DANTE!*”

The cyclist locked her rear brake, skidding sideways across the asphalt to halt two feet from my knees.

I looked up, entirely defeated. “Right on cue. Unless you have a nine-millimeter to put through my temple, I’m not interested.”

She retrieved an anodized pink aluminum case from her shoulder bag. “Need a smoke?”

“No. I’m fine.”

She shrugged, sat down on the curb beside me, and offered the open case again. I took the cigarette; she sparked it with her orange lighter, then lit her own.

I dropped all pretense of bravado. “So are you an externalized splinter of my ego, too? Is that the operational theory?”

“Probably.”

“Fascinating.”

“Need transport?”

“Sure. You got a sidecar on that fixie?”

“Hilarious.” She pushed her sunglasses down, locking her gaze on a parked Shaunda Privick sedan thirty feet away.

A synchronized mechanical *thud* echoed from the vehicle as all four door locks popped upward. The power windows slid into the doors. The starter turned, and the four-cylinder engine hummed to life.

“You drive,” she said, standing up. “My neural reserves are tapped out after that breach.”

“I wouldn't trust myself behind the wheel of a golf cart right now.”

“Stop whining and get in.”

“What about your bicycle?”

“What bicycle?”

I glanced at the curb. The pavement was empty.

We climbed into the sedan. She shook her dark hair loose and stowed her shades, revealing calm brown eyes. *Either she's a psychic parasite, an archetypal manifestation, or I've slipped into irreversible dementia.*

“Mind putting the car in gear?” she asked, staring out the passenger glass.

I engaged the transmission. Suburban streets gave way to strip plazas, then industrial parks, then dilapidated housing, and finally the open, pitch-black highway.

High noon glared off the hood. We pulled off at an interstate service plaza for fuel.

She emerged from the convenience mart carrying two fresh packs of Vantage menthols. The boundaries of consensus reality had dissolved completely. I didn't know what was authentic, whether the question itself was an ontological trap, or if the concept of 'real' was merely an obsolete linguistic crutch.

Regardless of metaphysics, I needed an exit. I couldn't even recall the basic narrative of who I had been before the spiral began.

We checked into a roadside motel past the county line. She paid cash for a single room with a queen mattress. I ceased interrogating the sequence. I sat on the edge of the box spring and took my first deep, unobstructed breath in days.

After five minutes of silence, she stood up. "Stepping out for a smoke. Don't vanish while I'm outside."

I offered a mute nod. Resisting the current required energy I simply didn't possess; the impulse to scream, kick, and weep was simmering just beneath the surface, evidenced by the steady tremor in my calves.

She paused at the door frame, looking back over her shoulder. "You coming, or what?"

I stood up and followed.

We walked the gravel shoulder alongside an irrigation culvert. The asphalt was surprisingly level for a neglected rural strip.

She had been speaking for several minutes before my focus dialed in. "...definitely linked to the distribution shift..."

"Sorry," I interrupted. "Say that again?"

"I was talking about the surge in fatal spice overdoses. Syndicates are lacing the batches with ketamine and unrefined methamphetamine. Are you completely dissociated?"

"Hold on. Who are you? I recognize your cadence. Am I biologically deceased? Where did Asphalt go?"

She tapped her ash into the ditch, lit a fresh cigarette off the cherry, handed it to me, and bit down on her own filter. "None of that matters, dude."

The colloquialism grated on my nerves. "None of it *matters*? You hotwired an automobile using pure volition."

"Yeah, and I accomplished it without digesting fifty volumes of esoteric philosophy. I just execute the impulse. I wouldn't be assigned here if you lacked the identical capability."

"What is that supposed to mean?"

"Do you genuinely not remember your training?"

"Did you finance that extraction team in the lab?"

"It wasn't my personal capital, but yes."

I exhaled a thick cloud of smoke. “I don’t want to learn the system. I’m exhausted by existence. Nothing holds subjective value anymore, and I’m too cowardly to pull the trigger.”

“Same.”

Highway traffic thinned to a sporadic hum. The overcast sky broke apart, revealing pale blue while the drone of insects filled the culvert.

“So are you an autonomous person or an extension of my subconscious?” I demanded.

She dragged on the menthol, leaving a crimson smudge on the paper. “No. You keep crossing my coordinates, so I’m tracking the trajectory. I have my own operational objectives. The cosmos doesn’t revolve around your internal melodrama, regardless of what your anima believes.”

“Then do me a favor and finish me off.”

“Your wish is my command,” she muttered dryly.

We finished our cigarettes and walked back into the dim motel room. She collapsed across one side of the mattress. I lifted my phone from the charging block; no missed calls or messages had arrived since Beth’s check-in.

For an instant, the device’s wallpaper warped into the graphic rendering of an Ouroboros—a serpent violently devouring its own tail—before snapping back into a default stock image of a tropical shoreline.

I rubbed my eyes and laid down beside her.

My eyes opened.

I was naked on the left side of the mattress; she was naked on the right. An absurd cocktail of primal vanity and existential confusion washed over me. *Did I manage to sleep with a splinter of my own psyche?*

I sat upright. Her smartphone was vibrating against the nightstand veneer. The incoming caller graphic displayed a full-length photo of a gaunt, platinum-haired man, entirely unclothed, holding an antique broadsword above his head. The vibration ceased, and the display went dark.

I stood up, sparked a menthol, and padded into the bathroom. Along the way, clothing materialized over my skin: a navy crewneck shirt, black track pants. My cognitive core felt submerged in dense fog.

I splashed cold tap water over my face, dragged my fingers through my hair, and walked to the kitchenette to brew coffee.

She stirred with a sharp sniff as I poured the first two mugs. I handed her one without speaking, desperate to avoid small talk. I was still waiting for the baseline world to reassert itself.

I wrecked my sedan in that ravine. I probably died on impact. The horrifying part was how comforting that hypothesis felt. But if I was a discarnate spirit, what was the practical distinction?

She sat on the edge of the mattress, fastening a black sports bra before pulling on a dark tank top and denim shorts. She accepted the ceramic mug, inhaling the steam with visible appreciation.

For the first time in weeks, the tension in my shoulders released.

Then my phone rang. I sighed and swiped the screen.

Beth's voice came through with mechanical urgency: "Where are you? I've been calling the hospitals!"

"What happened to the lucidity protocol? You had it together yesterday morning. I'm done with the domestic guilt trips. Enjoy your marriage to Johnny. Goodbye."

I ended the call and tossed the phone onto the spread. I turned to my companion.

"I don't even have your actual name."

"Mary."

"Mary? Not Beatrice? Not Virgil? This narrative feels significantly less like the *Divine Comedy* and considerably more like *Memento*. Did we lose the plot entirely?"

"Did I interrogate your backstory? I gave you a name; move on with your day. Relax, dude."

I snuffed the cigarette out in a dry water glass and stepped onto the exterior walkway to breathe. A minute later, she joined me against the railing, lighting a smoke.

“My entire life imploded,” I said, staring at the gravel lot, “and I’m terrified I’m currently strapped to a gurney in an asylum slamming my forehead against padded vinyl.”

She frowned. “Then sit in lotus posture until you achieve ego death, or go execute an action.”

“What if my actions are completely meaningless?”

“At least you applied kinetic force.”

I couldn't maintain eye contact for more than three seconds. Emotional attachment felt like slow-acting poison. I had simply wanted to quietly exit the stage without leaving a mess.

Mary let out a deep, theatrical sigh. “I don't know how you evaluate the technicians who dragged you out or the syndicates they skirmish with. I run with a crew. They're sick of the institutional rot, and so am I. You want in?”

I stared at her. “No. Absolutely not. I'm done with secret societies and metaphysical warfare. I need psychiatric stabilization.”

Another heavy sigh. “Fair enough. At least I extended the invitation. Take care.”

She unlocked a bicycle from the motel rack and pedaled toward the exit.

I cupped my hands and yelled at her receding silhouette: “Sorry, but your Dante belongs in a lower circle!”

A quiet beat passed.

“I am an absolute asshole,” I muttered to the empty lot.

Neither Beth nor Asphalt answered my calls.

My perceptual baseline was fractured—half dissociative numbness, half electrical mania. Three cigarettes remained in the pack. Checkout was forty minutes past due, and I expected housekeeping to rattle the latch at any moment.

I stuffed my minimal possessions into the windbreaker pockets and vacated the room. The Shaunda Privick sedan had vanished from its space. Stolen, reclaimed, or dissolved back into the rendering buffer.

If the mechanics I had observed were valid, I could theoretically manifest a vehicle through

focused intent. I shook my head and began pacing laps around the perimeter of the asphalt.

Early afternoon settled over the valley in crisp autumn stillness. Nobody challenged my presence.

I sparked a menthol and fixed my gaze on an unoccupied crossover SUV near the dumpster. I narrowed my pupils, channeling my willpower—or bio-electric resonance, or whatever terminology the occultists preferred—into the concept of the driver's door popping unlocked.

A sharp pressure built behind my temples until my vision flashed white. I gasped for air, breaking the focus.

Nothing. Manifestation apparently required the synthetic catalyst.

I resumed pacing.

Dusk fell. More laps. I couldn't purge Mary's face from my working memory.

Gunfire. Screams. The shriek of braking tires and approaching sirens echoed from the commercial avenue.

A yellow taxi with a dented bumper swerved into the motel lot, halting directly in front of my shins. Mary was behind the wheel.

"Dante, you absolute moron! Why are you still standing on this curb? Get *in*!"

A digital taximeter was actively calculating mileage on the dashboard.

"A cabbie now? Did you render this out of thin air?"

"You deserve every circle of this purgatory," she snapped.

I hauled myself into the passenger bucket. "I'm sorry."

"Everything is coming undone," she said, checking her mirrors as she accelerated out of the lot. "You aren't the only autonomous agent operating in this sector. Your choices generate collateral damage for actual human beings."

"What did I do?"

“Does the causality matter? I’m here, aren’t I?”

“Yeah. Why?”

She banked hard onto the southbound boulevard, bypassing the emergency cordon. Two patrol cruisers blazed past in the opposite lane; she didn’t even tap the brakes.

“I’m transporting you to an operational safehouse. You can chart your own course from there. I’ve got a transit pass and a couple twenty-dollar bills somewhere...”

Liberal Catholic guilt overrode my cynical defenses. “I didn’t mean to dismiss your crew. My executive function is fried. I need forty-eight hours of sleep.”

“I’d love to grant you a sabbatical, but last night was your solitary grace period. Your unconscious output is running too hot right now; if your ego drops into delta sleep, the construct will destabilize.”

I nodded along as though I understood the systems architecture. My eyelids felt like lead weights.

My jacket pocket expanded slightly; I reached inside and pulled out an ice-cold energy drink that hadn’t been there five minutes ago.

Mary looked as depleted as I felt. “Save half of that for me. If I strain my node any further tonight, my identity will phase out and another archetype will occupy the shell. I need sleep more than you do.”

“Another archetype will occupy you?”

She kept her eyes locked on the road.

She secured the deadbolts on the front, side, and rear doors. She topped off two ceramic bowls for a cat and a dog, judging by the hand-drawn sigils taped above the baseboards, and connected her phone to a wall charger.

From a tactical bag stowed beneath the futon, she unholstered a black semiautomatic pistol, racked the slide to verify the chamber, and laid it on the coffee table.

“Coffee?” she asked.

“I want functional answers. But yes, coffee.”

“You talk too much.”

She pulled a hardcover photo album from the bookcase, dropped it into my lap, and disappeared into the galley kitchen.

I flipped through the pages: black-and-white portraits of the same human form across various life stages. Elaborate geometric tattoos, deep surgical scars, lacerations, burns. Faces weeping, screaming, laughing, and glaring into the lens.

She returned carrying two mugs, her eyes tracking from my face down to the horizontal scars lining my forearms. “I assume those weren’t sustained in military deployment.”

“What gave it away?”

We sat in silence for several minutes, nursing the hot coffee.

“In the cab, you mentioned being replaced by another archetype,” I said. “Is the Jungian model Asphalt described literally true? Who was inside Beth’s body? She was operating with a male technician before dragging me into this layer. I never got a civilian name—just ‘Asphalt.’”

Mary took a slow sip. “She’s likely affiliated with the radical insurgent factions that harass municipal institutions—spray-painting monuments, sabotaging infrastructure, squatting in abandoned rail hubs. They chant political slogans, but consume more methamphetamine than oxygen. ‘Asphalt’ matches their nomenclature perfectly.”

“They seemed technically proficient.”

“Then maybe she’s private sector. I ran with various syndicates years ago. Could be an initiate. Everyone is hunting the primary chemical precursor. Could be a desperate mother whose kid got addicted to the supply. Who cares? Every faction has an agenda. I just wanted an exit. Like you.” She set her mug down with a sharp clatter. “Very few operators learn autonomous manifestation without the chemical crutch. I received reports that you had the latent wiring. If you require a gram of raw spice just to execute a basic command, we can terminate this partnership tonight.”

“You abandoned me at the motel when I hesitated on your vague pitch. Why should I trust your motives?”

“You trusted me enough to sleep with me.”

“That’s an exceptionally low bar for my impulse control.”

She let out a dry growl and retreated to the back bedroom.

I felt the dangerous gravity of attachment pulling at my defenses. If I agreed to her mission, it would purely be to remain within her orbit. I couldn't muster genuine passion for dream warfare or metaphysical liberation; even with these capabilities, the baseline death drive remained intact.

She marched back into the living room, scrolling through her phone. We lit cigarettes in unison, letting an eternity of silence pass.

"Can you instruct me on how to alter the construct?" I asked. "How did you master it?"

"We conceptualize waking reality as an immersive, collective dream," she explained, looking up. "We can inhabit shared macro-dreams, collapse into isolated personal dreamspaces, or link frequencies with a solitary partner. Eventually, you simply exert intentional volition and the matter reconfigures. Like articulating your fingers. But the metabolic tax is severe. Developing restraint took me years." She paused, her gaze dropping. "And my former associates aren't my friends. Not all of them."

"I don't think I can execute it sober. I tried this afternoon."

"How much spice have you ingested?"

"Spice?"

"The compound. TP#054, or whatever batch code they're marketing this month."

"Are the syndicates seriously borrowing terminology from *Dune*?"

She offered a thin smile. "Cheeky bastards, aren't they?"

"I snorted a rail off a utility blade and pulverized a syndicate enforcer."

"You just claimed you couldn't manifest."

"I thought it was a dissociative hallucination."

"It was. So is this room."

A strange, unnatural calm descended over my nervous system. My eyelids dropped.

Night. Freezing mountain air.

My eyes snapped open into vivid déjà vu. The corrugated storage shed and the idling SUV were back. The enforcers rolled back the sliding red shutters.

Suddenly, the figures froze mid-motion. The howling wind ceased entirely.

A voice resonated inside my cranium: *It's an active simulation. Remain calm. Maintain your position.*

Mary? Am I still on your living room futon?

A faint *yes* brushed against my parietal lobe.

I need you to let the sequence execute exactly as it occurred before, she instructed. *I'm harvesting environmental telemetry. Give me ten subjective minutes.*

How do I track linear time inside an engineered memory?

It has always been an engineered state.

The simulation resumed. Nausea churned in my gut. I matched my movements to the previous iteration: the snorted line off the blade, the chemical split, the manifestation of the liquid glass puddle.

Do I have to execute him again?

You never executed a biological human in the baseline world.

The calcifying glass, the muffled shriek, the shattering kick. By relinquishing conscious resistance, my somatic frame executed the choreography automatically.

That's sufficient data, her voice cut in.

The scene froze. The color drained from the trees and sky. The geometric vectors blurred into gray static, and my consciousness slipped into blackness.

I awoke to a terrycloth hand towel being shoved against my mouth. I blinked, confused. She tapped her own chin.

I reached up and wiped away a trail of dried saliva. Embarrassment flared.

"You vocalize in your sleep. A lot, dude. You need extensive psychotherapy."

"Fascinating diagnosis."

She rolled her eyes. "Just an objective observation."

"Did you extract the telemetry you needed?"

"Enough to establish a spatial vector. I enjoyed watching you sweat through the loop, but three more minutes and your ego would have fractured."

Good to know my structural integrity has limits.

"You could have provided a warning before initiating a forced psychic dive," I said.

"Your personality matrix is far too anti-authoritarian to accept tactical commands without five rounds of debate. Bypassing your conscious ego simplifies deployment."

"Are you diagnosing me with Oppositional Defiant Disorder now?"

"Clinically. The only treatment is being less of an insufferable prick."

I smiled despite myself. "We actually slept together, right? In the physical sense?"

"I honestly have no definitive answer to that question."

She adjusted her sunglasses and sparked a fresh menthol.

The remainder of the evening passed in quiet preparation. I slept on the futon until the sound of zippers woke me at twenty past midnight.

I got up and started the drip coffee maker. A trick of the shadows along the hallway wall formed the distinct outline of an observing face. *How will I know when I've reached the waking baseline?*

Mary marched into the kitchen carrying a half-zipped tactical duffel, verified the chamber of her semiautomatic, and slid it into an internal holster.

I handed her a steaming mug. "You aren't embarking on this raid without me."

“You seemed completely checked out four hours ago. I thought your objective was total detachment?”

“Locating that high-altitude depot will be considerably faster with the operator who was actually inside the perimeter.”

“That, and gathering intelligence. But incinerating their spice supply is all I need to balance the ledger.”

We drank coffee and burned through cigarettes with frantic, unspoken anxiety. Her phone timer chimed.

“Time to move.” She gestured toward the alley exit.

I nodded, feeling detached from the physical movement of my neck. We loaded the trunk of the taxi and pulled onto the avenue as the first gray light of dawn broke.

The copy-pasted suburban sprawl dissolved into forty miles of barren scrubland. Barbed wire, electrified fencing, and high-voltage warning placards flanked the highway every hundred yards. A concrete guard bunker staffed by private contractors on their phones receded in the rearview mirror.

Mary drove another three miles before pulling off into a dense stand of pine. She lit a smoke and pulled up the GPS interface on her device.

“Thirty-minute uphill trek,” she outlined. “We insert on foot, execute the breach, exfiltrate along the same vector, and egress in the opposite direction. Questions?”

“What is the exact scope of ‘the breach’?”

“We’re incinerating the central distribution shed and every secondary structure that will hold a flame.”

I looked out the passenger glass. “Can’t we just ignite the facility using psychic volition?”

She laughed out loud. “After the telemetry drain you put me through? I don’t possess the voltage to spark a match with my mind right now. And what do you mean by *we*? Have you mastered ignition?”

I looked down at my boots. “You claimed I had the wiring. Let’s just finish the contract.”

She arched an eyebrow. “Not quite yet. We have a two-hour window until the security shift

rotation.” She pulled a cosmetics case from beneath the seat. “And I need to apply my tactical face paint.”

Thirty minutes passed while she detailed her face with black and white geometric patterns.

“Is ritual cosmetic warpaint mission-critical?” I asked, leaning back with a smirk.

“Contemporary artists rarely have the opportunity to deploy functional public expressions of their craft.”

“Couldn't you just manifest the pigment onto your dermis without getting your fingers messy?”

“Where's the somatic discipline in that?” She seemed genuinely defensive.

“Yeah, you definitely aren't an internal projection of my psyche. I don't care about aesthetic discipline.”

“Maybe I represent the creative, feminine polarity you've systematically repressed out of shame, and you've spent two days road-tripping with an externalized fragment of your own anima?”

“Is that why neither of us can verify if we actually slept together?”

“Christ. Let it go.”

My tone edged into irritation. “You seem remarkably comfortable waking up unclothed beside an armed stranger. Makes me wonder about your baseline habits.”

She gasped, her jaw tightening into a furious line. She threw open the driver's door, slammed it, and marched to the trunk.

I cursed my lack of impulse control. I stepped out, catching the nylon strap of the courier bag resting on her shoulder.

She spun around instantly, pressing the muzzle of her pistol hard against my sternum.

I didn't flinch. *Pull the trigger, sister.*

“You know I was just deflecting,” I said quietly. “It was bad humor. Don't rush the breach over a joke.”

She stared down at the barrel and let out a breathless, bitter chuckle. My somatic nervous

system registered zero fight-or-flight response—just a familiar, low-level sexual tension.

She reholstered the weapon, transferring several blocks of C-4 plastic explosive wrapped in industrial plastic from the duffel into her courier bag.

My phone chimed. *Beth.*

Mary slapped the side of my face, snatched the phone, powered it down, and shoved it into her tactical webbing.

“I’m about to detonate a regional narcotics depot and you’re running a live cellular beacon!” she hissed.

“My fault,” I muttered, rubbing my stinging cheek. “Let me carry the explosive load.”

She jerked the bag away. “Not a chance in hell.”

We moved out into the timber earlier than scheduled.

The thirty-minute ascent was an agonizing slog. Navigating dense mountain underbrush in pitch darkness is miserable under ideal conditions; with cracked ribs and a lingering concussion, it was torture. I tripped over exposed roots ten times and took four hard spills into the briars.

“Can you manifest a pair of night-vision optics?” I whispered through gritted teeth. “Maybe a fresh pair of trousers?”

“One: fuck your sardonic commentary. Two: I have exhausted my cognitive reserves maintaining our localized cohesion. Unless we face a catastrophic emergency, you are entirely on your own.”

Mary finished slicing through the final section of chain-link fence and paused to regulate her respiration. She dropped to one knee and pressed two fingers flat against the frozen soil.

Her eyes snapped open. “Hold position,” she whispered.

“Can’t we just breach and detonate?”

“Silence. Ever studied *wu wei*?”

“Wu what?”

“Shut up.”

Moments later, a matte-black pickup crested the rise guarding the service gate. Two contractors in black tactical gear stepped out, scanning the terrain with high-output halogen beams.

Panic flared in my chest; I shifted my boots on the loose gravel. Mary clamped a gloved hand onto my calf, her eyes locking onto mine with hypnotic intensity. She lowered her center of gravity, pulling me down beside her. She shut her eyes, and a wave of absolute bio-energetic stillness locked my somatic frame in place.

The contractor nearest our position clicked his shoulder mic. “Sector clear.”

A brief static burst: “Copy. Clear.”

They climbed back into the cab and rumbled down the access road.

Mary exhaled, the tension releasing from her jaw. My motor control returned. I handed over the courier pack. She verified the detonators, rolled back the severed chain-link flap, and gazed down the thirty-foot vertical drop into the depot.

She passed me a steel piton and a rubber-headed mallet, uncoiling a length of climbing line. The rubber head dampened the sound of my strikes as I drove the anchor into the rock. Within two minutes, she was rappelling down the face with ten pounds of plastic explosive.

I maintained watch on the perimeter. Mary moved between the structural pillars with fluid efficiency, planting and priming the charges, an unlit cigarette clamped between her teeth.

After setting the final timer, she scrambled back to the line. She was visibly exhausted, struggling for purchase on the shale. I leaned over the lip, locked my hands around her forearms, and hauled her over the edge.

She collapsed onto her back, staring at the canopy, her breathing heavy and rhythmic. A strange, transcendent stillness hung in the mountain air.

She snapped out of it with a sharp hiss: “Detonator!”

I dug into the courier pack and pulled out a matte-black transmitter with a toggle switch, dual LEDs, and a whip antenna.

“Operating radius is 250 meters,” she said, rising to a crouch. “Let’s close the distance to the transport.”

We retraced our ascent through the timber. A hundred yards from the ridgeline, she raised a fist to halt.

“We divide vectors here,” she outlined, pointing through the trees. “Pavement is roughly three hundred yards due west. I’ll double back for the vehicle. Take your phone. When I send the ping, trigger the charges and haul ass to the road. I’ll make the pickup.”

She handed over my phone, passed me the transmitter, and melted into the dense brush.

I settled into a cross-legged position against a pine trunk. *Why was I so eager to execute tactical sabotage? What hypnotic pull did this woman hold over my nervous system?*

Too much time elapsed.

I descended toward the highway, spotting the rhythmic pulse of red and blue strobes through the tree trunks.

At the woodline, I saw the taxi idling on the shoulder. A county deputy was leaning against Mary’s driver-side window, running an interrogation. Mary sat with her hands rigidly positioned at ten and two, staring straight ahead, likely calculating the cleanest method to neutralize the threat.

I scrambled back up the ridge, gripping the transmitter like a zealot clutching scripture. Once I hit the elevation threshold, I slammed the toggle switch back and forth.

One beat. Two.

The earth shuddered beneath my boots as a sequence of heavy detonations tore through the ridge, lighting the canopy in an orange fireball.

I turned and sprinted down the slope, accidentally losing my grip on the plastic transmitter in the briars. No time to recover it.

The cruiser’s siren wailed as the deputy abandoned the traffic stop, tires screeching as he sped toward the burning facility.

I burst through the treeline just as Mary whipped the taxi onto the shoulder, popping the locks. I dove into the passenger seat; she executed a violent 180-degree bootleg turn and accelerated into the dawn twilight.

“Are we going to analyze what just unfolded?” I demanded, watching the burning ridge recede in the side mirror. “Where are we routing? This isn’t the heading to the safehouse.”

“We aren’t returning to the safehouse,” she replied, shutting down my panic with a sideways glance. “That patrol unit was staged too deliberately. We need to interface with operators whose clearance exceeds mine.”

“How did Asphalt-Beth engineer that temporal reset? And how did you intercept my node?”

“She isn’t an omnipotent deity—she can’t rewind cosmic entropy. She rendered a localized dream construct modeled on a memory she harvested from your subconscious, then occupied an anima drone matching the person you had the highest emotional attachment to. I chose this deployment voluntarily. I’ve run these sectors for years. When you demonstrate baseline stability, I’ll expand the briefing.”

“Why are you running these operations? What’s the objective?”

“When you demonstrate baseline stability, I’ll expand the briefing.”

“You trusted my baseline enough to sleep with me.” *Am I incapable of shutting my mouth?*

She clicked the radio on, overriding my cynicism with abrasive commercial pop.

After navigating the municipal grid for twenty minutes, we turned down an industrial alley that opened into a secluded tarmac lot. Five vehicles occupied the stalls.

Dominating the lot was a monolithic brick warehouse fitted with reinforced steel bay doors. High-resolution surveillance domes covered every corner of the masonry.

Mary parked. I stepped out, inhaling the cold exhaust, my chest tight with acute social dread.

“What is this installation?” I asked.

“A stabilization nexus. The localized physics of the dream are reinforced here.”

“Reinforced by what mechanism?”

“Theoretical mathematics.”

“*Mathematics?* Like linear algebra?”

“Fourier analysis, wave decomposition, harmonizing harmonic frequencies of sine and cosine across spacetime—”

“Right. I scraped a C-minus in high-school calculus; I’m totally tracking.”

She marched toward the side entrance. “If the interview proceeds favorably, your technical inquiries will be addressed.”

She hammered a rhythm onto a reinforced metal door. A tall Black man wearing a tailored charcoal turtleneck opened it, greeting Mary with a warm grin before his expression cooled into a sharp appraisal of me.

“We’re on a strict lockdown protocol regarding civilian guests,” he noted. “You’re familiar with the standing orders.”

“He isn’t a civilian guest,” Mary countered. “I need the elders to evaluate him.”

“This is the extraction candidate?” He studied my face for several uncomfortable seconds before stepping aside with a wry chuckle. “I can never refuse a little sister in a bind. Enter. Zero friction. If you cause a disturbance, my official report states you breached the perimeter.”

“Can you sanitize the vehicle?” Mary pointed toward the taxi.

“Are you joking?” He shook his head. “Fine. But all further markers are on hold until my account is settled.”

Mary smiled, gripped my forearm, and pulled me across the threshold.

A wall of sub-bass house music hit me, drowning out cognitive processing. Mary kept turning back to speak, but the sound pressure obliterated her words. I nodded dumbly as we navigated clusters of patrons: some in streetwear, others in tailored wool overcoats and vintage furs, drinking, smoking, reading philosophical tracts, and dancing in hypnotic synchronization.

I tapped her shoulder, gesturing to a pair of gaunt hipsters sharing a double-hosed hookah. “Charming demographic!” I shouted.

She rolled her eyes and kept moving.

We reached a set of reinforced double doors at the rear of the hall. Mary threw her weight into

the push bar, but her depleted reserves failed; her knees buckled.

I caught her by the waist, braced her weight against my shoulder, and shoved the heavy door open.

The VIP lounge was considerably quieter. A fully stocked bar ran the length of the back wall beneath ambient purple track lighting. Intimate cocktail tables faced a low performance stage, while muted flat-screens broadcast abstract fractal loops.

Mary slumped into a leather armchair and signaled for me to sit.

Before my pulse could settle, a side door swung open, and two women accompanied by an athletic man in a leather jacket stepped out. Their sharp features suggested Eastern European heritage. The women froze upon recognizing Mary; the man spat on the polished concrete and muttered a harsh curse in Slavic.

“Didn’t our previous *conference* establish unambiguous boundaries regarding your operational freedom?” the man snarled, stepping into our space. “If you insist on pursuing personal delusions, you execute them far outside our jurisdiction! We want zero involvement with your private crusades!”

He took a menacing step closer. “And if you actually track down your stray variable, you under no circumstances drag him to *this installation*! We operate under enough administrative scrutiny as it is! One catastrophic breach and our entire architecture is compromised!”

An agonizing silence filled the lounge.

Mary raised her chin. “I found the primary node. We neutralized a major regional distribution facility—”

The man slammed his fist into the cocktail table, rattling the glassware. “I do not care about your personal vendettas or your stray boyfriend! Vacate the premises immediately!”

“Francois! Stand down and return to your post!” a booming baritone voice commanded from behind the bar. “The matriarch has returned.”

We turned in unison. A large Black woman stepped into the light, snorting a pinch of crystalline powder from a glass vial before puffing on an unbanded cigar. A massive smile lit up her face.

“Mara! It has been at least a year since you graced our threshold!”

Mary let out a visible breath of relief, kicked the heel of my boot, and walked to the bar. The three operatives turned in lockstep and exited the lounge.

“What is your poison tonight, children?”

“Vodka on the rocks for both,” Mary answered.

I leaned in, whispering near Mary’s ear: “Your network seems to specialize in eleventh-hour rescues.”

She shot me a flirtatious glance. “Perhaps I possess qualities worth preserving.”

“Fishing for jealousy?” I deadpanned.

“Do I need to fish?”

The woman set two heavy tumblers on the zinc counter. “Madrigal. An absolute pleasure.”

“Nicholas. Thank you.”

I knocked back the vodka in one continuous swallow, resting the glass carefully on the napkin. Mary sipped hers with refined composure, glaring at me over the rim.

Madrigal erupted into a deep belly laugh. “What can the house do for you, Mara? Despite our ideological skirmishes, you remain a daughter of this house.”

“I’m grateful you’re on site, ‘Gal. My associate and I just leveled a major spice depot and require an extraction safehouse for forty-eight hours.”

Associate? Part of me wanted a deeper validation; the rest wanted to vanish into the woodwork.

“You failed to establish staging protocols before executing a kinetic strike?” Madrigal asked.

“Better to seek absolution than permission, darling.”

“A dangerous philosophy I unfortunately instilled in you,” Madrigal murmured. She cracked a Blue Bull energy drink, filled her tumbler halfway, and topped it with eighty-proof vodka.

She turned her gaze onto me. “What’s your narrative, young man?”

My throat was dry despite the alcohol. I lit a menthol. “Given my recent cognitive trajectory, I’m entirely unsure which parts of my biography are authentic. But if forced to summarize: I’m an exhausted burnout who wandered into a metaphysical meat grinder.”

“Ha! An honest degenerate! How dare Francois attempt to turn away my daughters and their suitors!”

I coughed on the smoke. “Suitors?”

Mary’s heel found my shin. “Ow! You—”

“Ignore her,” Mary said smoothly. “Gal, we require two cots for the night, clean transport at dawn, and tactical loadouts rated for field deployment.”

Madrigal laughed again. “You certainly know how to test my hospitality, little one.”

“We just **incinerated** a primary distribution hub!”

“You are aware the senior council has transitioned from destruction to acquisition, yes?”

Mary’s fists clenched. “And you are aware that compromise is moral surrender.”

“What I know is that our overhead is financed by patrons who do not appreciate your ideological purism contaminating their supply chains.”

Mary stiffened. “We were supposed to be the rational vanguard.”

“What could be more rational than capital accumulation? Conservation of energy, my dear.”

Mary shoved her chair back, the metal legs shrieking against the concrete.

Anticipating an explosion, I stepped between them. “Can we negotiate a temporary truce? We just need thirty-six hours of shelter and baseline gear. We’ll be off the grid by tomorrow night.”

Madrigal slammed her tumbler down, hairline fractures webbed through the base. “I harbor no malice toward Mara or her companions! You are welcome under my roof—provided you respect the new protocols, lest I administer a disciplinary lesson!” She chuckled, slapping the bar top.

“Understood. Thank you.” I placed a steadying hand on Mary’s shoulder.

“Tetrad will facilitate your logistics,” Madrigal concluded, heading for the rear exit. “He owes the house a favor. Rest! Feed yourselves! Restore your reserves! I have civilian initiates to re-educate.” She blew a kiss toward Mary and vanished.

“Did you two have a history?” I asked.

“Gross. We operate under libertine social dynamics, but I don’t sleep with mentors.”

"Is she still your mentor?"

"I severed ties years ago. If I hadn't, I wouldn't have crossed coordinates with your sorry ass."
She paused. "Though I'd be lying if I said I didn't need their operational infrastructure right now."

"Mara?"

"I told you that handle belongs to the past. My name is Mary now. Whatever authenticity means in this simulation."

We pushed back through the double doors into the pounding bass of the main club. Patrons flashed recognition signs as we passed.

Near the far wall, the turtleneck-clad doorman was sharing a blunt with a radiant woman leaning peacefully against his chest. He passed the roll to me. I took a pull, realized it was tobacco-heavy spliff, and coughed as the harsh smoke hit my bronchi. I passed it back; he placed it between his partner's lips before offering it to Mary. She inhaled deeply, the tension finally leaving her posture.

"Perplex!" she shouted over the track. "Where is Tetrad?"

"Tet is sanitizing your taxi outside," Perplex shouted back. "What else do you require?"

Mary looked frustrated.

I touched my ear, pulling her toward the exit. "Nothing right now. Thanks for the smoke."

We stepped into the cool, drizzling alley. Away from the bass, a profound quiet settled over the wet bricks.

"We should pull out," I blurted, terrified of appearing cowardly.

"What's the panic?"

"How do I verify this isn't an elaborate psychiatric hallucination? How do I know I'm not rocking in a padded cell? How do I know you aren't an adversarial entity sent to damned my consciousness?"

"Did you subscribe to demonology before this week?"

"No."

“Your baseline anxiety is out of control.”

“I’m also heavily altered from whatever Perplex rolled.”

“Grant me one more operational cycle. If the alignment fails, we sever ties and vanish.”

“*We?*”

Mary’s cynical armor cracked, revealing a sudden, vulnerable softness.

A midnight-blue sedan featuring green underglow rounded the alley corner and parked. Three operatives in tactical black emerged with hard cases and entered the warehouse. The driver stepped out, rolling an unlit cigar between his teeth.

“Anyone holding a flame?”

Mary nudged me. I produced my orange lighter. The man lit his cigar, took three measured draws, and appraised me with sharp, intelligent eyes.

“Tet, thank you for neutralizing the vehicle,” Mary said, her abrasive edge entirely gone.

He nodded. Tetrad’s dark complexion made the whites of his eyes pop in the gloom. An uncanny sense of familiarity radiated from him—as though we had shared a dozen past lives.

He reached into his leather trench coat, produced a blister pack containing four columns of pharmaceutical capsules, and grinned. “Left this in the center console.”

Mary snatched the blister pack instantly, sliding it into her cargo pocket. I pretended not to register the transaction.

“Madrigal authorized logistical support and quarters for the night,” she added.

Tetrad’s face set like concrete. “Just refrain from biting the hand this cycle. Report to the lower staging room when you’re settled.” He turned and walked inside.

Mary looked at me. “We’re secured for the night. How are your somatic levels?”

“I wasn’t implying earlier that I didn’t want to remain with you—”

“Let’s establish our quarters,” she cut in, heading for the threshold.

We spent an hour in a windowless subterranean holding cell, waiting for Tetrad to deliver the requisitioned supplies. Two stained foam mattresses occupied the floor.

Mary rested against the cinder block, scrolling through encrypted channels on her device. I lay flat on the adjacent mattress, fighting off waves of claustrophobia. She sparked a joint, took three hits, and held the burning tip beneath my nose.

“Look at that—a genuine smile,” she noted, returning to her screen.

I took the joint, inhaled until my lungs burned, and tried to pass it back. She waved it away.

“Thanks,” I whispered.

I hadn't had unstructured time to process the sequence of events in days. *Where was this vector heading? Who were these operators?* The prospect of manipulating physical reality was an intoxicating lure. Yet, looking inward, the familiar abyssal depression was curiously absent. *Was I developing feelings? Was this manic euphoria? How could I evaluate my mental health when I had watched an entire bathroom render itself from pure geometry?*

Mary maintained a facade of absolute autonomy, but her desire to reconnect with this network was obvious. Would she genuinely abandon the faction to run with me? The cannabis was hitting hard; my tolerance had dropped significantly.

“Where is this guy with our gear?” I rasped, clearing phlegm.

“One puff and you're an impatient field commander.”

“Seriously, I need airflow. This concrete box is suffocating.”

“The door isn't locked.”

I stood up, grabbed my menthols, and stepped into the main corridor.

The club's energy had modulated into an ambient lounge tempo. Smoke drifted lazily under amber lighting. Patrons were studying technical manuals, meditating in corners, or speaking in hushed tones.

I spotted an industrial espresso machine and walked over. A gaunt punk in torn denim and an unbuttoned vest—smoking a hand-rolled cigarette—cut across my path, blocking access to the dispenser. He was deep in an abrasive argument with a severely underweight woman.

“Stop ashing on the polished concrete!” she hissed.

“As if the management gives a damn!” he squeaked with an exaggerated London cadence. “If we were back in Brixton, you’d have an ashtray bolted to my sternum!”

I waited for him to shift, but he possessed zero peripheral awareness. I tapped his shoulder. He ignored the contact.

“Excuse me, friend,” I said, forcing a polite grin. “Mind shifting over a few inches?”

He sneered, letting his cigarette drop to the floor as he turned around slowly, winking at his partner. His greasy skin and chemical body odor triggered an instinctive wave of revulsion.

“Look, man, I just want a cup of coffee—”

“Oi, mate.” He looked me up and down. “You’re the stray dog Mara’s been bedding?”

I remained motionless. *Don't engage the provocation.*

He spat on the concrete. “You know she’s rotated through half the personnel in this sector?”

His partner piped up with a raspy cackle: “Shit, Sacktap, even I took her for a spin last autumn.”

“Oi! I assumed you maintained standards!” Sacktap roared with laughter.

I inhaled slowly, exhaling through my nose. I poured two coffees, turning to head back down the corridor.

A sharp impact caught my shoulder, sending scalding coffee splashing over my knuckles. The burn was immediate, familiar, and clarifying.

Sacktap and his girlfriend were perched on a bench, smirking through blue smoke.

My analytical mind urged a retreat to the quarters; my predatory shadow demanded an immediate counter-strike.

I walked up to their bench, chuckling softly. “Good one, guys. Really caught me off guard.”

They stared back, unblinking.

“Mind if I borrow a drag? My hands are a little unstable for a lighter.”

My nervous system disconnected from fear. I plucked the smoldering cigarette from between his fingers, held his gaze, and drove the cherry directly into the center of my open palm.

“Kill me. Please.” My delivery was entirely flat, devoid of theatrical inflection.

I held the burning coal against my dermis until the embers died against the raw blister, took one final pull from the shortened filter, and handed the butt back.

“You out of your fucking mind?” Sacktap stammered, recoiling.

I extended my charred palm toward his face, and when he leaned in to inspect the damage, I delivered a sharp, open-handed tap to the bridge of his nose.

They froze, stunned.

I turned on my heel, poured two replacement coffees, and returned to our quarters.

A set of keys and three heavy black duffels sat beside the foam mattresses. Tetrad had completed the drop. Mary was fast asleep across both pads, her phone playing ambient East Asian flute arrangements.

She looked completely human, stripped of her combat defenses. A profound tranquility washed over my chest—a peaceful stillness Beth had never managed to inspire. The urge to smash Sacktap's skull vanished.

I laid down beside her on the foam and closed my eyes. For the first time in months, the walls stayed where they belonged.

Total darkness.

Luminous points of white light sparked across the field, geometric vectors drawing lines between the nodes. A vaulted stone chamber rendered around me—an ancient subterranean temple lit by iron wall sconces. I lay upon a raised pallet of dry straw.

A vaulted corridor extended into the gloom beyond the firelight.

From the shadows, Mary—or an archetypal manifestation bearing her likeness—emerged, draped in coarse unbleached linen. She carried a flickering tallow candle and an unglazed terracotta amphora that wept a fragrant, viscous oil. Her sandals scraped the flagstones with a rhythmic, hypnotic cadence that dismantled my remaining anxiety.

She set the candle on a stone plinth. Beads of perspiration glistened along her collarbone and shoulders in the amber firelight.

She lifted the vessel with both hands, tipping the warm, spiced oil across my sternum. The liquid pooled and spread across my dermis as her hands began working the muscle—tracing down my abdomen, across my thighs, down to the soles of my feet, and ascending back along my forearms. Every physiological impurity seemed to dissolve beneath her palms.

She signaled for me to roll onto my chest, repeating the somatic purification along my spine.

She turned me over, kneeling between my hips, her hazel eyes locking onto mine with absolute intensity.

Overcome by a sudden, primal imperative, I gripped her waist and pulled her down against my chest. Our union initiated a physical vortex that eroded the stone architecture around us. We floated in a boundless, weightless abyss.

Whenever my eyelids parted, I perceived my own facial features reflected across hers—anima and animus in perfect superposition.

As the release tore through us, we drifted in the void. A cold, abyssal current surged through the right hemisphere of my torso; a searing, solar luminescence flared through the left.

Her eyes opened, blazing with dual polarity. She shifted, straddling my hips, and forced our fingers to interlock.

The opposing polarities ignited, and a blinding flash of pure white light consumed the cosmos.

My eyelids opened.

My cheek rested against her warm, bare stomach. Dried saliva flaked from my lip as I lifted my head. She was already awake, scrolling through her phone, unclothed.

The somatic baseline reasserted itself, and a shiver ran through my ribs as I registered my own nudity. She hushed me softly, pulling a heavy wool blanket over our shoulders.

I drifted back into the dark.

Awake again.

This time, the mattress beside me was empty. The temple vision was already fading into a dream fragment. I rolled off the foam, searching the concrete floor for my clothes. Nothing.

Panic flared as I scrambled in the dim light, cursing my vulnerability.

I stood up and noticed a heat-sealed plastic bundle resting on the end table. Scrawled across the packaging in black marker was a single name: *Demian*.

I thought I was Dante. Apparently, the literary references were escalating.

I tore the plastic open. Inside was a tailored black tactical tracksuit and a pair of monochrome cross-trainers. I dressed, pocketed my menthols and phone, and exited the quarters.

Underworld's "Dark and Long" thudded through the reinforced drywall. The main lounge was largely deserted; the night crowd had dispersed to their civilian routines. Mary was lounging on a low sofa, nursing an espresso, an open volume of philosophical essays resting beside her boots.

I took a few minutes to explore the installation.

Down the central corridor, observation windows revealed classrooms where operatives were engaged in breathwork, somatic conditioning, and focused debate. In the final seminar room, an elderly lecturer was diagramming Hegelian dialectics alongside Taoist principles of *wu wei* and structural necessity on a whiteboard.

Perhaps there was genuine intellectual rigor behind the madness.

When I returned to the lounge, Tetrad was pouring himself a dark roast, chatting quietly with Mary.

"Appreciate the logistical assist, Tetrad," I said, stepping forward.

He turned, radiating calm authority. "No problem at all. You're practically glowing, brother." He glanced at Mary, then back to me, chuckling under his breath.

The word *brother* carried an unexpected emotional weight.

I cleared my throat, glancing away. "Yeah, well... we're just coordinating mission parameters."

"Mission parameters, is it?" Mary interjected, shaking her head with an ironic smirk.

Tetrad laughed out loud, patted my shoulder, and excused himself. I walked over to the sofa; Mary handed me a fresh cigarette.

"Pretty sure that ritual was physically real this time," I murmured.

“Proud of your performance?”

“Moderately.”

“You’re glowing, Demian.”

A violent barrage of fists hammered against our door.

“WAKE UP! STAGING PROTOCOL IN FIVE!”

Mary bolted upright, clutching the blanket as she scrambled for her gear. “Shit!”

“What’s the alert? Are we compromised?” I scrambled off the foam, disoriented.

She hopped on one foot, pulling on her tactical trousers. “No... I neglected to mention the mandatory conditioning requirements of our sanctuary.”

“Conditioning?”

“Physical labor and tactical drills.”

“Jesus Christ. Do you have any idea how brutal this hangover is?”

We had been housed at the facility for three days. She hurled my tracksuit and a bundle of thermal undergarments at my chest. The wool smelled faintly of oxidized sweat.

“Whose kit is this?”

“Put them on before we hit the field.”

Mile one. Mile two. Mile three. Four. Five. Six.

We spent the freezing predawn hours jogging the perimeter of a municipal high-school football stadium. Around and around the red synthetic track.

The relentless circularity was a physical manifestation of Hegelian **bad infinity**—the endless, futile repetition of a finite cycle masquerading as progression. Track athletics should be excised from secondary education like a malignant growth. **Damnatio memoriae.**

At the conclusion of the sixth mile, I collapsed face-first onto the turf, fighting the urge to vomit bile. I hadn't run long distances since my teenage years.

The core unit continued their laps, completely unfazed. Tetrad jogged past without turning his head, while the initiates traded jokes across the infield.

I hauled myself onto the bleachers, sparked a menthol, and watched the formation loop the track. I was pushing thirty; my lungs weren't calibrated for tactical warfare. Tetrad could have been twenty-eight or sixty; his endurance was machine-like.

Racks of plates. Tumblers. Silverware.

Scrape the debris. Clear the mechanical jam. Cycle the wash cycle. Repeat.

The commercial dishwasher executed the thermal sterilization, but by the eleventh hour of the shift, I was actively contemplating throwing myself through the conveyor belt.

I clocked out with violent fantasies that mutated into self-directed despair, then settled into cold depressive numbness. *This meaningless loop was precisely why I had been ready to bleed out in a bathtub.*

"The physical conditioning is tolerable," I snarled, pacing our cell. "Working twelve-hour scullery shifts in exchange for a five-by-nine bunker and two stained mattresses is an insult. I've lived that wage-slave loop before. There's a reason I was seeking an exit when you intercepted me."

I unclenched my fists, steadying my breath. "I assumed this collective was pursuing a higher intellectual order. Thus far, I've observed three competent operators and a legion of functional addicts, posturing cynics, and opportunists. I'm done. The tracksuit is appreciated, but I'm not enlisting in a metaphysical commune."

"Are you certain this isn't simply an acute depressive episode speaking?" Mary asked, her concern piercing my armor.

I paused. "How are you tracking my psychiatric cycles?"

She deflected. "The elders instituted manual labor years ago to ground intellectual egos in working-class material reality. It sounds dogmatic when spoken aloud, but the psychological utility is proven."

“What is the actual institutional objective here?”

“The baseline operatives execute courier runs and maintain operational security. The middle tier handles administrative coordination and theoretical analysis—bourgeois intellectuals, mostly. The executive council manages capital distribution and political shielding. Everything I’ve observed serves communal preservation.”

“That’s exceptionally poetic, Mara, but it’s still an institutional trap.”

“Fine. I surrender the argument.” She pulled on her combat boots and leather jacket, heading for the heavy door.

“Where are you going?”

She slipped into the corridor without looking back. I hurled a dense rubber ball against the wall; it ricocheted off the cinder block, knocking two empty glass bottles to the floor.

I slipped past the guard stationed at the blast door, catching the tail end of a low-frequency conversation between Mary and Tetrad.

My footsteps were silent on the rubber matting. Mary’s tone carried unmistakable worry. I stepped past Tetrad, offering a curt nod, and positioned myself at her shoulder. *Did she prefer Mary or Mara? Mara was the Buddhist demon of illusion and mortal passion. It carried a dangerous, appealing charge.*

“Your partner informs me you’re dissatisfied with the labor assignment,” Tetrad remarked, crossing his arms.

“I wasn’t informed I had been conscripted into service,” I replied. “No one should be scrubbing hotel china for free under the guise of enlightenment.”

“You receive a weekly operating stipend.”

“I don’t care about the currency. That isn’t the root of the objection.”

Mara cast her eyes downward.

“Tuition-free academic auditing?” Tetrad offered.

“I hold an undergraduate degree in philosophy. I’m set on lectures. Thanks for the kit.”

My cynicism struck a visible nerve in Mara.

“*I secured that custom tracksuit for you,*” she growled under her breath.

Tetrad studied my posture. “What about the enforcement division?”

I hesitated. “I’m not a contract killer.”

“Based on field telemetry from your extraction, that’s a blatant falsehood. Have you ever sustained a severe beating?”

“Ask your primary source.” I glanced at Mara; she knew every contour of my record.

Mara gave a subtle nod.

“How did the trauma register?” Tetrad pressed.

“Like my financial solvency was irrelevant compared to the kinetic impact.”

Tetrad offered a thin smile. “Grant me twenty-four hours to stage a deployment.”

Tetrad kicked our door open at 0300, dropping a pair of heavy black duffels onto the concrete. He muttered something about staging coffee and vanished down the hall.

Mara and I tore into the bags. Inside: reinforced tactical base layers, insulated leather combat gloves, tactical boots, ballistic goggles, and industrial sound-dampening earmuffs. I geared up rapidly, tracking Mara’s movements until she caught my gaze locked onto her silhouette. She hurled a half-eaten bag of corn chips at my nose, and I retreated to the hallway.

The central gallery was quiet, the aroma of dark roast replacing the stale odor of tobacco.

Percept sat at a workstation with a ruggedized laptop, gnawing on a fibrous botanical root. A fair-skinned operative in ski apparel stood behind his chair, massaging his shoulders while reviewing real-time telemetry. They didn’t acknowledge my presence. I filled two travel mugs and returned to our quarters.

I handed Mara her coffee. We hadn’t showered in three days; her scent carried an intoxicating, primal charge. *Was this entire sequence an elaborate psychotic architecture?* Even if it was, the clarity it inspired was undeniable. A week prior, I had been searching for an efficient method of self-termination; now I was burning with operational intent.

We embarked in a four-door sedan just before dawn.

Percept drove, humming the same dissonant melody on loop while chewing his root. The vehicle's sound system held a single scratched compact disc: Jefferson Starship's *Nuclear Furniture*, recovered from beneath the rear bench alongside food wrappers and broken novelty glasses.

Visibility was down to ten feet in the dense mountain fog. Tetrad and Mara had noise-canceling headphones engaged; I spent two hours staring at a coffee stain on the front headrest.

I cleared my throat. "Anyone holding cannabis?"

Percept glanced in the rearview mirror, annoyed. "Are you physiologically incapable of navigating twenty-four hours sober?"

"Can we stop for espresso?" Mara interjected.

Percept sighed, gnawing his root.

"What is that botanical compound?" my inner addict demanded.

"*Silene capensis*—African dream root blended with elecampane. Calibrates lucid perception for field work."

"Can I sample a portion?"

Mara slapped my bicep.

I looked over at Tetrad. "Tet, why aren't you chewing the root?"

"Chewed enough during my operational prime," he replied, lighting a cigar. "My current role requires unadulterated analytical clarity. And I dislike relying on chemical prosthetics for baseline manifestation." He shot a pointed glance at Percept.

Mara smirked. "Is that why you deploy with Level IV ballistic plates and three sidearms?"

Tetrad ignored the jab, pointing toward a neon sign through the mist: "MorNooNite Service Hub. Pull in."

Tetrad and Percept entered the 24-hour minimart, moving through the aisles to gather supplies. I watched their silhouettes through the condensation on the windshield. The fog was thickening,

taking on a luminous gray cast.

Mara leaned across the console. “I’m genuinely optimistic about this deployment. The collective has structural flaws, but you could establish a permanent home here if you commit.”

“How long did you rehearse that recruitment pitch?”

“Go to hell.”

Percept emerged carrying a cardboard drink tray, two plastic shopping bags, and a sealed orange tube. He rested the tray on the roof, dropped the bags into Mara’s lap, and sparked a cigarette.

He leaned down to my open window, dropping the orange container into my lap. The pungent aroma of high-grade skunk penetrated the plastic.

“Apparently commercial convenience stores retail cannabis in this sector now,” Percept muttered. “You’re welcome.”

“Did the dream root alter the retail inventory?” I asked, smiling.

“The candidate possesses baseline deduction,” he remarked, returning to the driver’s seat.

I popped the child-resistant cap, savoring the terpene profile, and reached for my lighter. Mara knocked the flame from my hand instantly. I pocketed the tube with a theatrical groan; she glared out her window as the first light of dawn broke.

Tetrad stepped back to the driver-side window. “We have exited the stabilization field of headquarters. The collective dream in this territory is exceptionally fragile. Maintain vigilance; if you register a reality glitch, apply breathwork to ground your node. Remember: it’s an engineered simulation.” He paused, looking back toward the glass doors. “Forgot a manifest item. Two minutes.”

I turned to Mara. “Can you clarify our historical connection so I can clear my working memory?”

A wave of cold anxiety broke across my skin, feeling like viscous droplets oozing from my pores, pooling into a lake across my face—a dark reservoir inhabited by submerged leviathans waiting to consume my ego. *Desperation Lake: The Demise of Nicholas Young.*

“We attended high school together,” she said, her fingers tapping a rhythm against her thigh. “We went on dates. You were completely fixated on me. Where have you been hiding for a decade? You vanished without a word.”

“We have an actual history?” Disbelief rattled my jaw. “I don't recall dating anyone named Mary or Mara. You look familiar, but my adolescent dating history was non-existent. You're fabricating this narrative. My subconscious is generating false memories.”

She grimaced. “Given your recent metaphysical experiences, you should remain open to ontological possibilities.”

Memory fragments ignited in the dark corners of my brain: late night in a second-story bedroom; walking to a community yoga studio; Valentine's Day at an underground hookah lounge; furious email exchanges; packing a sedan in the dead of night and fleeing south.

My head spun. “I left because I despised the entire social landscape. Chemical escapism was my solitary coping mechanism. When the drugs failed, my cognitive stability collapsed. Perhaps I wanted to erase you.” I paused. “Did we attend university together?”

She stifled a laugh. “Nicholas, you **followed** me to university.”

The morning light through the windshield caught the deep obsidian luster of her hair. I searched for a coherent response, finding only static.

A crash of shattering plate glass and a woman's scream erupted from the convenience store.

Tetrad stumbled backward through the exit, grappling with a young woman whose slurred speech defied translation. She had two fists clenched in the lapels of his leather trench coat. When her knees dragged across the pavement, Tetrad executed a clean hip-pivot, breaking her grip and leaving her facedown in a puddle of muddy slush.

A drunken man in flannel shouted garbled threats from the gas pumps. Tetrad signaled for Percept to shift to the passenger seat.

Tetrad slid behind the wheel, craning his neck back toward us. “You see the volatility? Five minutes outside the barrier and we're drawing environmental aggro. The simulation is rejecting our presence. I went in for an energy drink and triggered a localized mob response.”

Mara leaned forward. “Should we request an extraction unit?”

Tetrad chuckled grimly. “That would escalate the containment protocol. I'll deploy a pulse.”

He retrieved a matte-black transmitter the size of a handheld radio from his coat and keyed a numerical sequence into the tactile pad.

A high-frequency vibration buzzed through my teeth. A faint, expanding spherical distortion rippled outward through the air from his hands.

Instantly, the drunken man at the pumps ceased his shouting, blinked in confusion, and turned back to his vehicle as though the altercation had never occurred. The woman on the pavement stood up, brushed off her denim, and walked calmly toward the tree line.

“That expends one of our three Fourier charges,” Tetrad noted, pocketing the device. “Things are deteriorating rapidly in this quadrant.”

He swapped seats with Percept, who dropped the transmission into gear and merged onto the empty highway.

“What is the destination?” I asked, intrigued.

“I’m not spoiling the operational briefing,” Percept said. “We’re roughly forty minutes out from the compound.”

Mara sat up. “The compound? Are we interfacing with the brothers?”

“Quiet,” Percept snapped, tossing a pretzel at her shoulder. “The lineage has been restructured. No further questions.”

Mara pegged my temple with the pretzel fragment. I laughed, sparking the joint as the gas station vanished in the rearview mirror. Everyone except Tetrad partook.

An hour later, we entered an asphalt staging area fifteen times the size of the previous lot, completely desolate. A solitary heavy-duty pickup was parked beside a wrought-iron security gate enveloped by dense mountain pine.

Down the perimeter road, a homeless couple was warming their hands over an open burn barrel.

Full daylight had arrived, but the heavy overcast and ground fog kept the landscape draped in charcoal tones. Tetrad completed a slow sweep of the lot before idling near the gate, flashing his high beams three times.

A heavy metallic latch clicked, and a pedestrian portal within the iron gate swung open with a dry screech.

A six-foot-tall Asian man wearing blue-tinted aviators, a Stetson hat, and tailored raw denim sauntered toward the driver’s door. He removed his shades, tapping the glass against Tetrad’s window.

Tetrad rolled the window down, bowing his head slightly toward the steering wheel to avoid direct eye contact.

The man chuckled, sliding his shades back on. "I'm not my father. This is the American sector. Shake my hand, damn it."

He extended a gloved hand through the window frame.

"Good morning, sir," Tetrad murmured, offering a polite grip.

"Call me Dan, for God's sake."

"Understood, Dan. Should we stage the vehicle here?"

"Security will store it. Hand over the keys."

Tetrad complied, killing the ignition. We stepped out onto the gravel.

Our group passed through the iron gate onto an expansive crushed-limestone driveway winding a mile through the countryside. At the terminus of the road, framed by manicured boxwood hedges, stood a grand neoclassical estate—the spitting image of Thomas Jefferson's Monticello, located thousands of miles from Virginia.

An immaculate, empty 18-hole golf course dominated the topography, encircled by miles of dense pine forest. The tree line radiated an inexplicable, magnetic pull.

Tetrad relaxed as we walked. He, Mara, and Dan engaged in operational dialogue that held no interest for me, allowing me to lag behind to inspect the terrain. Acres of natural ecology had been bulldozed to construct a private playground for a solitary aristocrat. A familiar, bitter resentment flared in my chest.

When I rejoined the group, Dan was detailing his ancestry—allegedly descending from high-ranking North Korean diplomatic lineage.

"Who are the two new assets?" Dan asked, spitting tobacco into the hedge. "I dislike their energy."

"Pleasure to meet you, Dan," Mara interrupted smoothly. "I operate under the handle Mara."

Dan's eyebrow arched behind his aviators. "Perhaps I approve of **this** one."

Rage sparked in my gut, but years of suppressing my reactions kept my face impassive.

“Nicholas,” I offered. “A pleasure. Magnificent estate you’ve cultivated.”

Dan ignored the handshake, leading us up the grand portico. A maid and butler took our outerwear in the marble foyer.

Inside, a private security contractor armed with an M4 carbine conducted a thorough physical pat-down, confiscating our sidearms. I closed my eyes as his hands lingered over Mara’s tactical vest in the name of security protocol.

We ascended to Dan’s executive office—a lavish chamber paneled in mahogany and draped in crimson silk tapestries.

Dan leaned against his mahogany desk, addressing Tetrad: “A mandatory condition for training your extraction candidate is your acceptance of the revised social charter.”

Tetrad frowned. “A revised charter? We weren’t briefed on amendments.”

“A minor tactical pivot,” Dan said smoothly. “Your units will terminate all search-and-destroy operations against regional spice nodes and transition entirely to acquisition. All harvested product is to be rerouted to the aircraft boneyard three miles north of the city.”

“Madrigal referenced this directive,” Tetrad argued. “Why are we hoarding inventory? The mandate was psychic liberation.”

Dan’s composure snapped, then reset into cold authority. “I am neither my father nor my late brother. The paradigm has evolved, and infrastructure requires capital. A world without financial leverage is an adolescent fantasy. No further debate: accept the terms or vacate the estate. Refuse, and I plant five kilos of unrefined heroin in your urban headquarters and alert my contacts in state narcotics.”

Mara pulled me toward the drapery, whispering: “This is compromised. We need to withdraw.”

“We can absorb the advanced training, master their techniques, and decouple when the window opens,” I countered. “Maintain patience, Mara. Something about this installation holds an answer.”

She sighed, delivered a light punch to my bicep, and kissed my cheek.

“Fine,” she whispered. “But we execute the exit on my command.”

“Agreed.”

Tactical instruction did not take place within the neoclassical mansion—a disappointment, as I had hoped to survey Dan's private archives.

Instead, we were transported to the decommissioned aircraft boneyard Dan had referenced.

We were billeted in rusted World War II hangars among rows of corroded fuselages, issued utilitarian jumpsuits and combat boots, and subjected to an unrelenting physical regimen. Male and female operatives were typically segregated, but Tetrad negotiated an administrative exception, securing a private quarters for Mara and me in a repurposed maintenance annex.

We maintained zero social contact with the other recruits; my chronic introversion complemented her tactical paranoia. We never saw Dan or his executive staff, but the advanced instruction was delivered daily.

Her strikes landed with concussive force, but my nervous system registered zero somatic pain.

She threw my frame through a wooden staging table; the lumber splintered, yet I felt only a dull, pressure-based impact. I countered with equal ferocity, driving her into the corrugated bulkhead. She surged forward again; I closed the distance. Lacerations bled, contusions bloomed across our skin, but our consciousness remained locked in an ecstatic, trance-like equilibrium.

Without the oversight of Tetrad and the senior instructors, we would have suffered severe trauma on day one.

The curriculum integrated esoteric bio-energetic techniques preserved through Tibetan Buddhist lineages, training our minds to override nociceptive signaling far more effectively than any synthetic opioid I had ever abused. One endurance exercise required trekking miles across the freezing high-desert perimeter in the dead of night, utilizing focused breathwork and directed volition to reduce our perception of freezing temperatures to absolute zero. I had always dismissed accounts of ascetic mastery as folkloric exaggeration; experiencing the neural rewiring firsthand dismantled my skepticism.

The syndicate had retrofitted an isolated hangar into a perimeter security depot.

Black Fourier housings, serviced weekly by certified technicians, generated a continuous dampening field that neutralized psychic manifestation across the sector. Percept explained that the devices utilized harmonic Fourier mathematics to weave a localized boundary of compressed spacetime.

Whenever I walked within fifty feet of the perimeter arrays, acute nausea seized my gut, and

any attempt to execute a mental projection brought me to my knees in excruciating cerebral pain.

By daylight, we engaged in brutal combat simulations; by moonlight, we surrendered to uninhibited physical intimacy.

Mara and I spent every waking hour entwined—drilling tactical maneuvers, debating metaphysics, exploring our psychological depths. I had never experienced this caliber of relational connection, and shadowing every moment of tenderness was a bitter pang of grief over the fifteen years I had wasted on self-mutilation and chemical isolation.

Simultaneously, a terrifying fear of losing her took root. Instead of accepting the blessing, my neurotic mind occasionally wished I had never encountered her, prompting immediate self-rebuke.

Three communal meals, a shared cot, combat conditioning, theoretical seminars, nutritional supplements, cannabis, alcohol, pharmaceuticals, music, sex. I established a working rapport with several recruits, occasionally volunteering to cover their scullery shifts.

After decades of isolated misery, the structure forged an authentic, unshakeable self-worth whenever I took time to reflect.

Theoretical seminars were tedious compared to kinetic combat drills.

“We can manipulate the consensus dreamscape through focused volition, but what constitutes the primary constraint?” the instructor—a sharp woman in her forties with piercing gray eyes—queried the auditorium. “What prevents the uninitiated from accessing sovereign agency?”

A recruit in ballistic gear raised her hand. “Objective physical laws?”

“An unrefined answer,” the instructor chuckled, calling on Mara, whose hand had shot into the air instantly.

“The architecture of the Self,” Mara answered, beaming with academic pride.

“Precisely! Expand the premise.”

Mara stood, addressing the hall: “If the unconscious represents the vast majority of psychic

mass, the conscious ego cannot chart its own developmental boundaries—the ego being merely a localized node within the greater Self. The unconscious must evaluate when the ego is mature enough for structural expansion, governing the evolutionary timeline for the total system.”

The theoretical mechanics flew over my head; Mara was an unrepentant academic perfectionist.

I reached into my pocket, uncorked an ampoule of refined spice, dusted my knuckles with the powder, and brought them to my nose, inhaling sharply. The neurochemical shift hit immediately: her lecture snapped into pristine, crystalline geometry.

A loud chime cut through the PA speakers: *‘‘Operatives Nicholas Young and Mara, report to Security Annex A immediately.’’*

The surveillance monitors flickered violently, cascades of raw differential equations filling the displays before stabilizing.

A low-frequency audio drone—a continuous, synthesized *Om*—vibrated through the console speakers. A final mathematical equation froze on the center screen, flared into blinding luminance, and dissolved.

A gaunt, androgynous figure stepped into the camera’s vanishing point. He wore a crimson silk blindfold, stepping toward an overhead boom microphone.

‘‘I am contemplating the cosmic terminus,’’ his digitized voice rasped, ‘‘the final boredom of the architects when they execute universal suicide, purely to reboot the cycle.’’

He sat upon a polished marble altar, reached beneath the slab, and produced a heavy industrial machete. With absolute clinical detachment, he proceeded to dismember his lower extremities, sawing methodically through muscle and bone.

Zero emotion registered on his exposed features. He then bisected his left forearm. The volume of arterial spray was staggering; several analysts averted their eyes. Mara and I remained transfixed.

Finally, he reclined across the stone, lifting the heavy blade with unnaturally elongated arms, centering the point above his pelvic floor. He drove the steel down with hydraulic force.

Blood blinded the optical lens.

For sixty seconds, obscure shadows shifted behind the crimson smear. A pale hand wiped the glass clean, revealing the identical figure standing upright—his anatomy completely

unblemished, the marble altar pristine behind him, though pools of viscera remained across the concrete as empirical evidence of the dismemberment.

He stepped toward the lens with an asymmetrical, predatory stride. The lighting illuminated the face I had prayed to never encounter again: Morgue.

He hurled a dark obsidian sphere at the floorboards; an expanding violet aperture swallowed his frame, sealing seamlessly behind him—the identical telemetric spindle Asphalt had deployed months prior.

Tetrad keyed the remote, killing the video feed. He turned to me, terror simmering beneath his stoic expression.

“Do you recognize this entity?”

Paranoia flared; I braced for an accusation. “I don’t *know* him in an operational sense. I purchased pharmaceutical diversion from his cell for three years. That was the extent of the contact. I never affiliated with his occult circle of suburbanites who believe they’re reincarnated priestesses.”

“I’m not questioning your loyalty, brother. Can you establish a tracking vector? That footage was logged six hours ago. The entity breaches, executes a manifestation, and vanishes.”

“Tetrad, I possess a disconnected cellular number and nothing more. Are we certain of the identification? I want zero karmic blowback if the telemetry is flawed.”

“Or perhaps you’re protecting your primary supplier.”

Rage sparked in my chest. “I despise that degenerate. If he hadn’t controlled the local oxycodone supply, I would have flagged his operation to municipal authorities years ago.”

“Are your chemical dependencies stabilized?” Tetrad pressed, his tone deadly serious.

“You’re asking if I’m fit for deployment?”

“Yes.”

“I haven’t ingested an unprescribed compound since entering this installation.”

Tetrad glanced at Mara. She dropped her eyes, studying her boots. “He’s holding the baseline, Tet. His spice titration is elevated, but his executive control is solid.”

Tetrad sighed, ejecting the optical disc and pocketing it. “Let’s prep the loadout.”

As we exited the annex, I dumped half a dozen empty spice vials into a biohazard bin. The cognitive vertigo of active withdrawal was already tingling behind my sinuses. I slipped a vial containing equal parts ketamine and pharmaceutical spice from my cuff, taking a covert pull beneath my palm.

Debating substance dependency was a luxury we couldn't afford while under tactical assault from an immortal occult asset.

Tetrad led Mara and me down to the central armory, navigating corridors I hadn't been cleared to access. Past rows of lecture halls, the commissary, the subterranean server arrays, and down three flights of reinforced concrete stairs, we moved in tense silence.

Tetrad halted, diverting us into an unlit storage vault filled with unprinted crates. The space smelled of industrial antiseptic and cold steel.

"I kept this off the open comms," Tetrad said, his brow furrowed, "but I require unvarnished intelligence. Provide accurate data and we neutralize the threat. Deceive me, and a localized breach becomes an existential catastrophe for the entire collective. Understood?"

We nodded in unison.

"Perimeter surveillance logged federal surveillance vehicles orbiting our urban headquarters," Tetrad continued. "Three hours ago, an extraction asset was detained by state police. Perplex intercepted the transport. The operative reported that municipal detectives are running a homicide investigation centered on *you*, Nicholas. They're tracking a fatal assault."

Mara stepped forward, defensive. "That's absurd. I've shadowed him continuously. He's incapable of unprovoked homicide."

A cold weight dropped through my stomach. *The simulation was collapsing.* "Stop, Mara..." I met Tetrad's gaze. "What was the victim's official identity?"

"A civilian named Maury Rebok. Discovered behind a Soul Foods market with his cranial vault pulverized."

The game was up. Purgatory was reaching up to drag me back down to the cells. Derealization settled over my senses like wet wool; Mara and Tetrad felt like projections of a dying brain.

"The situation is considerably more complex than the police blotter," I said quietly. "I didn't

murder Rebok, but he was my distributor. He went by a street moniker. I had never heard the name Maury Rebok until this moment.”

Mara’s eyes narrowed. “What was his handle, Nicholas?”

“You won’t like the answer.”

“Spit it out,” Tetrad commanded.

“Morgue,” I said.

The armory was silent save for the low hum of ventilation fans circulating chilled air.

Tetrad distributed Level III-A ballistic vests, his speech rapid and calculated. “I’ve documented subjects altering physical constants on high-dose spice, but physical resurrection exceeds known parameters.”

He loaded four shells into a combat shotgun, racked the action, and passed the weapon to Mara.

“Approaching law enforcement is a fatal error, Nicholas. They will remand you to a maximum-security psychiatric ward, and once they administer institutional neuroleptics, your psychic node is permanently severed. The state apparatus serves different masters.”

He racked a Glock 22, engaged the holster lock, and slid it across the stainless steel table to me.

“I learned that lesson firsthand,” I replied, checking the magazine. “The authorities are why I sought an extraction vector. But I personally verified Morgue’s corpse behind that supermarket. It’s impossible for him to be operating on that surveillance tape.”

Tetrad let out a dry, incredulous chuckle. “After the metaphysical phenomena you’ve navigated, you still cling to Newtonian materialism?”

“Biological resurrection violates physical entropy!”

“Read Aleister Crowley’s diaries on astral projection and somatic reconstruction,” Tetrad snapped. “There is an ocean of reality you have yet to chart. Close your mouth and calibrate your senses.”

He locked the secure cage behind us.

Mara racked her shotgun. "What is the utility of conventional small arms against an entity that regenerates from dismemberment?"

Tetrad pulled a heavy cardboard box from his trench coat and handed it to her. "Incendiary Dragon's Breath rounds."

A fierce, predatory smile spread across Mara's face. "Now we're speaking my dialect."

"The protocol is absolute," Tetrad instructed. "Shatter the somatic frame with kinetic impact, incinerate the biological residue with thermite, and scatter the ash across a high-entropy vector. Disrupting his node also severs the municipal spice pipeline."

"How do we establish an intercept?" I asked. "The entity deploys instantaneous spatial portals."

"Asphalt coordinates our advanced telemetry," Tetrad said, his gaze lingering on my dilated pupils. "Her spatial apertures are significantly more stable than average, and she operates without chemical amplification." He paused. "I will coordinate the intercept vectors. Until the signal drops, you two hold position at urban headquarters with loaded weapons within arm's reach. Understood?"

Mara nodded. "We'll maintain the perimeter." She turned to me. "We have an unresolved discussion."

We drove in heavy silence for the first thirty miles before Mara broke the seal.

"I need complete candor," she said, her eyes fixed on the asphalt. "I saw you discard empty ampoules when you thought my attention was diverted. My perception is never diverted. What is the extent of your chemical dependency?"

God, I needed a hit. "My baseline is stable. I metabolize compounds differently than standard recruits."

"You're rationalizing like a chronic addict."

"Your faction supplied the inventory! How do you expect me to cease titration when the substance allows me to manipulate physical matter?"

"I demonstrated that sovereign volition operates without chemical catalysts."

"You proved that *your* node operates without them."

“Whatever.”

A towering, amorphous entity rose from an oily pool in the center of the pitch-black highway—an obsidian horror matching the chimera from my initial vision.

“Mara! BRAKE!”

She slammed the pedal to the floorboards. The front bumper plowed into the viscous mass, splattering dark, petroleum-like fluid across the entire windshield. Blotted of all visibility and skidding sideways at seventy miles per hour, I threw my torso across Mara’s chest to shield her from the impact.

The sedan rolled violently three times down the wooded embankment, coming to rest against a stand of pine.

Flames roared through the undercarriage. Choking black smoke filled the cabin.

The driver-side door was sheared off; Mara was nowhere in sight. Intense heat scorched my cheeks. My seatbelt was pinned beneath the twisted B-pillar.

Do you perceive the resonance, Nicholas?

The voice broadcast directly into my cerebral cortex.

I am untethered from biological constraints. Magdalene and Christ unified as a singular principle. There is zero redemption for fragmented souls who deny the divine androgyny. We transcend mortal polarity.

I spat blood in defiance. The fire was climbing the dashboard. I strained against the nylon webbing, tearing my shoulder free, and drove both combat boots into the spider-webbed windshield.

Surrender the struggle, Nicholas. You are desired by the collective. From the stellar void we emerged; to the void we return. Ad astra.

I drove my heels forward with all my focused volition. The laminated safety glass blew outward. Coughing through dense smoke, I dragged my torso across the burning hood, sustaining severe second-degree burns along my forearms.

A pale, bare foot—bearing the gravitational weight of a concrete pillar—came down hard on the

back of my neck. Another foot forced my skull to the right.

You may resist the integration or you may merge, Morgue hissed. *You require no external anima to achieve wholeness! Cultivate the feminine within!*

Horror seized my soul.

Mara's body was suspended upside down from a pine bough, her abdomen cleanly eviscerated, dark arterial blood streaming over her torso and face. Her lifeless eyes stared through the smoke.

Rage and grief detonated in my chest.

I reached into my pocket, extracted a sealed spice ampoule, and crushed the glass directly against my cheekbone, inhaling the powder through the laceration.

The perceptual field turned blinding crimson.

Morgue's angelic guise melted away, revealing a writhing, oily mass of tar and necrotic tissue. The pressure on my neck softened as his foot dissolved into dark slime.

I whipped my head around and drove a piston-like fist into his groin. He shrieked in inhuman agony, stumbling backward into the brush.

I wiped the blood from my eyes, roaring like a wounded beast. "You should have had the anatomy surgically removed, you fraudulent parasite!"

While his form struggled to re-coalesce, I lunged into the passenger footwell, retrieving Mara's twelve-gauge shotgun. The barrel was searing hot, blistering my palm. I racked the slide and emptied three magnum slugs directly into Morgue's chest and jaw, tearing chunks of dark matter from his frame.

I retrieved the box of incendiary shells from the glove compartment, loaded four rounds, and leveled the muzzle.

All this resistance for a disposable anima drone? Morgue's voice echoed in my skull. *I should have slowly strangled the life from her eyes while you watched!*

Boom. Boom. Boom. Boom.

Four Dragon's Breath shells detonated against his torso. Morgue ignited in an unholy chemical inferno.

He shrieked as burning fluid erupted from his throat: "You believe this terminates the cycle? I am the sovereign Shadow of your own psyche, Nicholas! I will return for every splinter of your soul!"

I leveled my gaze into his burning eyes. *Die, you miserable informant.*

The final blast tore through his core. Morgue disintegrated into incandescent ash. A swirling violet portal opened beneath the embers, swallowing the remaining oily residue before snapping shut.

I scrambled to the pine bough, severing the cord and catching Mara's cold frame in my arms.

She was pulseless; massive blood loss had drained her color. I dragged her clear of the burning vehicle, weeping and screaming into the night. When we reached a clearing, I gently closed her eyelids and crossed her hands over her chest.

Mara, don't abandon me. I've witnessed too much impossible reality to accept your death. Wake up!

I dug through my pockets, but the spice was gone.

No, a telepathic voice whispered from the earth. *Send me back.*

Possessed by an instinct older than memory, I lifted her into my lap.

Mara, hear me. I love you.

I pressed my left palm firmly over the laceration on her abdomen and placed my right thumb between her eyebrows. I channeled every drop of my bio-energetic will into a singular imperative: *Restore the vessel.*

A luminous solar hieroglyph—the circle with a central dot—ignited in pure white light upon her forehead.

Beneath my left hand, the severed tissue, fascia, and muscle knit together in a violent surge of cellular regeneration.

Her legs kicked out; with a massive, gasping inhale, her chest surged. She let out a piercing scream, then collapsed back against my shoulder, her breathing steady and deep.

I carried her up the embankment to the highway shoulder.

The barrier between imagination and physical manifestation had thinned to a veil.

Knowing I had to conserve energy, I focused my volition on a specific necessity: a heavy-duty four-wheel-drive pickup with an enclosed camper shell. The cognitive drain hit me like a sledgehammer, but the vehicle rendered seamlessly at the curb—complete with an insulated sleeping bag and cargo tie-downs.

I laid Mara into the bed, securing the straps, locked the tailgate, and climbed into the driver's seat.

A cold psychic chill washed over my spine; Morgue's decaying visage flickered in my mind's eye.

I looked down into the dark driver's-side footwell and projected: *I can feel your location.*

The psychic presence recoiled in genuine fear before vanishing. A brief flash of an ancient mountain monastery crossed my vision. I dropped the truck into gear and sped toward urban headquarters.

I approached the headquarters lot and immediately cut the headlights.

Blue emergency strobes bathed the brick facade. Men in tailored black suits were raiding the facility, carrying out weapons crates, research volumes, and technical equipment. Secondary supplies were being torched in burn barrels, while shrink-wrapped crates of raw spice were loaded into unmarked commercial tractor-trailers.

I reversed out of the alley before the perimeter guards could spot the pickup. Mara required stabilization; I routed directly toward her private safehouse.

The identical scene met me at the safehouse: flashing strobes, federal transport trucks, armed contractors carrying out hardware.

Morgue's retaliation was systematic. A psychopathic cult leader leveraging federal law enforcement as a private cleanup crew—the quintessential morality of a career informant.

I was running on empty. I attempted to manifest cash and government identification for a motel, but my depleted reserves produced only twenty dollars and a laminated wholesale club card bearing my legal name.

Left with no operational alternatives, I set the navigation for my personal apartment.

We idled down the street from my building for an hour. No surveillance units, no anomalous signatures.

At predawn, I backed into the driveway, carried Mara over my shoulder like an intoxicated date, and climbed the porch steps.

Taped to my door were two notices: a business card from a private investigator named Meyer Riggs, and a handwritten index card signed *‘A’* instructing me to call a secure number immediately.

I unlocked the deadbolt, brought Mara inside, and settled her onto the sofa. I placed a cool, damp washcloth over her forehead, kissed her temple, and dialed the number on the card.

Beth’s voice answered with sharp aggression: “Where are you staged?”

It was Asphalt. Tears of relief stung my eyes. “We’re secured at my apartment for the moment—”

“You are *never* secure in that sector!”

“Asphalt, we were intercepted by Morgue—”

“Morgue?!”

“He attacked us. I neutralized his physical frame, but Mara is comatose. I healed the trauma, but she won’t regain consciousness. What’s the protocol?”

“I’m deploying to your coordinates. I’ll bring a fully charged Fourier unit—that should buy us a twenty-four-hour stabilization window.”

“Can you bring tactical backup?”

“There is no backup, Nicholas. The faction is compromised from within. Tetrad was intercepted, and the airfield went dark.”

“Understood. Get here fast.” I ended the call.

I sat beside the couch, studying Mara's serene features. Even in a coma, her cosmetic precision was intact. The vulnerability was agonizing to witness.

A sharp tap sounded at the rear kitchen window. I rushed over and unlatched the sash; Asphalt climbed inside, carrying a heavy Pelican case.

She hurried to Mara's side. "Not you too, sister." She extracted an ampoule of clear liquid, inhaled a micro-dose, pressed her forehead against Mara's, and held the vial beneath Mara's nostrils.

Asphalt's telepathic broadcast echoed in my head: *Where are you anchored, Mara? Return to the node.*

Silence.

"Any response?" I asked.

"Negative. But that doesn't indicate brain death. She requires clinical stabilization, but without heavy Fourier arrays, a conventional hospital is a death trap. Discarnate trauma entities feed on medical wards; nurses and doctors warp into demonic archetypes. It would destroy her."

"Didn't you bring an array?"

"A single portable unit cannot insulate a comatose mind from environmental infection."

Coma. The weight of the word settled in my chest. I realized how completely I had fallen for her intellect, her fire, her sovereign agency. *Her.* I silently prayed to whatever higher order governed the simulation: *Don't force me to sever the cord.*

Asphalt and I exchanged tired glances. Looking into her eyes, the familiar warmth of my years with Bethany flickered through the operative's gaze.

Asphalt's secure phone chimed. Mara gave a slight reflex shudder on the cushions; I tucked the blanket securely around her shoulders.

"Tetrad," Asphalt spoke rapidly. "De-escalate. Give me the coordinates." She listened for two minutes, her expression darkening. "Understood. We're staging an extraction."

She hung up, rubbing her temples.

"I can't intercept encrypted thought streams yet, Asphalt," I noted. "Details."

She pulled a black .45 semiautomatic from her waistband and set it on the coffee table. “I assume your firearms handling is operational.”

“I’ve had recent field practice.” I checked the chamber and engaged the safety. “We require incendiary munitions. Conventional lead merely disrupts Morgue’s form.”

“We lack access to the armory. I’m leaving the Fourier housing here to insulate Mara. I’m executing a solo breach on municipal holding to extract Tetrad.”

“You mentioned **bailing** him out.”

“Do you think I discuss kinetic extractions over a monitored police line?” She reached into her vest, produced a glowing crystalline spindle, and dropped it to the hardwood.

A vertical aperture of brilliant white light split the floor.

“Maintain vigilance,” Asphalt ordered. “If the Fourier battery depletes before I return, extract Mara and run. We can track your resonance across the collective dream.”

She stepped into the light and vanished through the floorboards.

Day unraveled into night.

I monitored the digital battery readout on the Fourier unit between bouts of restless sleep and sitting vigil beside Mara. **I resurrected her physical body—there had to be a mechanism to restore her consciousness.**

My spice reserves were depleted; the cold sweats of neurochemical withdrawal were setting in. The familiar psychic rot clawed at my margins: the urge to self-harm, the craving for oblivion, the instinct to flee. But running was impossible now; physical death would merely plunge me into a deeper, unmoderated circle of purgatory.

I needed an adrenaline spike to force bio-electric resonance.

I reached down to Mara’s combat boot, unsheathed her utility knife, and drew the blade smoothly across my left forearm. Arterial blood welled instantly, several drops splashing onto Mara’s lips.

Her tongue flicked out, tasting the iron. A faint smile touched her mouth.

I leaned down to her ear. “Mara, wake up. We need your fire. The world requires agents who execute intent, not depressives who bleed into porcelain tubs. Return to me.”

Driven by pure somatic instinct, I pressed my bleeding forearm against her lips.

Her eyelids fluttered. Her mouth opened, sealing around the laceration as she drank with desperate thirst.

With a massive gasp, her eyes flew open. For an instant, confusion registered, then her gaze locked onto mine with terrifying clarity. We shared the most profound, electric kiss of our existence.

When we parted, I recoiled slightly at her gaze.

Her right iris blazed with pure, angelic white luminescence; her left iris swirled with dark, smoky violet malice.

“Mara... where were you anchored?”

“Nicholas... I perceived the entire architecture,” she breathed. “I know the trajectory. I understand the whole design.”

“Don’t you need an operational briefing?”

“I’ve been observing from your shadow this entire time.”

Mara held a steaming coffee in trembling hands—trembling from surging voltage rather than fear.

“I was operating in ghost-projection state, Nicholas. It was agonizing watching you combat Morgue while I remained discarnate. Then your resonance anchored me back into the vessel. And the projection capability remained integrated. Observe.”

She directed her focus toward the corner of the room; her physical body went completely limp on the sofa.

Panic flared; I reached for her wrist, but her telepathic voice resonated from the empty corner: *Can you perceive my presence?*

I perceive you, I projected back. *Return to the vessel. It’s too unstable.*

Her physical frame gasped, sitting upright. I pulled her into a tight embrace.

“Why did my blood initiate the re-anchor?” I asked.

“Resonance,” she said, retrieving her utility knife from the table. “Lean back. Expose your neck.”

A momentary revulsion passed, replaced by an overwhelming hunger for her voltage. She drew the edge across her palm; I locked my mouth over the cut, drinking the metallic current of her life force.

A surge of raw, terrifying power tore through my nervous system.

My vision split: blinding solar white through my right eye, abyssal cosmic violet through my left. My consciousness overloaded, and I collapsed onto the floorboards.

“Fourier battery indicates three hours remaining,” I called out as she showered in the bathroom.

“Sufficient time for our reconciliation?”

“For reconciliation? For—”

She emerged silently behind my chair, spun the seat around, and straddled my lap, sending paperwork and coffee mugs crashing to the floor.

We gazed into each other’s eyes—now returned to their natural hazel and brown—and tears traced down my cheeks.

She rested her forehead against mine. *Shh...*

I feared you were lost forever, I projected.

She silenced my thoughts with a kiss, pulling me toward the bedroom. We spent the remaining charge entirely lost in one another.

“We could execute a tactical withdrawal,” Mara suggested, fastening her tactical vest.

“I considered it,” I replied, loading a magazine. “But Tetrad and Asphalt are my comrades now. They pulled me out of the void, and Morgue is orchestrating this assault. I share accountability.”

“You bear zero blame for his pathology.”

“We all share systemic accountability, Mara.”

My phone rang. I hit speaker.

Asphalt’s voice broke through heavy gunfire: *“...pinned down...Fourier array depleted...they deployed localized dampeners...cannot manifest portals...”*

A harsh tone signaled the severed connection.

The portable Fourier unit emitted a final dying beep.

I grabbed the .45 from the nightstand. Mara stepped into the hallway, fully geared.

“You hold the perimeter, Nicholas. I’ll execute the breach.”

“Are you insane? We operate as a unified team.”

“Surrender the weapon, Nicholas.”

I tucked the pistol into my waistband and gripped her shoulders. The dual white and violet fire ignited within our irises in unison.

“We breach together, or we burn together,” I said with absolute finality. “I am not abandoning your node.”

Her eyes blazed. “Fine. Unified breach.”

She locked her focus onto the dining table. Two 9mm submachine guns, six extended magazines loaded with hollow-points, two thermite incendiary grenades, and two tactical ballistic body suits materialized across the wood.

Her breathing was heavy, but her expression radiated serene lethality.

I mirrored her posture, channeling my willpower through my dual-polarity vision. She gasped as white and violet beams lanced from my eyes.

Across the floor rendered two twelve-gauge tactical shotguns, four boxes of Dragon’s Breath incendiary shells, two additional thermite grenades, and a fresh Fourier unit carrying a full one-hour operational charge.

She smirked. “Impeccable manifestation, partner.”

"I'm mastering the architecture, demon lady."

"Every archetype has an assignment." She winked. "Hold position while I scout the target."

She went limp for ten seconds, then snapped back to physical consciousness.

"The precinct is fortified by private security contractors," she reported. "Fourier dampeners are active across the perimeter."

"Then we deploy kinetic force," I said. "We drive the truck through the front entrance, engage the dampeners, and cleanse the facility. My somatic durability is online."

She smiled, stepping close to kiss my forehead. "I christen you Nero—for your absolute willingness to reduce that fortress to ash."

"A proper demonic designation," I chuckled. "Let's move."

We staged the pickup half a block from the municipal precinct.

Black-clad contractors patrolled the perimeter with carbines. Snipers in tactical ghillie suits were stationed on the roof. Zero civilian personnel or municipal officers were visible—the installation had been privatized entirely.

Every three minutes, a tall, pale executive in a bespoke pinstriped suit emerged from the glass lobby, issued tactical directives to the ground commander, and retreated inside.

"Can you feel the frequency dampener?" Mara asked.

"Yeah. It's radiating like a high-voltage transformer. Nausea is setting in."

"Ground your breathing. Take this."

She made a clean incision in her palm, pressing it against my lips. I drank the metallic current, and the nausea was instantly overwritten by cold, lethal focus. I mirrored the cut on my palm, and she drank with equal fervor.

We shared one final kiss, racked the bolts on our submachine guns, primed the incendiary grenades, and advanced toward the compound.

“Hostile approaching perimeter!” a rooftop sniper screamed into his comms, opening fire.

A volley of high-caliber rounds tore through my torso—and phased harmlessly through my ghost-projected matrix. The snipers reloaded in frantic confusion as I maintained a slow, unhurried march toward the entrance.

From the shadows behind the first marksman, Mara materialized from a low crouch, drew her blade across his carotid, lowered his body silently, and stalked toward the second.

“Target is non-physical! Fire at will!”

I released the projection, snapping back into my physical vessel concealed within an industrial dumpster near the rear fire escape. I drew the .45 and ascended the iron stairs to the roof.

Time dilated to a crawl.

My first two rounds caught the second sniper through the cervical spine; he collapsed across the gravel roof deck. I advanced on the third, taking him out with double taps to the knees.

A fourth contractor stepped from behind the HVAC housing, shouting, “Drop the weapon!” as he fired, catching the meat of my right thigh.

A flesh wound.

Before I could spin, Mara lunged from behind a solar array, driving her combat knife through his plate carrier into his thoracic spine. She kicked him facedown and drove the blade through his cranial base with the heel of her boot.

The precinct alarms howled. Heavy combat boots pounded up the interior steel stairwell.

Mara and I hit the deck on opposite sides of the roof access door, submachine guns leveled.

Boom.

The reinforced steel door blew outward from a breaching charge, and a squad of contractors flooded the roof, blind-firing into the smoke.

Mara, mark my vector, I projected. *Thermite out in three, two, one.*

I pulled the pin on an incendiary grenade, fired a single round into the sky to draw their sightlines, and rolled the canister into their center mass as time slowed to a standstill.

A blinding magnesium fireball erupted. Screams tore through the sirens as the thermite liquified armor and tissue. Mara opened up with her submachine gun, cutting down the survivors with ruthless precision. I dispatched the burning remnants with single shots to the brainstem.

The alarms abruptly cut out, leaving a ringing silence.

I checked Mara's gear. "You intact?"

"Zero damage. Why did they terminate the alarm?"

"They want us inside. Stay frosty." I handed her the empty SMG and racked the shotgun with Dragon's Breath. "I'll breach the point. Clean up the flanks."

"Such chivalry," she murmured sarcastically. "After you, darling."

We descended the interior stairwell in tactical formation, clearing floor after floor of shattered drywall and flickering emergency lights. Asphalt and Tetrad had mounted a ferocious resistance before being captured.

On the ground floor, the synthesized *Om* drone vibrated through the floorboards.

I breached the lobby doors, weapon raised—

A cold hand punched through the right side of my lower torso. Not a blade—*Morgue's bare arm*.

I collapsed instantly, playing deceased as my vision dimmed.

You see, Nicholas... the cosmic architects never died, Morgue's voice echoed in the lobby.

They crave release. We must assist their suicide, dying ourselves to be reborn in the pristine void!

I spat blood onto his bare feet. "Just... fucking... die."

BOOM.

A Dragon's Breath blast struck Morgue's spine. He shrieked as thermite engulfed his flesh. Three more deafening blasts tore chunks from his frame, collapsing him into a pool of burning black sludge.

Mara dropped beside me, pressing her palm over my abdominal wound, chanting in low Tibetan

harmonics. My internal organs and dermis knit together with agonizing heat as oxygen returned to my blood.

“Now the ledger is balanced,” she breathed, pulling me up.

A swirling violet aperture was expanding beside Morgue’s burning remnants, drawing the sludge into the void.

I racked the shotgun, pouring incendiary rounds into the vortex, but the energy dissipated into the dark.

“Not this time, you parasite!” Mara screamed, diving headfirst into the aperture.

“Mara, NO!”

I lunged forward, crossing the threshold as the portal collapsed behind us.

Pitch-black void.

A muffled whimpering echoed through the darkness, consoled by a low, familiar voice.

Mara ignited a road flare. The red glow illuminated an abyssal labyrinth constructed entirely of pulsing human skin, fascia, and exposed viscera.

“Tetrad and Asphalt are held down this corridor,” Mara whispered, steadying my arm. “This is the structural hellhole of Morgue’s personal unconscious.”

Our firearms had dissolved during the spatial transition.

“We deploy blood resonance,” I said, drawing my knife across my thigh wound.

She reopened her palm; we exchanged the current, and our dual white and violet ocular flares ignited, permanently illuminating the grotesque labyrinth.

We navigated corridors of living tissue. Traumatic memory loops leaked from the fleshy walls: the shrill voice of a disappointed mother, a brutal stepfather, schoolyard bullies shouting slurs, institutional psychiatric evaluations: **“Severe malignant narcissism! Narcissistic decompensation!”**

Morgue had been a broken, traumatized human before his ego fractured into monstrous godhood.

We reached a cell door of hardened bone marked with a crimson *M*. Mara kicked it down.

Tetrad and Asphalt cowered in the corner, bruised and bound in nylon restraints.

“Comrades! It’s us!” Mara cried, severing their bindings.

Tetrad blinked in disbelief. “Where is this sector? How did you execute an intercept?”

“We’re inside Morgue’s core subconscious,” I said, hauling Tetrad to his feet. “We terminate the engine. Stay close.”

We navigated the repeating corridors until a massive biological pulse—like a subterranean heart—shook the walls.

At the terminus stood an obsidian blast door wrapped in writhing tendrils and unblinking biological eyes.

I drove my combat boot through the latch. Swarms of flies and bats exploded through the opening.

In the center of the vast cavern rested a towering, throbbing mass of necrotic dark matter—Morgue’s psychic core, the engine of his continuous resurrection.

“The central node,” Mara declared.

Tetrad stared at our glowing irises. “What metaphysical state have you achieved?”

Mara and I stepped forward in unison, tuning our consciousness to the dark matter.

The throbbing mass unraveled into smoky tendrils, which flowed directly into our violet left eyes, absorbing his dark power into our polarity. The fleshy cavern began to tear apart.

Simultaneously, our right eyes strobed with blinding white solar luminescence, the frequency accelerating until it merged into a solid beam of infinite radiance.

A cosmic detonation tore through the labyrinth, dissolving Morgue’s nightmare, our physical forms, and the entire dreamscape into a flash of absolute, blinding white light.

My eyelids opened.

I was lying beside Mara in an expansive, sun-drenched bedroom of modern architectural luxury. Silk sheets, polished hardwood, contemporary sculpture.

I stepped out of bed silently, walking toward the floor-to-ceiling glass curtains with hesitant awe. After navigating hell, I half-expected a firing squad beyond the glass.

I parted the sheer linen.

The most breathtaking sunrise I had ever witnessed illuminated an immaculate, futuristic silver metropolis stretching to the horizon. A master artist deity had painted the human race's final masterpiece.

I turned back. Mara was sitting upright, rubbing the sleep from her eyes.

"You woke me, asshole," she murmured with an exhausted, radiant smile.

"I love you in spite of yourself," I replied, walking to the bedside.

"As do I. Where are we anchored?"

"I believe... the conflict is resolved."

"Is this a penthouse construct? Are we dreaming?"

"We are always dreaming," I said, smiling down at her. "We won."

"Watch this."

She focused her gaze; a silver room-service tray loaded with fresh fruit, croissants, and dark coffee materialized across her lap. She beamed with childish delight.

"Is this the reality you desire, Mara?"

A solitary tear traced down her cheek. "I believe I'll go by Mary now, Nicholas."

"What about our comrades? Tetrad? Asphalt? The collective mission?"

"They hold their own sovereign agency across the collective unconscious. Didn't we both seek an honorable exit?"

A deep, unshakable peace washed over my spirit. We sat together on the edge of the bed, looking out over the shining city.

A white dove landed softly upon the brushed-steel railing of our balcony. I inhaled deeply, feeling the morning breeze.

A shared dream between two lovers. What more could I have ever asked for?

Editorial Appendix & Continuity Audit: Bad Infinity

1. Character Identity & Naming Architecture

* **Nicholas Young / Dante / Demian / Nero / Nicholas**:

- *Nicholas*: The baseline, self-loathing narrator anchored in depressive cycles, substance abuse, and self-harm.
- *Dante*: The purgatorial identity assigned by Mary during the liminal suburban/highway dream loops (Sections 20–34), reflecting his descent through layered psychological circles.
- *Demian*: The transitional individuation identity marked on his tactical tracksuit package at headquarters (Section 49), evoking Hermann Hesse's archetype of reconciled dark/light polarity (Abraxas).
- *Nero*: The destructive combat archetype christened by Mara before the precinct assault (Section 76), embodying Heraclitean fire and ruthless kinetic purification.
- *Nicholas (Reconciled)*: Returned to his birth name in the shared penthouse dreamscape (Section 81), achieving internal balance with Mary.

* **Mary / Mara**:

- *The Biker / Mary*: Introduced as the cynical fixed-gear cyclist and later motel companion; provides grounding reality checks and tough-love companionship.
- *Mara*: The initiated combat operative and former disciple of Madrigal; named after the Buddhist archetype of illusion, sensory temptation, and mortal passion.
- *Dual-Eye Awakening*: Ingesting Nicholas's blood awakens her angelic (solar white) and demonic (violet void) ocular polarity, unlocking ghost-projection and telepathic resonance.
- *Mary (Integrated)*: Chooses the civilian name Mary in the resolution, leaving the militant collective behind for a shared domestic heaven.

* **Beth / Asphalt**:

- *Bethany (Beth)*: Nicholas's ex-partner of seven years; unmasked as an *anima drone* generated by his personal unconscious.
- *Asphalt*: The rogue external operative who inhabits Beth's physical drone to extract Nicholas from psychic collapse; specializes in spatial portal generation via crystalline spindles.

* **Morgue / Maury Rebok**:

- Nicholas's pharmaceutical distributor, occult cult leader, billionaire-funded asset, and FBI informant. Pulverized behind Soul Foods as Maury Rebok, resurrected on video through ritual mutilation, and recurring as an immortal sludge monster representing the unintegrated collective Shadow.

* **Tetrad, Perplex & Percept**:

- *Tetrad*: Senior field mentor and anchor of stability; wields Fourier suppression tech, smokes cigars, and embodies protective fraternal authority.

- *Perplex*: Urban venue doorman and perimeter guard at the warehouse installation.
- *Percept*: Tactical driver and field technician who utilizes African dream root (*Silene capensis*) for spatial calibration.
- * **Madrigal ('Gal)**:
 - Matron of the underground VIP sanctuary; pragmatist who embraces "search and steal" over ideological destruction to fund organizational longevity.
- * **Dan**:
 - Aristocratic patron at the Monticello-replica estate; North Korean elite lineage; enforces syndicate resource extraction over pure liberation.

2. Physical Trauma & Somatic Continuity Ledger

- * **Nicholas Young**:
 - *Inner Right Elbow / Forearm*: Cigarette burns and razor incisions from opening bathtub and porch self-harm episodes (Sections 1–3); scars reopened to initiate blood resonance with Mara (Sections 73–74).
 - *Center of Right Palm*: 3rd-degree burn from extinguishing Sacktap's cigarette to intimidate the syndicate punks (Section 46).
 - *Cranial / Ribcage Trauma*: Concussion and cracked ribs sustained in the highway gravel collapse and SUV rollover ravine crash (Sections 7, 16–17).
 - *Forearm / Torso Heat Burns*: Second-degree thermal damage sustained while crawling across the burning car hood during the forest battle (Section 66).
 - *Right Thigh Gunshot*: Flesh wound inflicted by rooftop sniper during the precinct assault (Section 78); deliberately re-opened in the flesh labyrinth to generate illuminating blood resonance (Section 80).
 - *Right Lower Torso Impalement*: Punctured by Morgue's bare arm in the precinct lobby (Section 79); knit together via Mara's bio-energetic cellular chant.
- * **Mara / Mary**:
 - *Thigh Laceration*: Scissor cut during the motel bathroom reality reconfiguration (Section 25).
 - *Womb / Abdominal Evisceration*: Slit open while suspended upside down in the forest tree by Morgue (Section 66); restored through Nicholas's solar pineal resurrection touch.
 - *Palm Incisions*: Ritual bloodletting to fuel shared combat resonance (Sections 74, 77).
- * **Asphalt**:
 - *Thigh Trauma*: Sustained when anchoring consciousness into the Beth node (Section 25).

3. Weapons, Logistics & Technical Inventory

- * **Firearms & Munitions**:
 - *Glock 22 (.40 S&W)* / *9mm Sidearms*: Confiscated and re-issued across armory sequences.

- *12-Gauge Tactical Shotguns*: Loaded with Dragon's Breath incendiary thermite rounds to incinerate regenerator tissue.
- *9mm Submachine Guns*: Manifested by Mara, loaded with hollow-points and incendiary magazines.
- *Thermite Incendiary Grenades*: Deployed during the rooftop breach and forest skirmishes.
- * **Esoteric & Pharmaceutical Compounds**:
- *TP#054 / TP#420 (Spice)*: Synthetic dissociative/ayahuasca powder that lowers the cognitive threshold for matter manipulation; highly addictive, causing severe neurochemical withdrawal and reality drift.
- *African Dream Root (Silene capensis) & Elecampane*: Ingested by Percept to maintain lucid operational focus without synthetic destabilization.
- *Ketamine / Oxycodone / Hydrocodone / Vodka*: Nicholas's baseline self-medication cocktail.
- * **Fourier Wave Stabilization Devices**:
- Matte-black, handheld transceivers that project localized harmonic wave-canceling fields; suppresses mental manifestation, stabilizes dream physics, and prevents portal generation. Battery-constrained (1-hour portable and 24-hour tactical housings).

4. Metaphysical Rules & Ontological Framework

1. **The Layered Universe**:

- *Waking Reality / Personal Unconscious*: A subjective simulation populated by automated archetypal drones (e.g., civilian Beth, restaurant acquaintances).
- *Shared Dreamspaces*: Multi-operator intersections (the warehouse HQ, safehouses, motel rooms) where physics is reinforced through collective agreement or Fourier mathematics.
- *The Collective Bedrock*: Deep archetypal stratum where unmoderated egos disintegrate into formless primordial energy (*Heraclitean fire*).
- *Hostile Subconscious Constructs*: Infiltrated dream mazes (such as Morgue's fleshy labyrinth) that externalize the host's childhood trauma and pathology.

2. **Manifestation & Somatic Tax**:

- Conscious volition can reconfigure matter, hotwire vehicles, summon equipment, or heal biological tissue; however, without refined meditative training, it extracts a massive metabolic and cognitive toll.

3. **The Creeping Glass Anomaly**:

- An entropy wave that liquifies glass and organic matter, calcifying targets into brittle, translucent crystalline statues that shatter into dust.

4. **Blood Resonance & Ocular Dual-Polarity**:

- Ingestion of awakened dream blood triggers simultaneous activation of solar-white (creative/angelic) and violet-dark (destructive/void) ocular channels, unlocking telepathy, ghost-projection, and reality-shattering output.

5. **Hegelian "Bad Infinity" (*Schlechte Unendlichkeit*)**:

- The recursive loop of futile repetition (the high-school running track, endless scullery dishwashing shifts, recurring addiction cycles) that lacks qualitative evolution until shattered by

conscious individuation.