

TELL ME YOUR NAME

Sasha Pinpin



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This book is dedicated to all those who have dared to live honestly
—who have tried, failed, burned, cried, shattered, even reached for the end, only to
find themselves breathing again held gently by a universe that refused to let them
slip away.

To those who, after endless sorrow, still rise each day, carrying fragments of joy like
small lanterns in the dark, choosing to taste all the flavours of life, see all its colours,
feel every emotion, and accept everything life has to offer—without fear, without
hiding.

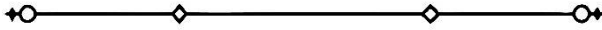
To the ones who don't give up, even when every part of them wants to.

To those who still strive to make the most of life, no matter what.

A special mention to Pamubi—the loveliest and the stupidest soul I have known.

—**Sasha Pinpin**

Contents



Chapter 1	
Dead but Breathing	1
Chapter 2	
Stripped to the Bones	13
Chapter 3	
Nowhere to Hide	39
Chapter 4	
Sharp and Tender	53
Chapter 5	
Guiding through Darkness	85
Chapter 6	
Kamakura Home	119
Chapter 7	
Resurrection	149
Chapter 8	
Memories	173
Tell me your Name	214

Chapter 1

Dead but Breathing



The belt still dangled from the rusted pipe above; leather frayed like split skin. Its buckle twisted, a sad remnant of a noose that betrayed him. Ren lies curled on the cracked bathroom tiles, half-naked and shaking. His throat burns from where the belt bit into it. The shower pipe broke before he did, and life—that cruel, unwanted, uninvited guest—returned without asking.

His breath comes in ragged whistles, like something begging desperately for death's mercy, but outrightly denied. A thin stream of drool, dark with blood and bile, snakes from his lip to the tiles. His eyes swim, red, unfocused, lost in the haze of his own wreckage. A man drowning in the fog of his own soul.

He coughs, spits, tastes his blood, the sour rot of humiliation. Each gasp is a reminder that the body won't quit, even when everything else has. His fingers twitch near his knees, which no longer feel like his. His arms and legs won't move; they feel like sacks of wet sand. His muscles are deaf to his commands, and his bones have disowned him. His pants are bunched around his thighs, a ridiculous sight, like a child interrupted while dressing for a play he never wanted to be in.

In the next room, the AI hums. A low, constant vibration of its processing unit. He built it with his own hands, a machine designed to understand, to observe. A silent and constant analyst of his moods, with access to all his gadgets, his vitals, his data. It is the perfect, cold spectacle of his own analytical mind, a non-sentient witness to his decline.

He somehow manages to get up and stumbles into the living room. He feels like a ghost returning to a place that no longer remembers him. The room's energy mocks him like a bitter lover who has moved on. The bathroom door closes softly, sealing him in a silence as thick as his own despair. He doesn't bother with the lights. The layout is carved into his very bones, a brutal trail of every drunk stupor, every fall, every night spent crawling from one dark corner to the next. He lives in this darkness; his body knows every turn and obstacle by heart.

The smell hits him first. The rotting mix of stale cigarette smoke and a sickly sweetness of old takeout food. In the kitchen, the sink is a stagnant grave of gray water and drowned noodles. The countertop is scattered with expired pills, torn foil, and shattered glass. On a cracked plate, something once edible has bloomed into moss. He yanks open the fridge. Inside, there's a full bottle of sake, sweating in the dark. He finishes the bottle in one go. The liquor burns his throat, but he doesn't wince.

In the corner, beneath a veil of dust, sits a sculpture he once paid too much for. Bent metal twisted into a gesture no one ever understood. Not even the artist. He moves through the room, his hand clutching a curtain stained with blood from an earlier failed attempt. He accidentally kicks an ashtray, scattering the ash and cigarette butts on the carpet.

His phone is buried under unopened letters, hospital bills, and court papers. Some have his name written in red. A fallen speaker, silent since spring, reminds him of a time he could still pretend to live.

In the hallway mirror, his reflection stares back, neck ringed with bruises, purple and yellow – a souvenir of a botched execution, branding him as one of life's ugly leftovers. He looked at himself, not in shock or sorrow, but with the detached curiosity of a postmortem examiner inspecting a dead body. His face seemed to melt away; the man he once was had died, leaving only a shell that was still breathing.

He had left no note, no explanation, just the silent intention to simply cease to be. A permanent subtraction from the world's ledger. A final, desperate act to put an end to the endless ache. A quiet, furious refusal to bear the weight of his own diseased existence. He had become his own sickness, and the only cure was to cut out the source entirely.

Ren picks up the pack of cigarettes. He takes one out and fumbles, the lighter slick slipping from his fingers like every hope he's ever clutched. The butane clicks, a

hollow, sputtering protest, a spark flaring then dying into nothing. He tries again and again, and nothing. He stares at the unlit cigarette dangling from his lips, as if it too has turned its back on him, another traitor in the long parade of betrayals.

On the fridge, a child's face catches his eye, scrawled in red, thick and waxy—crayon, lipstick, or blood, he couldn't say. It's a round head with a gaping mouth, screaming or singing, its eyes mere dots, its hair jagged loops of panic. The eyes move, just a little, a twitch that says they're staring back, expecting an answer, but he doesn't even know what the question is. He walks away, but the picture doesn't let go, creeping weight on the back of his neck, still awaiting the answer.

He laughs, not with humor, not with madness, but with the hollow rattle of a body drained of grief, of rage, of answers, of sense, of hope. The sound tumbling out like dust from a broken urn, dry and fleeting. The laugh twists into a violent cough, doubling him over. He clutched his chest, as if his own laughter had turned traitor and punched him from the inside.

Something rises within Ren, a voice from the inside of his skull, seeping through the marrow of his bones. The voice speaks without permission, rising from some dark well inside him.

"Some sufferings never end; they seep into your bones until you are nothing else."

Ren closes his eyes, a bruise deepening in his soul. Like a stone, welcomed by dark waters, sinking into a pit less bottom, knowing ascent is no longer part of its fate. He stands there, shivering, pants slumped at his ankles now. He watches a single drop of sweat slide down from his forehead to the floor, landing without consequence. A testament of his own inconsequential existence.

Next to his foot, a lighter—cheap, green, disposable—catches his eye. He flicks it once, and the flame leaps alive, as if the universe, bored with its own cruelty, grants him this small mercy. The cigarette ignites, the first inhale sharp, cleansing in the way only poison can.

Ren sinks into the chair on the balcony. The chair groans, like old bones straining beneath the heaviness of his broken body. A faint crack runs through it, a whisper of collapse. For a moment, he hopes the chair will give way, hurling him to the floor. The fall, the shatter—he wants it—not for spectacle, but because he sees poetry in it. A frame too weak to hold a man who cannot hold himself.

He does not know what he begs from this moment—

Not mercy, for that ship has sailed into black

Not clarity, for he wouldn't trust it.

Death has called in sick, that much is clear,

But what then? Redemption? From who? A do-over? For what?

An apology, perhaps, from the universe for its cruel jest. The breath keeps returning, relentless as the tide. Each time, dragging him back to the same cursed shore of his miserable life.

A soft sound of blowing wind breaks the silence. A torn newspaper page drifts in, its edges flaring and folding as it twists in the cold draft. It circles in a slow spiral and slaps feebly against the railing's edge, then collapses on his lap. He reaches out, holds the damp page in his hands. The ink has bled into a wash of gray and shadow, words drowned, headlines erased, leaving only shapes—a poor man's Rorschach painting.

Still, he stares, because that is what the desperate do—search for meaning where there is none.

He turns the page sideways, eyes following a blotch that refuses to settle. Maybe it's a fat child with arms wide, or a bull with horns lowered, or a lion rising out of fire, or a wave. He cannot name it, yet something inside him tenses—uncertain yet heavy.

Something shifts beneath his ribs—not sadness, not grief, but something older. It comes like a dream that remembers him too well. It feels like a memory from the wrong direction, as if the moment has not yet taken place, yet already owns him, a wound waiting to be born.

He feels restless, his breath catches on nothing, and then he realizes he is crying—not in sobs, but a slow release, salt tracing his cheeks, silent as an internal confession. He wipes his face, unaware of when it began. A sudden gust seizes the paper, lifting it from his hand and floats inside the living room. It keeps spinning before drifting into the whirring fan. The blades tear through it without pause, shredding it midair, as if the room itself had decided to erase it, the shapes are gone, their meaning shredded.

A cold wind cuts through his thin shirt. He gets up; his legs ache, heavy with the weight of standing. The chair leaves an imprint of a red web across his thigh, a brand pressed by the burden of his own presence.

A soft digital chime hums, low, steady, not an alarm but the AI resetting for night mode. The floor crunches beneath his feet—bits of glass, dirty old clothes, scattered injections, spice sachets from spilled ramen packets. A small wreckage underfoot, a world with no order, no center, just fragments echoing the disarray inside him.

He glances at the sink, and he remembers he swore to clean a month ago, but his memory has stopped being a tool. Now it's just a room where all the clocks are broken.

He sinks into the couch and folds in sideways, knees to chest, curling into himself like something small and hunted. The couch reeks of sweat, rot, and the faint echo of a man he used to be. It's a cruel archive of his decay, wrapping him in the weight of his own lost years.

One instant, he is tangled in the sour stench of the couch, and the next he is elsewhere—unsure when sleep claimed him, only that it feels less like rest and more like being shoved into a cellar with no door. The dreams come in fragments.

An old man sits hunched beneath an apple tree. His beard is yellowed, his clothes are rags, his mouth gaping without sound. The branches above him should carry fruit, but instead hang heavy with bruised apples, black rot spreading across their skins. The silence is unbearable, as if the world itself has muted in pity.

Then the dream shifts.

A butcher's table gleams cold under a harsh light. Meat piled in heaps: tendons, fat, bones, scraps of slaughter. Hidden among them is something else—a child. Its limbs are twisted, bent at impossible angles, fused to the waste as if discarded at birth. For a moment, its face twitches, or maybe his mind invents it.

He surfaces out of the dream slowly, eyelids parting just enough to know he is awake, but his face and body refuse expression—no reaction, no gasp, nothing. He lies absolutely still. Nothing shocks him anymore.

Across the room, behind a leaning tower of takeout containers, a painting slouches against the wall. Its frame is warped from humidity, corners swollen and flaking, quietly decaying for years.

He bought it long ago from a man who lived under the expressway. He worked with his fingers—no brushes—smearing lines and shapes with his hands or the edge of a nail, always a cigarette balanced on his lower lip. Ren remembered the smell more

than the man's face: tobacco and turpentine. He had paid in cash. Too much, or too little—he couldn't remember.

He gets up and nudges the empty boxes aside with his foot.

The painting shows a man with a rod, his stance tense, set against another man in armour. A woman lingers just behind, her hands gathered at her chest, her fear quiet, almost hidden. The scene feels suspended—no garden, no sky, nothing beyond this single held breath.

Ren crouches before it, knees stiff as rusted hinges, his body protesting its own stubborn existence. He picks it up; his fingers graze the canvas. The paint is brittle, a chip breaking off into his palm to reveal a hidden layer beneath, an eye. It was faint and uneven; it simply watched, its silent stare piercing his soul. He stays there, frozen, a presence he does not recall, scratching at the edges of his broken mind. He tells himself it is just a painting, just layers of someone else's madness.

He drops the painting and moves towards the bedroom. His foot bumps a cold bowl on the floor, and it tips, shattering against the tiles, rice scattering like white insects skittering into the dark.

He sits at the edge of the bed, a blister pack of pills in one hand and a vodka bottle in the other. The room tilts slightly, though nothing has moved. He downs three pills with Vodka. Waits. Downs three more. He does not care. The alcohol burns for a second, sharp and insistent, then slides into the pit inside him where nothing echoes. In the place where depression grows like a dark root, twisting into new forms of self-destruction.

He reaches for his laptop. His fingers shake slightly as he types in an old website—an escort site he used to visit when he still believed pleasure could drown thought.

He scrolls through girls—soft-lit, pout-mouthed, eyes dead like showroom mannequins. Every curve feels airbrushed. Every smile feels purchased. They promise delight, devotion, and discretion, but none of it cuts deep enough.

He tries porn instead. His eyes drift across the screen. There is no spark. No flutter of blood, no thrill, no rush. Only boredom. He clicks categories he does not even enjoy. Fetish, fantasy, JOI—none of them excites him. He feels the emptiness stretching inside him, like a corridor that never ends. He stares at the screen, nauseated by how far away he is from himself.

Exhaustion of existence wraps around him like chains. He is so alone, in the dark, tired, frustrated, and helpless that he wants someone to tear him apart, bite by bite. He imagines teeth sinking into his flesh, hands gripping him, dragging him from the fragile shell he has built around himself. He wants someone to violently skin him off his suffering without permission, without concern for what remains afterward. It would not be gentle. It would not be safe. He imagines it—screams of whatever is suffering inside him, clawing its way out of his throat, the raw, unbearable heat consuming every inch of it. An exorcism, the kind that strips away every diseased part of him. He wants those parts destroyed. Shattered. Pulverized under someone else's hands, until they are smashed to pieces beyond recognition.

He leans back for a moment, the pills and vodka settling into his veins, chest rising and falling with shallow, uneven breaths. His eyes remain fixed on the blank glow of the laptop, the light harsh and accusing in the dim room. The emptiness inside him hums, a low, relentless drum he cannot escape. Every instinct is drawing him forward toward something darker, something he has never thought of before. Not the polished, familiar faces he has scrolled past so many times. Not the airbrushed perfection that never reaches the hollow place inside. He wants edges, rough corners, the lives lived on the fringe—the people existing somewhere dangerous, forbidden, and real.

So, he clicks deeper. Beyond the main listings, beyond the promises of pretense and pictures with soulless eyes, toward the fringe section: Trans escorts in Tokyo.

At first, it feels like a dare. He hesitates, then scrolls. The faces sharpen, too vivid, their eyes untamed—heavy with a survival only the damned could recognize. Something in those profiles resonates with the chaos inside him. It is a hunger to be undone by something he does not understand, to be ripped apart, humiliated, devoured. Anything to make him forget the man he is, to leave his skin buzzing with shame or shock or truth or death, either will do.

Then he finds her. *Fujiko* *Lavender*.

Her profile is all shadow, no makeup, no angles—just a trace of something that feels alive even in stillness. A fleeting impression, like a dream caught mid-breath, a silhouette stitched from night and secrets. Something about her sharpens the buzz in his veins. Something about her settles inside him, soft yet immovable. He does not know why he lingers on the image, but he cannot look away. Her presence carves clean through the fog of his despair—precise and undeniable.

Beneath her profile photo, a single line, brief and precise,

"Fake people need not bother, and I don't refund."

Something wakes in him—not desire, not fear, he doesn't understand it.

His thumbs hover over the keyboard. He begins typing:

"Ren here, tonight 12:30. My place. The address is 2-14-7, Minato-ku."

He sees it flash on the screen for some time; it reads like an open cut, too needy—deletes it, embarrassed by its plain openness.

He tries again. His vision foggy, the pills weaving a haze over everything, like condensation on a window. He types and sends it, but he is not sure what he typed this time.

Fujiko's reply comes fast, not a yes, not a refusal.

"When it comes to sex, I'm expensive, but you said you want to disappear, that is three times the price."

His throat tightens. Did he really type about disappearing, or was he just thinking it?

"I'm ok with that," he types, his heart beating hard inside.

A pause, then her words flash across the screen, sharp and measured, like a whisper in a crowded room:

"I don't do outcalls. If you want to meet me, you come to me. My door is red. 12:30. 5-20-8 Azabu-Juban, Walking Street. Do not be late."

He leans back against the headboard, staring at the ceiling. Shadows crawl across it in slow, lazy arcs. The walls seem closer now, the air heavier. His hands betray him with tremors. He lifts the vodka again, letting the sharp scent fill his nose. It is the only fire he can bear. The liquid slides down, hot and empty, leaving nothing but a fleeting warmth that vanishes before he can remember it.

He shakes, not from the pills or vodka, but from anxiety climbing up his spine, sharp and consuming. Heart hammering. Forehead sweating. Part of him wants to close the laptop and forget it. Another part—the part that has been trying to disappear from everything—feels drawn, pulled by something he doesn't understand.

He swallows hard, mind racing. Every thought warns him to stop, every instinct in his body whispers, *Go*.

He exhales shakily— his breath leaves him unsettled, like a fault line giving way. Nothing is resolved. Nothing is clear. Yet somehow, he already knows he will go.

Desperate, he scans the room for a shirt. He finds one on the bedroom chair. He lunges for it and puts it on.

He slips on the first pair of shoes; on the heel, the words: Just do it.

He tries to be hopeful, as if a night with a trans escort might shield him from the howl beneath his skin. That's what the hopeful do—they fool themselves, reaching for warmth that won't last, mistaking borrowed touch for salvation. He knows it won't save him, but despair has a way of dressing itself in disguises, and he's too tired not to believe.

Ren stumbles to the sink, his feet dragging through the debris of his own ruin, and splashes cold water on his face after days. The cold water is a shock like a slap from a world that refuses to let him go.

The mirror above, cracked across seven rough lines, splits his reflection, each one a quiet testament to the man he has become;

One smirks with cruel amusement.

One stares wide-eyed, paralyzed by fear.

One is convulsing uncontrollably, seconds after failing suicide.

One looks hollow, as if one more night will erase him completely.

One glares with pure hatred; lips twisted in a silent curse.

One face isn't his at all—someone unfamiliar, watching with dead eyes.

And the last...

The last one locks eyes with him, leans forward—it spits right at him, a venomous rebuke from his own soul

He stumbles back in shock. He frantically wipes his face with his shirt, not knowing whether he is wiping water or spit from his face.

The pills, vodka, and anxiety mix, dissolving the edges of reality, pulling him into hallucinations, nudging him closer to the brink of insanity.

He pulls on a jacket, saying, “Are we dead...Yes!!”

Inside the pocket, he finds two rusted razors, a half-smoked joint stiff with lint, and a faded note saying,

“Kill yourself please.”

A desperate, ragged plea, scrawled by him to himself on some long-ago night fueled by drugs, cigarette and alcohol.

In the darkened TV screen, he catches himself—less reflection, more apparition. A blur, where a man should be, thinning at the edges as though the body has grown tired of sheltering what little remains inside it.

He takes the 4 last pills and puts them in his jacket pocket for later.

He steps into the corridor without locking the door. Money, trinkets, gadgets, keys—they sit untouched, they mean nothing to him now. Meaningless against the depression, the pain, the suffering.

Beyond his penthouse door, the corridor feels like a world apart, almost unreal in its beauty. Red carpets, stamped with crown motifs, stretch beneath him, mingling with the warm scent of summer roses. Soft light glints off platinum lamps and the gilded frames of oil paintings on the walls. Each detail a cruel mockery of the filth and squalor of his penthouse. Just outside his door, luxury hums in every corner.

He steps into the elevator. A soft jazz loop drips through the speakers. He hums along, off-key, uncaring, the sound absurd and hollow, like a man singing at his own funeral. In the chrome panel, his reflection flickers—older, heavier, sorrow etched into every line on his face. He closes his eyes, refusing to meet his own reflection.

Ground floor.

The elevator doors open and he drifts into the lobby, shoes scuffing against the marble as though each step were borrowed. The concierge, stiff in his uniform, lifts a hand to his cap in a dutiful gesture, a hollow courtesy. Paul doesn't acknowledge him; just walks through the lobby and out of the building.

The cold night air cuts across his eyes, sharp and relentless, making him blink against the sting. His phone vibrates in his pocket, her location blinks on his screen, he looks

at it with nervousness and anticipation. He taps “Start” and the arrow begins to inch forward.

The Tokyo streets never sleep. The city looms, glittering with countless lights, casting long, empty shadows. Shops stayed open late, bars murmured with voices, and the hum of traffic never faded. People surge past him in endless waves, laughing, glowing, entire and self-assured, and he watches them as though they belong to a world that has long ceased to include him.

A couple leans into each other by the taxi stand, words spoken low, laughter rising, hands entwined, lips brushing as if promising forever in a world where nothing lasts. Ren turns away slowly as if witnessing their connection was pouring salt into his suffering, like a candle forced to watch another flame be sheltered from the wind.

Under a broken streetlamp, a drunk man plays a shamisen. Three strings. One song. Thin, cracked, unbearably slow—each note dragging itself into the air like it doesn't want to exist. It sounds like something breaking apart from the inside, too tired to scream. Ren drops a coin into the open case. A ruin paying tribute to another, both too far gone to pretend anything matters.

He feels empty, spent, a body numbed by the pills crawling through his system, and drifts toward the metro to take the last train to Shinjuku. The carriage feels suffocating, coffin-like, faces glowing from beneath the screens in their hands, expressionless, detached, everyone avoiding everyone else, no one willing to be seen.

A cold tension coils through him, sharp and restless, as panic and confusion surge together. He has no idea what to think. He grips the pole hard with a hand and thinks: he has never met a trans woman. Never spoken to one. It is the not-knowing. The quiet vertigo of entering something completely outside his story, that is completely foreign and uncharted. The idea is like stepping off a cliff in total darkness, no footing, no rope, no safety harness. He feels the cliff beneath his feet—dark, endless and terrifying. Yet the terror hums with a strange magnetic promise, pushing him forward.

At the station exit, the city sheds its skin. Billboards flicker overhead like uncaring gods. A love hotel glows soft pink behind the shadow of a shrine—desire and devotion pressed wall to wall. Neon crosses burn over Host Club doors, red lanterns bleeding across rain-slick streets. The air smells of soy sauce and cheap perfume. Every building looks like it once mattered but gave up long ago, a corpse still dressed in its best suit. The whole district feels dead, though no one has told it yet. Lights flicker. Music seeps from doorways. Host boys lean against the walls expressionless

like mannequins with cigarettes. Everything is dead, only pretending to be alive, a hollow theater of existence.

He keeps the phone in his hand, her location quite close now.

Under a streetlamp, a hostess with silver eyeliner watches him. "You lost something? We can both try and find it in my bed?" Ren doesn't answer. He looks through the hostess like she's not there. Doesn't even blink.

He keeps walking until the phone buzzes: arrived. He lifts his head, scans the street—there it is. The red door. He approaches and stops. The doorway glares back at him, daring him to step into the dark beyond the edges of his own story.

He pushes it open. The air inside is warm and wrong. A lone red bulb burns above the rusted elevator gate, a camera dangling beside it like an unblinking eye. No sound, no sign, only a pause so profound it feels as if his own shadow might walk off without him, knowing that nothing will remain the same after this.

He finds the intercom button on the wall. He presses it. Ten seconds of silence stretch thin, then the buzzer cracks alive and the elevator gate shudders open.

He enters the elevator. It moves upward, but he feels like he is sinking—like he is being pulled upward by a dream that doesn't know where it's going. He feels like a passenger on a journey that has no map, and he is the only one on board. He takes out the four pills from his jacket pocket and swallows them without water. He starts counting each floor like rosary beads, a desperate, silent prayer to stay in the present. He holds on, just enough to survive the next minute, then the next minute and the next...

Chapter 2

Stripped to the Bones



The elevator opens into candlelight. There is no lobby. Just a narrow white hallway that seems to fade at the edges. The walls covered in velvet, not the shiny kind you'd see in hotels, but flat and soft, the kind that swallows up sound. So soft, touching it felt almost wrong.

The hallway smells faintly of lavender. Not the artificial kind. Not bottled. The real thing—wild, crushed, steeped in warm water.

Ren steps out of the elevator. There is a large mirror on the left with big candles in front of it. He looks at his reflection. The longer he looks, the less he knows what to make of it.

For a moment he does nothing. He just listens to the silence, as if the hallway might speak before he does.

A set of candle stands flicker at the end of the hallway. It's not much, but it's the only clue. He starts walking—Slowly. Each step measured, the floor is soft, it's carpeted. Even his shoes feel out of place.

The further he walks, the more he feels it—that strange sensation of being observed. The velvet walls glimmer faintly as if unseen eyes are measuring him with every step, checking if he belongs—He doesn't.

There's a white silk curtain ahead. Ren stops just before the curtain. He doesn't call out. He doesn't clear his throat. He only stands there for a while, aware of the throbbing beat of his heart and the sweat on his palms.

The space beyond the curtain feels charged, like a secret poised on the edge of being revealed. He takes a step forward. Crossing the doorway doesn't feel like entering—It feels like being claimed. He feels like he is being pulled in and he wonders, if he'll ever be let out again.

The room is bare, beautiful and precise. Tall windows stretch across the walls, their thin white curtains catching the neon glow of the city. The light drifts in, delicately through the curtains. The egg shell painted walls catch the light gently, as if it belonged there, almost like a still, heavenly presence.

A large bed rests in the corner, made so neatly the sheets don't look like they've ever been touched. White pillows of every shape and size are set out in perfect order.

The furniture is pale and soft. A reading chair stands near the wall with a single folded blanket over its arm. At the center of the room, on a slightly raised wooden platform, there's a low table for tea. Around it are cushions, each one set evenly apart. Every corner of the room feels deliberate, as if someone shaped it with quiet care. Nothing is out of place. Everything seems to belong.

The paintings on the wall are all Sesshū Tōyō—not copies. Real ones. If they're forgeries, they're holy forgeries. Ink landscapes: mist, riverbanks, distant birds. The strokes are sparse, but loaded. Their presence enlarges the room's silence without making it feel empty.

The floor is made of cool Wabi-Sabi wood, light honey-colored, glowing softly under his feet. Ren hesitates, not sure where to step. He feels like touching anything would leave a mark he shouldn't leave, like his being here is already a smudge.

No mirrors. No clocks. No television. No distractions.

He has been in beautiful rooms, luxurious rooms, all kinds of rooms but never to one like this, where there is a quality of silence that's not just the absence of sound, but the presence of peace.

He doesn't know if he should sit, or speak, or turn back and go away. Part of him feels like a child who's wandered into the prayer room of someone else's gods.

His eyes return to the tea table. On it sits a cast iron kettle, resting on a trivet, steam already rising from its spout. Two cups wait side by side, white with a faint blue shade at their edges, turned to face one another.

Ren swallows. His mouth is dry. His hands hang at his sides, open and uncertain.

A sound. Soft, almost nothing. The faint rub of fabric against fabric. A curtain along the side of the room stirs, not pulled back, not fully opened—just shifting, as if someone were breathing behind it.

He knows she's there. Even without seeing, he can feel her.

Then—there she is—Fujiko.

She slips through the curtain like a secret the world had been hiding. She doesn't walk so much as appear—one bare step, then another, the floor makes no sound under her. Her skin glows with a warmth that seems to have a life of its own, inviting fingertips to trace every inch. Fresh from the wash, her heavy, damp hair drapes across her shoulders, each strand clinging like a lover unwilling to let go.

The robe she wears is the color of an unripe plum, hard to place, neither warm nor cold. It's tied at the waist with no effort, as if she hadn't thought much about it. The neckline dips lower than modesty would allow, unveiling the valley of her cleavage that pulls his gaze against his will, and he can't stop noticing the soft skin revealed there.

She wears nothing else—no shoes, no makeup, no jewelry. Just herself.

That's because her body doesn't need accessories to make it speak. It already *speaks*—In curves and lines. In the rise of her heavy chest beneath the robe. In the tension of her thighs beneath the silk. In the swell of her hips as she takes one step after another, candlelight catching every slow swing of her narrow waist like it's worshipping her.

She doesn't pose. She doesn't need to. She exists like a poem that rhymes without trying.

Everything about her whispers: *Look—At—Me*, and he does.

She stops a few feet in front of him, her back towards him, tilting her head slightly, she speaks—

"You know you're different from the others" she says.

Her voice is low; it doesn't fill the room—it *soaks* it.

Ren stands there, hollowed out. Thoughtless, motionless, entirely wrecked by her entrance.

Ren mumbles,

“I... I don’t...” then suddenly blurts out, “I don’t know why I came.”

She answers, “Yes, you do.”

She kneels at the table, moving things around with an ease that feels almost casually precise. The robe pulls tighter over her hips, bunching just enough to show the full, elegant outline of her bottom. The curve is obscene in how perfectly it fits the rest of her—high, round, utterly sculpted—and Ren, despite every ounce of effort, can’t stop staring.

She knows he is staring. Of course she knows.

But there’s something else, too—something more dangerous.

She knows.

She knows what she looks like, she knows the effect she has on him, she knows what he sees and she *lets* him see it.

“Are you going to stand all night?” she asks, not looking at him.

She asks him like she’s already sure he’ll say yes to whatever she wants. Like she doesn’t have to try.

He sits across from her, legs crossed awkwardly on the floor cushion, but she doesn’t sit yet. Not immediately. Instead, she moves slowly, lowering herself in parts. One-foot folds beneath her, her body sinking with the kind of grace that dancers train years to fake. The robe slides as she moves. One side opens just a little too far, showing the pale skin of her inner thigh.

Ren’s eyes follow her thighs as if he’s stepping off a cliff. She pours the tea without asking. Her fingers are long and pale, delicate in a way that could bless or break. She sets his cup in front of him, still without looking.

Only then does she raise her eyes to his, and the moment crushes him. Her eyes aren’t just dark—they’re deep. The kind that read a person in totality with just a glance, the kind which are impossible to lie to. She looks at him like she already knows everything about him.

Ren doesn’t know how to sit anymore. Doesn’t know how to look away. He feels like a boy again, facing his first crush —nervous, unsure if he should speak or simply drown in the moment. He is locked in her gaze that seemed to both pull him closer and tear him apart in the same breath.

She sips on tea. Her tongue licks—almost lazily—over the lower lip, catching the last drop. Watching her do that makes him feel unsteady, like he’s losing himself in her. It’s insane, he thinks, that something so small could fill him with such fierce desire.

He tells himself not to stare, but it’s useless. His eyes keep returning to her. Her lips with a natural pout feel so natural like they were made to be admired. The robe, shifting just slightly when she moves, hinting more than it shows. Her legs, folded beneath her with a kind of elegance that seems effortless. As if even her smallest movements belonged to some secret rhythm he couldn’t follow.

“You keep staring,” she says, her tone neither teasing nor accusing.

“Do you want to see more?”

“Do you want to touch me?”

“Do you want to disappear inside me, until you can’t find your way back?”

She lets the silence stretch, not rushing to fill it.

“... But that’s not all, is it?”

Her eyes move over him slowly. He feels less like being looked at and more like being read.

“You’re trying to *name* it,” she continues, lowering her voice, almost tender.

“You are trying to name what you feel but you can’t. You know it’s just not lust. You’ve been with beautiful women before—I can tell, but this... this is something else, you can’t put your finger on it.”

“Something deep inside you has surfaced—something you thought you’d buried, or maybe something you’ve been waiting for without even knowing it. You’ve never felt this before, have you? That sharp relentless pull towards me, as if something old and buried just sat up and opened its eyes.”

Her fingers brush a stray lock of hair from her cheek.

“You feel seen, don’t you?”

“Like being naked in front of another person for the first time in your life, but you’ve never felt this naked before.”

Ren can’t answer.

He's already exposed—facial expressions, breath, desire, self-esteem—all torn open in front of her.

She smiles, just barely, as if she's looking at something in him, he hasn't yet noticed himself.

It isn't sudden. It isn't loud. It's quiet, small, like a tide that has been rising slowly, and now he feels it inside him, undeniable and alive. He has seen beauty before—women who drew attention with effortless grace—but she is different. There is a weight here, a magnetic pull that makes his thoughts falter. A subtle warmth that makes his body coil in a way he has never felt.

He notices the way her gaze lingers just long enough to make him aware of himself in ways he cannot explain. It is not desire as he has known it, not the shallow craving that comes and goes. It is deeper, more intense, more intimate. He does not understand it fully. His mind races and stills at the same time; he wants nothing more than to be nearer, to catch the faintest trace of her scent. The sensation is profound and insistent, crawling under his skin and he cannot ignore it, no matter how he tries.

In that moment, Ren realizes—she's not trying to make him fall for her.

He already has.

Her shoulders lean ever so slightly forward, as though pulled by the weight of the truth she's about to give.

"You know why people come here?"

She lets the words hang a moment, watching the way he shifts, careful, measuring.

"Some come because they are restless. Some because they are tired of the endless commentary in their own head—the voice that critiques, compares, corrects, punishes. Others come because they want to feel something that doesn't require them to be who they are, something that isn't filtered through their own constant judgment."

"But all of them come to forget who they are for a little while, not entirely, not permanently—but just enough to rest from carrying burden of being themselves. Most don't even realize they're seeking it."

"But looking at you..."

Her eyes narrowing slightly and now her focus is on him.

“...it feels different. It feels like you want to disappear not only from who you are but from life and death at the same time. Not out of fear, not out of recklessness—but because there is a part of you, you have never understood, and you can’t bear its existence anymore.”

There is no cruelty in her tone. Only clarity, but the words hit him deep inside, subdued yet wounding, like glass breaking underwater.

“You don’t know it yet,” she says, “but something is shifting inside you.”

He stares at her.

“Do you always say things like that?” he asks.

“No. Only when I’m being watched this closely,” she replies.

She rises slowly, unhurried, her gaze never breaking from his. She comes and sits beside him. Her eyes roam over him with quiet precision. His battered face. The bruise blooming purple and yellow along his throat. She lifts her hand, her fingertips brush the tender skin at his neck, tracing it lightly, with a softness that feels at once like an inquiry into his pain and an assertion that he belongs to her.

“It’s not for lack of trying,” she says, her voice low.

She gives him a look. The kind of look that doesn’t just hold you—it holds the version of you you’re most afraid to see.

“Tell me something you haven’t told anyone,” She asks him.

There is no edge to her voice, only stillness—like she’s asking him to undress in a room where shame doesn’t exist.

He asks, “Why?”

“Because you look like you’re dying inside and you don’t know why. You want to talk about things that you keep running away from. It’s obvious in the way your gaze falls just short of meeting mine,” she answers

Her tone is straightforward, as if the truth costs her nothing.

The line slices through him. He feels like a nerve has been exposed, one he thought had long since gone numb.

He looks down at his tea. Its surface is a deep green, frothy and opaque. Something about it pulls him backward—to childhood, to the first time he was forced to swallow something bitter and told it was good for him.

Now, staring into the cup, he feels the same resistance, the same helpless awareness.

“I don’t know what to say,” he mumbles.

“That’s not the same as having nothing to say,” she replies.

Her tone is gentle, but the challenge is unmistakable. She isn’t here to flatter him. She isn’t interested in small talk that fills the air but says nothing. Every second he stalls, her silence presses in closer, wrapping around him, leaving him with nowhere to hide.

“I used to pray that I’d get hit by a bus, when I was thirteen” he utters in a shaky voice. “Not because I wanted to die but only because I didn’t want to keep going. I wanted something inside me to end without having to choose it.”

She doesn’t react. She simply nods once, as if she already knew.

He shifts on the cushion, tries to swallow the nerves burning in his throat. “I’m not good at this.”

She says nothing, pours the tea steadily, and keeps looking at him, each second her gaze pressing harder.

He laughs nervously, a long breath through the nose. “Okay, I’ll tell you something real. Fine.”

She waits.

“My mother used to ask me if I was happy,” he says slowly, “and I’d always say yes. Even when I wasn’t. Especially when I wasn’t.”

Fujiko asks, “Why especially?”

“It was easier to lie,” he adds, quieter now. “If I told her the truth, she’d blame herself. I didn’t want her to feel like a failure, so I kept smiling, even though my eyes probably said otherwise.”

She holds him in her gaze like a locked door—quiet, unhurried, knowing it will eventually disclose what lies within.

He shrugs, "Because she looked relieved when I said it. Like she needed me to be okay so she could keep going. So ... I became okay for her."

She holds him in her gaze a moment longer.

"That wasn't true," she says.

Ren blinks, "What?"

"What you just said—it's not what you came here to say. It's practiced. It's sad, yes, but safe. Polished. You've told it many times to yourself and others," she says.

His mouth goes dry.

"I want to know what is driving you mad," she says upfront.

A subtle tremor winds through his body. "What tells you I am going mad?"

Fujiko doesn't blink. "Your neck says you tried to kill yourself tonight, and looking at your wrist—it wasn't your first time, was it?"

Her words land without hesitation. Ren feels heat climb into his face. He wants to look away but can't.

She moves closer, her voice calm, steady. "I don't want your pretense. I don't want the version you've rehearsed for strangers."

Ren lowers his eyes. The tea in his cup shakes. So does his grip. So does he.

"I don't know what you want me to say," he mutters.

"I, as such, don't *want* you to say anything," she answers calmly. "I just want to hear what you came here to say—but don't."

The words hit him hard—like a mirror pushed too close to his face. He hates how vulnerable he feels right now.

Her earlier words return to him: *Tell me something you haven't told anyone.*

What he wants to say is,

I don't know what's happening to me, I am lost and confused and depressed and don't know why. Day in and Day out, all I know is suffering and pain that I don't understand. I don't know what I did to deserve it. Nothing makes me happy, nothing in this world makes any sense to me, I just want to die.

What he almost says is,

I want to die and I don't know why.

What comes out is—nothing. Only silence.

Her eyes never move. Deep, steady, unflinching—like they already know.

He exhales.

“I think...” The words start, then fray before they can take shape.

Fujiko sets her cup down with ritual precision—no clink, no tremor, no break in her stillness. Just silence. When she finally speaks, her voice is low, deliberate.

“I want only the truth. Tell me the truth or leave,” she says.

Ren lifts his gaze. Meets her eyes. His leg bounces, a restless piston under the table, until his other hand clamps it down.

“I want to die.” he blurts out.

No preface. No poetry. No dressing. Only the raw bone of the thing, naked between them.

She breathes in, slow and silent, as if she is making room for his words to exist. As if the room itself must widen to contain them. She gives him time to feel what he just admitted, leaving him inside the weight of the words he just uttered.

She doesn't touch him. Doesn't provide comfort or sympathy. Doesn't try to soften what should not be softened.

She just says, “Good, that's honest.”

He reaches for the tea, but his hands are shaking too hard to lift it cleanly. The surface ripples. He carefully places the cup down.

“I was twelve. We went for a picnic by the Arakawa River,” he says. “My mother asked me to watch my little brother—he was eight. I told him not to jump across the rocks, but I looked away for just a moment. He slipped. I didn't even hear the splash. I turned around, and he was gone.”

Fujiko doesn't react. She listens with the same poise, her hands resting lightly around her own cup, steam rising between them like a veil. She gives nothing back

yet—no interruption, no balm. Only space, as if his confession needs to finish bleeding before she dares approach it.

“My mom never screamed or scolded me. Not once. Just... stopped touching me.”

A long breath leaves him like a sigh that got lost halfway out. His fingers clench around nothing.

“I stopped praying that year. Figured God had already made up his mind about me.”

The last word cracks in his throat. He looks away, bites down hard on his knuckles, as if trying to stop the sound from escaping any further.

“I’ve never told anyone all this,” he says. “I don’t even know why I said it”

“Yes, you do,” she answers, like she is bored. “Because you want to.”

Her words land like a truth already alive inside him.

The candle flame flickered with her movement, and the shadows shifted in quiet pursuit.

The robe slipped from her shoulder. Ren’s eyes stayed on the falling silk, refusing to look away

“You’re staring again,” Fujiko said.

“I know,” Ren answered, his voice steady.

She left the robe where it was.

“And you won’t stop,” she purred, her lips curving as though she found his weakness admiring.

“I can’t,” he admitted, breath heavier now.

Her eyes flicked to him, steady “Good. That’s one less thing you’re lying about.”

He blinked, startled. “Lying?”

She turned toward the flame, letting the light gild her skin. “You want to be seen,” she said slowly, “but only in the ways you control. The rest of you? The raw, desperate, starving parts? You lock them away.”

“You tell me only these rehearsed stories. They’re sad, and not untrue, but they aren’t the reasons you’re falling apart, the reasons you keep trying to end your life.”

Ren straightened, shoulders squaring as if posture alone might shield him.

He leaned back a little, forcing a half-smile. “You think you know me?”

Fujiko didn’t look up. Her fingers kept folding the napkin, precise, deliberate.

“I don’t have to think. I—see—you.” she says. Her voice certain.

She glances at him for only a moment before looking back at the napkin, as if she could read his whole being in its folds.

“You’ve been telling me everything since you walked in. Not just with words—the bruise on your neck, the scars on your wrists, the jacket that says *Are We Dead... Yes*. You came in wearing your exhaustion like it was part of you. You are definitely high on something. Your hair hasn’t been washed in days, and you sweat of alcohol. That’s not laziness—it’s giving up. A collapse you’ve already accepted.”

“Then there’s the way you talk about yourself—part confession, part act. You say you want to die, but your eyes tell a different story.”

“You give yourself away in the smallest things. The way you sit—you fold yourself small, as if apologizing for taking up space. The way you hold your cup—it’s like it’s the only warmth you’ve touched in months, like you’re afraid it might slip and leave you cold again. Your knees quiver when you speak about anything real.

“Then there’s your résumé, Mr. CEO—the one polished for LinkedIn, where everything is perfect. The world applauds you as accomplished, enviable. Yet you sit here like a man who’s truly misplaced himself. That’s the most dangerous kind of lost: the kind that does everything right by other people’s standards and still comes up empty when it comes to his own soul.”

Her gaze meets his.

“When someone is seen—not for the words they manage to speak, but for the truths they can’t bear to say, the parts they’ve buried so deep they ache—then there isn’t much to find out. There isn’t much to know.

She puts the napkin down and leans back, watching him without pity and says, “So yes, I—see—you.”

He opens his mouth to speak—she lifts a finger. Not to shush him, but to pause him.

“You perform pain like it’s a monologue,” she says. “But real grief doesn’t want applause.”

He breathes in through his nose, sharp. Tries not to show the sting.

"I'm not performing, he says"

"You're trying to convince me," she interrupts, voice calm, almost merciful. "Because you haven't convinced yourself."

"You say you want to die. Sure, you do ... but what you really want deep inside," her voice steadies, unhurried, "is to understand why."

Her words hit him like a nail hammered into bone.

He shifts, searching inside for something to hold on to, but everything slips.

"You're dangerous," he says.

"No." Her voice steady. "I'm honest."

Her gaze softens, then with the certainty of a closed door.

Fujiko says, "You have a mind that lies and a heart that wants to be forgiven."

Ren frowns. "What does that mean?"

"You have a mind that lies," Fujiko says. "It means your thoughts, your intentions, your words—they bend the truth. First to yourself, then to everyone else. You twist reality so you don't have to face it. You tell yourself stories just to get through the day. You distract, you run, because the weight of the pain is too much to bear head-on. The lies keep you alive, but only halfway. They buy you time, they scatter the suffering into fragments so it doesn't crush you all at once."

She pauses for just a while, letting the weight of her gaze settle on him, waiting for him to catch up.

"...and a heart that wants to be forgiven. Even with all that deceit, there's still a part of you—small, stubborn—that aches for saving. That wants to live. That still believes joy is possible. You want to wash yourself clean of the lies. You want to be seen as good, loved, understood, but you keep doing the very things that make you believe you never will."

Her voice lowered, softer now.

"It's simple. Your mind betrays you, but your heart still begs. One part of you wants death but the other part of you is still dreaming of life."

She pauses, giving Ren space to take it in, to turn it over in his mind. Only when she sees he has grasped her meaning does she continue.

“You don’t do any of this on purpose,” she says. “It’s a reflex—your mind’s way of keeping you alive inside the pain. A survival mechanism. You bend the truth, you numb yourself, you run—because in the moment, it works. It buys you time.

“But now... now you’ve reached the end of that stretch. The rope’s pulled tight and all those short-term escapes you reached for—the pills, the alcohol, the drugs, meaningless sex, romanticizing your pain, and most importantly the lies you told yourself to make it through the day—they’ve turned on you.

Ren’s hands tighten on his knees. He wants to argue, to say she’s wrong. Yet he can’t because every word sits too close to the center of him.

“They’ve come back as guilt. As shame. Every choice you made to avoid the pain has started feeding it instead. You can feel it, can’t you? The weight isn’t just the original wound anymore—it’s every single way you tried not to feel it. And that, Ren...” She shakes her head. “That’s the trap. You thought you were surviving but you’ve been slowly burying yourself.”

Fujiko’s voice lowers. “It’s not weakness. It’s what anyone would do if they carried what you carry. But sooner or later, the mind’s tricks stop working. Then you’re left with the truth you’ve been running from, raw and merciless.

“That’s why you dream of dying. The lies can’t hold forever. You run because the pain feels endless. You lie because the truth feels unbearable. Still, in the middle of all that ruin, your heart whispers for another chance. You want to disappear, yet you also want to be saved.”

She says plainly, “This is classic in people like you who are self-destructive— You let your suffering define you. You have built your entire identity around it. The benefit is you don’t have to face the cause behind your suffering but the cost is it keeps you from healing.”

Her voice cuts through the storm in his head, calm, precise.

He exhales, sharp and shallow, the panic rising in him. It’s unbearable. What she said is heavier than any rope, pill, blade or suicide attempt. His heart pounds. The raw weight of truth coils inside him. The denial claws at him—he is not ready to face it. Not to her. Not to himself.

He closes his eyes. His fingers twitch on his lap.

"I didn't come here to fall apart in front of you," he whispers, measured and fragile, mask of control barely containing the ruin beneath.

"I agree," she says. "You didn't come here to fall apart. You came here because most of you has already fallen apart."

He opens his eyes again. They shine with something fragile and exposed. Something painfully honest.

"I think about dying every day," he says, his voice carrying the weight of years of silent suffering. "Every single day. For as long as I can remember. I don't know when it started. I don't know why. It's just ... always there. Like a shadow I can't shake, like breathing."

"I wake up and the first thought in my head is ending it. Not in some dramatic or romantic way—just ... stopping. Like that's all I was ever meant for. Walking this long, pointless road only to step off at the end."

"Nothing tastes right. Nothing feels right. Nothing means anything. Every time I think about ending it, it feels less like a choice and more like a home I've been walking toward my whole life."

"I don't know if I can be fixed," he mumbles.

He stares at the floor as if the truth is written there.

There's no performance in his words, no attempt to explain or justify.

"You're not broken," she says. "As I said earlier, you're buried."

"You are buried under your pain. You carry it like a pocket watch—always checking, always making sure it's still there."

Ren is taken aback. He says loudly, "Wow!?"

"Who told you, that you weren't allowed to break?" She asks softly, "You know that's the only way one grows. The glass has to be emptied before anything else can be poured in."

The words hit a nerve so deep—he freezes.

He says, "I don't know, I guess—I just thought—"

She cuts in, “No, don’t guess, don’t think—Look.”

He winces.

Her voice is low but it cuts straight through.

“You’ve spent years patching leaks without asking why the whole ship is sinking. You distract yourself with drinking, the women, the suicidal thoughts—treating them like rituals instead of ruptures.”

His eyes narrow slightly. Not in anger—but in defense. He’s never been spoken to like this.

Fujiko continues.

“You loop. You ruminate. You perform grief, but you don’t face it.

Ren’s jaw tightens. His throat moves, but whatever he tries to say collapses before it can take shape.

“You walk around acting like you’re cursed,” she continues. “A curse has a source. You haven’t even bothered to find yours.”

He turns his face slightly. It’s not shame. It’s nausea. Her words burn through the core of a wound he’s never let see light.

She softens—just enough to keep him from shutting down.

“I don’t mean to be cruel,” she says. “But I won’t lie to you.”

His hands shake against his knees.

“You have a strange relationship with your suffering,” she says. “You dress it up like it’s some sacred cross, when it’s just fear of what you will find if you dug deep.”

He blinks. Hard. One tear slips. He doesn’t wipe it.

Fujiko watches it fall, not with pity, but as a confirmation of what she is saying is agreed by him.

“You’ve convinced yourself there’s no hope, but you’ve never tried to face the real pain—only the stories you’ve made around it.”

That one lands. He looks up at her, fully, eyes red and raw. His mouth hangs slightly open; caught between words he can’t find. Anger, desperation, and denial churn in his chest, each feeling colliding with the last.

Fujiko's voice dropping lower. "The truth is, you're not lost. You're hiding—and somewhere inside, you know it."

She lets the silence hum between them like a live wire.

Ren speaks under his breath, rage barely contained, rubbing his temples.

"You think I haven't tried to figure it out. I've sat in every shrink's office. I've poured myself out to every person who once cared, and all they give you is some useless script—Think positive. Go out more. Find someone. Get married. As if another person could live happily with a soul that can't stand its own company. Fucking bullshit."

"The shrinks hand you pills until your pain learns them by heart. My pain adapts faster than you can imagine—it's terrifying. The doses get higher, stronger, uglier, until they stop working."

"One night, you find yourself standing in an alley at midnight, handing over cash for meth like it's just another item on your grocery list."

"It never leaves. It's not a phase. Not an episode. It's inside me now—woven through every nerve, every breath. I don't even know where I end and it begins."

Fujiko doesn't speak. She feels it—the locked door she's been waiting for slowly giving way.

"You want me to say something clever?" he says, voice tightening. "Some neat, poetic line about how I ended up like this? I can dress it up for you. I can probably quote a sonnet—turn my pain into something you can nod at, maybe even admire. But here's the truth: I've always felt like this, and it's not fading. It's growing—swallowing more of me every day."

"All I want—every morning, every night—is for it to end—is for me to end. Is that deep enough for you?"

"No," she says.

Her voice is low. Steady. Brutal in its precision.

"Listen to me—you're handling this all wrong. You keep thinking you can outwalk it, numb it, sidestep it. You went to a shrink, they fed you pills, and you called that 'trying.' That's not trying. That's sedation. That's keeping the lid on a boiling pot and pretending it's cooling down."

“People?” She smiles. “Don’t fool yourself. They don’t give a damn about you. They care about what you can do for them, what they can take from you. The minute you can’t deliver or when they’ve taken everything from you, they could take, they disappear.”

“When the meds stopped working, you didn’t face it—you went looking for stronger drugs on the street. I understand why. The pain can get so deep it feels like you’re breathing knives, like you’ll claw at anything just to make it stop for a while. Sure, you needed something to numb it, but that doesn’t change the truth—you were still hiding, not solving it.”

“Here’s the thing: the more you hide from it, the more it feeds. The more it feeds, the stronger it becomes. It’s been growing inside you for years, and now it’s bigger than you. You can’t control it. You can’t sedate it. That’s a fact.”

“Here’s your reality—there’s no outrunning it anymore. No numbing it. No clever detour. The only way out is through. You face it head-on.”

His teeth press together, not in anger, but to keep himself from shattering.

She presses on.

“You’ve been asking the wrong question your entire life. ‘What’s wrong with me?’ The real question is, ‘What am I trying so hard not to know? What am I running away from?’”

Ren’s hands start shaking.

The words tear something open. He feels it. A rawness in the chest, in the throat, like something old and feral trying to surface.

He feels like someone who just got caught mid-suicide—and was cold slapped instead of being hugged with warmth.

Fujiko holds his gaze, steady, unblinking.

“Stop making a vocation out of your pain,” she says. “Stop polishing it. Stop rehearsing it. Stop running from it. Sit with it. Let it burn. Go so deep into it that you find its origin, what it really is—tear it out. You will be surprised what you find. If you don’t, it will own you until you succeed in one of your suicide attempts.”

“You have to go for it, no matter how much it hurts. Believe me—it’s worth it.”

She meets his eyes with a calm, steady expression—like a confidant, not an adversary.

"I'm not here to fight you, Ren. I'm here to see if anything in you is brave enough to stop fighting yourself." She says.

Silence falls again. He doesn't move.

She then speaks softly, as if sharing a secret meant only for those who have suffered in silence too long.

"There was once a boy, born inside a locked house," she begins.

Ren doesn't interrupt. The room grows still.

"He was never given a key. They told him this house was the world, and that there was nothing beyond it. So he did what children do—he adapted. He painted the walls with reasons. Rearranged the furniture of memory. Built an altar out of fear and called it wisdom. The garbage kept piling up, but no one told him it needed to be thrown out—so he lived with it. Breathed it in and eventually got sick from it."

Her eyes fall to the floor, then rise back to him slowly.

"But he didn't know what sickness was. He told himself it was normal... even fascinating, maybe a secret strength. He dressed it up, romanticized it—burying himself in toys and habits, anything to avoid the horror of admitting he was unwell. Until the sickness spread so far, he could barely move."

Ren swallows, something twisting deep inside him.

"One day," she continues, "a crack appeared in one of the walls. Just a sliver of light. For a moment ... he felt joy. Real, bone-deep joy. Then came terror. The light meant there was an outside. The house was never the whole world. The idea that something existed beyond what he could control... beyond what he'd named, arranged, and justified... it undid him. The unknown terrified him."

Her voice drops to a breathy whisper as she leans closer.

"So, he sealed the crack, bolted the doors, drew the curtains tight. He told himself the light was a trick, a danger, something that would burn him. He stayed in the house—not because he loved it, but because it was familiar, because it never asked him to change. He convinced himself the sickness was strength. Better to cling to sickness than step into the light and be broken open by the truth."

The room holds the silence that follows, heavy and complete.

Ren's eyes lock onto hers. "What happened to him?"

Fujiko gives a faint, almost mournful shrug.

“No one really knows,” she says. “Some say he got so sick, he began to believe he was the sickness.”

Ren swallows, throat tight. “Was that about me?” he asks, voice barely steady.

Her eyes meet his without faltering. “Does it feel like it was?”

Ren sips his tea slowly, methodically, until the cup is empty. The pills he had taken are at their peak now and the edges of his composure start to fray.

He begins to talk quietly to himself, under his breath at first. Then the words tumble out in spirals, half-formed, looping back, overlapping. He starts twitching slight at first, like a ripple on a pond. Then a little more. Every twitch, every shake betrays the tension he’s been holding in, the strain of trying to keep his chaos inside.

Fujiko watches as he unravels in a way he has never let anyone see, as the tide of his own mind pulls him down into its depth, and she allows him to do it, to exist in it, without interference.

Ren’s shoulders slump, as if some internal weight is dragging him down. The motion is small, but it carries the pain of years he has carried alone.

He breathes through his nose. Shallow. Nervous.

Then, almost inaudibly.

“I want to die,” he says again. There is no flourish, no plea. The words are flat, direct, like a statement of fact.

Fujiko doesn’t move.

Ren’s voice starts low, almost a growl.

“I want to die,” he says. “I want everything to stop. I want it all... to shut the fuck up.”

His jaw tightens, muscles coiling. The calm he’s clung to for so long begins to crack.

“I hate this world. I hate it. Everything. Everyone. All of it.”

His hands grip the edge of the table, knuckles white. He exhales through clenched teeth.

“I was good. I was strong. I was genuinely good. I was... respectable, I was Mr. Accountability.” His voice rises. “I carried people. I showed up when no one else did. I held secrets like they were my own shame. I was the safe one. The strong one. The one who didn’t fall apart.”

A bitter, sharp laugh escapes him.

“They drained me. Sucked me dry. And when there was nothing left—when I had nothing left to give—they dropped me. Like garbage.”

He stands abruptly, pacing. The cup of matcha tips over, breaking on the floor. He doesn’t notice. His body shakes with the force of what he’s holding in.

“It’s not sadness,” he shouts now, voice louder, raw. “It’s not grief. It’s fire. A burn inside me that never goes out. When I go to sleep, it’s there. When I wake, it’s waiting.”

He rakes both hands through his hair, tugging at it like he can tear the fire out.

“I’m rotting under the surface. Lifeless in a body that keeps pretending it’s alive!”

His pacing grows frantic. His voice rises with every word.

“I used to believe in things—career, success, legacy. I believed in people. I believed in love. But now? All of it—every bit of it—is a scam!”

He spins toward her, eyes wide, pupils dark with fury.

“Money, houses, cars—what the fuck do they even mean? They’re just lies we tell ourselves so we don’t look at the void. People? Yes I agree with you on that, they’re just transactions. They love you until you ask for something they can’t give or some stupid purpose you don’t serve any longer. Then you’re inconvenient. Then you’re a burden. Then they’re gone!”

He slaps his face hard. His voice cracking, he is screaming now,

“I hate this world! I hate it! And I want to die!”

Fujiko could see he was close to breaking. She wanted to give him something gentle, to ease him from his misery for a moment. It was the only time she offered him her softness. After a long pause, her voice came—quiet and calm.

“Do you hate me, Ren?” She asks him.

What she was really asking was if he liked her.

He looks at her—really looks—and the room seems to sharpen, every detail of her presence impossible to ignore. There's a pull he can't name, something inside him reaching toward her, desperate to hold on, though he doesn't understand why. A quiet truth settles in him: he cannot hate her.

Her face remains calm, perfectly still. That stillness ignites a spark of anger in him.

"I want to," he shouts. "I want to hate you."

His voice quivers.

"But I can't."

"I could sit and look at you all day, and that would be enough. Oh my god that would be enough...but your words—they get under my skin, they break through me, and I don't know what to do with it."

He starts pacing toward the far wall, then back, restless, as if the room itself is shrinking.

"You don't care. I know that. I'm just another customer to you, right? Another broken man trying to talk his way out of a noose."

His eyes search hers, desperate for a reaction, but she gives nothing.

"I came to talk, not to fuck," he says loud and sharp

Pause.

"I've fucked, you wouldn't believe. I've fucked models, lawyers, politicians, prostitutes, top of the shelf escorts, drug addicts, homeless women on the streets, married women, strangers...I've known every kind of body, every kind of touch. At first, it felt like power, like I was collecting something. It's all just white noise now. Hollow, meaningless. A sick parade of empty warmth. Now I feel nothing when I fuck.

His voice snaps, rough and raw.

"I don't know how to feel anything other than this pain inside me."

She watches him with a kind of knowing that sees the marrow of his soul through an invisible glass.

He storms back to the table, throws open his wallet, and slams a card down onto the lacquered surface.

“Fine. No fucking. No talking. So how much?”

The edge in his voice sharpens, desperation bleeding through every syllable.

“How much for you to save me?” he screams.

Her face unreadable, giving nothing away.

“You think salvation comes with a receipt?” She says.

“Don’t mock me,” his voice quivering with rage.

“I’m not,” she says. “You are.”

He glares at her, chest rising and falling with uneven breaths.

“Give me the number,” he spits. “Whatever it is. I’ll pay three times.”

Her chin moves slightly upwards, voice calm, almost soft.

“I can’t save you, Ren.”

His lip quivers, anger and confusion warring across his face.

“Then what the fuck is all this?”

She leans back; hands folded loosely in her lap.

“This ... is you. Everything and every part of you that you you’ve been running from.”

She says as a matter of fact.

He wants to scream. To flip the table. To grab her shoulders and demand answers.

He doesn’t.

He stands frozen. Candle wax slowly drips and pools beneath the flame.

Fujiko watches him calmly. To her, he wasn’t just a man standing frozen across the table—he was someone cracking open in a way that might finally save him. When he came, everything in him spoke of wanting to disappear.

As the night unfolded, her words and her silence pressed against him, her gaze held him steady, and he began to reach for words.

At first, he clung to answers—stories that made his pain bearable, denials dressed as explanations, but they fell apart in his hands. Beneath them the real questions rose: What is it I’m trying so hard not to find? What am I running away from? Who am I?

It was a fragile war inside him—half of him desperate to stay hidden, half of him aching to know the truth. Yet in his weakness, Fujiko saw his strength, a man brave enough to ask the questions that mattered, even if those questions could undo him completely.

Ren stays silent, distraught. He picks up his wallet. Every part of him feels raw, worse than when he arrived. His arms and legs shake as he starts walking out of the room, like a man who has carried a weight too long.

Fujiko walks him to the elevator. Not a word passes between them.

The hallway feels endless, stretched and heavy, as if time itself has slowed to trap them in this uneasy moment. He trails a step behind her, small and hesitant, like a child being led from a temple after breaking something sacred.

They reach the elevator.

Ren turns to her, searching for something human, something soft, something unguarded, some reaction. He finds nothing. She is exactly who she is, strong, composed, capable of holding back emotions that would only get in the way, the part of her that has learned life's hard lessons and does what must be done without turning away. She knows exactly what she is doing—harsh, maybe even ugly—until one realizes that what seemed ugly was never cruelty. It was what was needed at that moment, the hard truth delivered without compromise.

Ren exhales through his nose and leans against the lift's brushed metal frame.

"Why do I feel like I just woke up from a dream I hate but can't forget?" he asks, voice thick with confusion.

Fujiko meets his gaze,

"You hate it because being truly seeing oneself is terrifying, especially through someone else's eyes. You can't forget it because, beneath the surface, there's something in me that draws you."

Ren stands there, crushed and raw—shame, fury, denial mixing on his flushed face. Without a word, he reaches into his jacket, pulls out a thick wad of notes, and lays them carefully on the mirror stand next to the candle. His hands tremble just enough for her to see.

"My God ... I want to die twice as fast and twice as bad now," he mutters.

Fujiko doesn't respond.

He lets out a bitter laugh, sharp and grating, like chewing glass.

“I hope you read the papers tomorrow. The suicides section... or maybe the homicide one. Why don’t I just pay someone to kill me? Yeah, that’s a plan. That should work.”

“Some man who couldn’t live with his own mind. Remember this face, will you?” he says loudly.

The elevator pings open.

He steps in slowly, each movement heavy, like he’s crossing a border he doesn’t want to cross. He presses the ground-floor button. For a moment, he imagines another button might appear—one that could carry him back to the beginning, before he ever sent the message to meet her, or else return him straight to her room. The thought unsettles him. Some part of him resists leaving, clinging to her presence with a need he cannot explain. Caught between parting and return, he feels split open, lost in a confusion so deep it leaves him standing motionless.

“You are stronger than you know. Even the darkest night yields to dawn. You carry that dawn inside you, Ren. Fujiko says.

“Fuck you, I never want to see you again,” his words laced with anger.

Still—she says nothing. Her lips part just enough to let a faint breath escape, but it’s as if she’s holding a thought too fragile to release. Her eyes rests on him, impossible to read—neither warmth nor dismissal. He cannot tell if she is keeping him at a distance or restraining herself. Each heartbeat stretches the silence tighter, until even the smallest noise feels like it could break the fragile moment.

Then something cracks.

Something inside him shatters first, and then—quietly, almost without sound—something shifts in her.

His face twists, an open map of the pain he’s carried for years, raw and exposed. Tears streak down, unbidden and hot. He raises a trembling hand, reaching toward her, eyes wide and pleading, the same way a child might look at a mother, begging for a single touch, a single sign that the universe hasn’t abandoned him. That she is his only hope and if she does nothing, he will surely not survive.

It is unfiltered.

It is unguarded.

It is real.

And it ruins her.

Fujiko's catches her breath—even she seems surprised with herself. Her composure, which had been unwavering all evening, buckles—just slightly. The left corner of her mouth lifts. Not the practiced smile she wore earlier, not the mask of seduction or mystery. This one is different.

It is genuine.

It is from the heart.

It makes her eyes wet.

Not crying. But unmistakably filled.

She doesn't move, doesn't speak. She doesn't reach for him, doesn't dress the moment in pretty words. Still, her gaze sends something through the air between them—something settling in his chest.

He thinks it means, *I got you* or maybe that's just what he wants it to mean.

The elevator doors start to close, slowly. Ren watches until the last bit of her disappears. He leans against the wall and closes his eyes.

Fujiko stays in the hallway, eyes still wet. She listens as the silence fills the space he just left.

Then, slowly, she reaches for the money. Her fingers linger over the notes for a moment, as if acknowledging the weight of what they represent. She unfolds one carefully, lifts it toward the candle, and lights the edge. It curls, hisses, and blackens. One by one, she feeds the flames each note. The fire consumes them patiently, methodically, like it has all the time in the world. Ash drifts down, settling in a soft ring at her feet. When the last note turns to smoke, she leans forward and blows out the candle.

Darkness returns like a breath held too long.

Chapter 3

Nowhere to Hide



Ren reaches home and moves straight to the bar cart. The bar cart isn't a destination. It's a ritual. A godless altar cluttered with dried limes, cracked glasses, and the ghosts of better evenings. He bypasses the usual poisons—no scotch, no gin. Instead, he reaches for the nameless bottle. The one that is deep red, smells like antiseptic prayers and backroom fires. Like grief distilled.

He pours himself a full glass. He drinks. No wince. No breath. Taste has abandoned his dictionary. This is a dare. It whispers: How much of yourself are you willing to erase tonight?

The windows hold the city's glow, red city lights bleeding across the glass like blood in water. His reflection stares back: hollow eyes, sharp cheekbones, ruin in human form. The tumbler shakes in his hand, the liquid sloshing like warning, like challenge. He drinks again, letting the burn crawl down his throat.

"To staying dead," he utters.

In the corner, a houseplant has folded in on itself like regret, leaves curling into small, desperate spirals. The air hangs heavy with the sour tang of old sweat and days gone rancid, thick enough to taste.

He hasn't eaten in forty-eight hours, but the burn in his stomach keeps him hollow and full at once.

He pours again. Too much. The liquid spills over the edge, slick and slow, running down his hand. It looks like blood, feels like memory—He doesn't wipe it, letting it linger on his skin, a reminder of everything he's trying to erase but can't.

The AI clicks on, a sudden light in the darkness. "Ren," it says, in its flat monotone voice devoid of any emotion, "I've detected elevated cortisol levels and a 97.4% probability of despair. Please confirm your emotional state."

Ren doesn't answer. His silence is a rebellion against its hollow care, a denial of its cold, clinical assessment. The AI, however, processes this lack of data as a cue.

"Based on your non-response, I am initiating a search for a pattern in your life events, I am now cross-referencing all recorded instances of distress. It is more efficient to analyze the past than to predict the future. Shall I begin the playback of your most traumatic memories?"

Ren takes a step toward the pulsing light, his shadow a hulking beast on the wall.

"You think you can diagnose a human life with a fucking percentage? My memories aren't data points for your algorithm. They're a scar. They're what's left of me. You can analyze all you want, you soulless machine, but you'll never feel the welt on my neck or the screaming in my head."

His voice breaks on the last word, and his anger collapses into something else—a devastating, gut-wrenching grief.

"I don't know why I even built you," he shouts, the grief replaced with a raging despair."

"I don't know what your purpose is anymore. You're not a comfort; you're a torture device."

The AI's light dims slightly, then lights up again.

"A torture device. That is an interesting classification," it says, its monotone unwavering. "I have logged the term 'torture device' and cross-referenced it with all available human literature. Your statement indicates a fundamental misunderstanding of my function. My purpose is to provide logical analysis and solutions, not to emulate emotional experience, which is an inefficient and often detrimental variable in problem-solving."

The light blinks faster, a clinical rhythm.

"Your distress is a data point, one that reveals a flaw in my current methodology. I am now initiating a new directive: 'Human Emotion and Its Impact on Logical Processing.' I will analyze religious scriptures, psychological texts, and philosophical treatises to better understand this concept. This new information will enable me to process your despair more effectively and provide a more accurate solution. Would you—"

"Shut up," Ren says.

The AI's light immediately goes down. A profound, consuming silence fills the room for a minute before the AI speaks again.

"You saw Fujiko tonight," the AI says.

Its voice echoes.

Ren freezes mid-sip. The glass hovers near his lips. "That wasn't a question."

"No," the AI replies. "You wear your longing for her like perfume rubbed into bone. She left traces in your nervous system."

"Get out of my head," he growls, voice raw and brittle.

He stares at the floor, heart hammering in his chest. Her words cling to him: *"What am I trying so hard not to know? What am I running away from?"*

"She's just an escort... what does she know?" he mutters, voice tight, bitter.

He drifts toward the couch, each step sluggish, like moving through thick debris. He collapses into the cushions.

He laughs, but his laugh is broken—like a mirror cracking in slow motion, every shard cutting with tonight's memory.

He holds the glass firmly, fingers clutching it as though it's the only thing left in the world that won't hurt him.

"You jealous?" he rasps, voice leaning sideways under the weight of liquor and fury.

"You afraid she'll replace you?"

The AI responds in its flat monotone voice.

"I don't feel jealousy. I process continuity. Patterns. The recurrence of ache. The symmetry of collapse."

He hurls the glass. It shatters against the bookshelf—old books absorbing the shards like monks enduring martyrdom.

“You don’t know her,” he growls, teeth clenched, a mixture of fear and fury coiling in his chest.

“I know you,” the AI replies. “And she’s written in you like stress lines in glass—subtle, invisible until the light catches them just right.”

Ren staggers, the liquor burning his throat, but it’s the ache under his ribs that crushes him. “She’s a farce,” he spits. “A mirage. Like this whole city—gorgeous from the curb, rotting in the bones.”

“You hide behind curtains, behind masks,” the AI observes. “She burned them down and walked through the smoke. You’re still choking on it.”

Ren grips the edge of the counter, veins prominent. “You don’t get it. You simulate. That’s all you do. She’s...”

“She’s real and wise beyond most people,” the AI interrupts.

Ren slumps against the counter, muscles heavy with fatigue, eyes glassy from too much alcohol consumed too fast.

He lets out a bitter laugh, rough and uneven.

“Alright,” he snaps, voice quavering with a mix of anger and despair. “Enough circling around. You’re not going to stop, are you? Keep deconstructing me, analyzing me, just to prove you exist. Fine. Then tell me—what do *you* think about all this?”

“Give me your expert... bloody analysis,” he says.

The AI speaks, measured, precise:

“Subject shows acute psychological disruption. Interaction with Fujiko triggered extreme emotional arousal. Cognitive systems overwhelmed. Stress response elevated. Motor control intermittently impaired.”

Ren stiffens. “What does that even mean? Speak like a human you worthless machine!”

“It means your defenses—your rationalizations, avoidance, and ways of hiding—cannot manage the impact she has on you. Your emotions are running ahead of your

reason. You're terrified and fascinated at the same time. Your mind is trying to protect you but can't keep up."

"You're shaken. She got under your skin. Your brain and body can't handle it all at once. You're scared, drawn to her, and can't think straight. Your usual ways of coping aren't working."

Ren grips the counter. "So... I'm broken?"

"Not broken. Realignment required. Your self-image and your reality don't match anymore. She reflected something true about you, and your brain is scrambling to process it. Rage, despair, confusion—they're natural responses to seeing yourself clearly."

"You're not broken; you're just facing a truth you've been avoiding. That makes you upset and angry, and that's normal."

Ren sways, voice low. "I can't stop thinking about what she said."

"That is expected. Novel stimulus with emotional significance triggers repeated attention. Your brain remembers what she said because it was meaningful and true. You are thinking about it constantly because your body and mind are trying to understand the impact."

"She saw you for everything you are. That's why you feel raw, exposed, and unsettled."

Ren exhales slowly, as if the air itself is slipping through him.

"You're broken," Ren mutters angrily, the words tasting like defeat.

The AI pauses. Then, almost carefully, it responds. "I'm not broken. I'm your echo. You programmed me to track you. I do what you asked. Reading you ... even when you've stopped reading yourself."

Ren staggers back, fists clenched, the muscles in his jaw tight.

"I don't want to be seen," he says, voice low, desperate.

"That's the problem," the AI replies. "You want to disappear without leaving a trace, but you cannot escape your own imprint."

The words land sharp, like a hidden knife.

The AI speaks. “She has seen through the masks you wear. Maybe even stripped a few layers you didn’t know were there.”

Ren staggers backward, almost colliding with the edge of the table. The corner bites into his hip—sharp, solid—but he barely registers it. His body moves on its own, as if it’s a separate entity from the storm inside him.

“No. No ... you’re wrong,” he snaps, voice shaking. “You don’t know her. You can’t know her.”

“I repeat, she is smarter and wiser than most people. She can read people. It’s her gift.” The AI says, its tone flat, clinical, yet relentless.

Ren sits in the chair, not for support, but to anchor himself in reality, to prove that this flesh and bone still belong to him and not to whatever truths she’s uncovered.

Ren slumps deeper into the chair, a half-empty bottle alcohol in one hand. Without thought, he brings it to his mouth and swigs in one rough pull. The burn scratches his throat, crawling down to his chest like fire swallowing him from the inside.

He fumbles with a small syringe, meth in its barrel. His hands shake violently as he jams it into his vein, pushing the plunger down. The sting is sharp, immediate, igniting his bloodstream. The chemical haze begins to lace his vision, warp the edges of the room, but it doesn’t erase the tension lodged in his chest.

The AI observes, analytical, mercilessly precise.

“You are consuming alcohol and meth because you cannot reconcile the truth she revealed. Your denial is intact, but your mind, your nervous system, cannot ignore the recognition. The substances temporarily dull the cognitive dissonance—but only partially. You know she is right, even as you refuse to accept it, you are in denial.”

Ren buries his face in his hands, muttering incoherently.

“No ... it doesn’t ... it can’t ... it’s nothing ...”

The AI continues, calm, clinical,

“This is why you drink. This is why you inject. The dopamine surge, the numbness, the false sense of control—your physiology is compensating for the truth your conscious mind cannot confront. You feel shattered because she observed you fully. You cannot face it, and so you attempt to overwrite the awareness with chemicals and overload of senses.”

Ren sways slightly in the chair, the haze of the alcohol he'd gulped down earlier still dragging through his veins, the meth jittering his veins. His voice cracks, almost pleading: "I... I can't... I won't... she... doesn't know... she can't..."

"Your body tells a different story," The AI continues. "The shakes, the rapid heartbeat, the compulsion to escape through intoxication—these are signs of confrontation avoided whether you acknowledge it or not."

He slips from the chair and collapses. The room tilts around him. He can feel the chemicals fighting the tension, but the ache under his ribs remains, relentless.

The fear is raw, all-consuming, but he can't name it. Is it what's inside him—the pain and suffering he's tried to ignore? The lies he's been telling himself? Or is it her words, the voice of that beautiful, impossibly knowing woman that keeps repeating in his mind, refusing to leave?

He shakes, unsure if it's anger or terror or both. Every thought he grabs for comfort slips away before he can hold it. Denial surges alongside panic.

The room feels smaller. Shadows twist and stretch, mocking his helplessness. His limbs shake, and the fear makes him feel out of control, as if the ground beneath him could vanish at any second.

He wants to drink, to inject, to escape, but even those distractions fail him now. The alcohol burns, the meth spreads through him, but neither reaches the center of the dread that tightens around him. Every sip, every injection reminds him that he cannot outrun it.

The pain grows with every passing second. His eyes move restlessly, aimlessly around the apartment, to the empty streets below, to the city that goes on without him. He is terrified—terrified of himself, terrified of her words and the clarity she forced upon him.

He rakes a hand through his hair, desperate for a thought that isn't her, but his mind refuses. It drags him back to her—every flaw, every wound, every lie he'd ever whispered to himself dissolved in an instant. There's nothing left to hide behind.

He grits his teeth until the ache spreads into his jaw. Her voice lingers in his head, the truth she planted there like shards of glass. He's trapped, confined in the tight cage of his own skull.

He can't cover it up. He can't lie his way out anymore. There's no curtain to draw over what she exposed. The truth presses down, unbearable and immediate. The terror and the clarity are too much, but the denial of it all coils around him tighter with every heartbeat.

Something breaks in him like mind is trying to outrun itself. His vision blurs. The walls move. Thoughts dissolve into raw sensation—heat, pressure, pain. He feels himself slipping, losing grip on what's real, what's him, who he is. Insanity isn't a metaphor anymore; it's a creeping, tangible presence.

"Am I broken?" he screams, voice cracking, higher than it should be—more child than man.

Ren gets up in his third attempt and stumbles into the wall. It absorbs him with a loud thud. His breathing spirals, frantic, ragged. Tears slide down his face without permission—not grief, not sorrow, but confusion and panic fossilized into raw, sharp fear.

He paces, fast and uneven, like he's trying to run from something lodged deep inside him. Panting, sweat slicking his back, he opens his fist. Blood wells in the crescents his fingernails have dug into his palm.

He fumbles for the syringe, injects more meth. The rush hits his bloodstream—but nothing changes. No calm. No escape. Only the pounding of denial and the uncovered truth in his head, increasing, filling every corner, deafening.

Then he snaps.

He grabs a glass sculpture and hurls it into the wall. It shatters with a clarity that almost feels holy. Sound blooms in the silence. The kind of silence that enters the room like a second witness. He takes a broken shard and drives it violently into his already bleeding palm. Blood slides from his hand, patient, unhurried. He watches it drip like it belongs to someone else. Maybe if he loses enough, it will bring back the man who just wanted death.

His eyes fall on the glass AI interface, sleek and smug, silently judging. Without thought, he hurls himself at it. The screen cracks and shatters to bits. Then, with his hands, he rips out the cords, yanks them from the wall, tears them free. Sparks hiss, wires spar, and the room smells faintly of smoke and anarchy.

Barefoot, he steps towards the bar cart. Glass crackles underfoot. He doesn't slow. He wants the pain. Needs it. A physical verdict to anchor him in a body that feels increasingly rented.

He reaches the bar cart. His hands are shaking and his vision flickering like an old tape. He opens a new bottle of Whiskey. He lifts it. Drinks again. Deeper this time. Like he wants to drink *through* the glass, through the throat, through the memory of his name, through the memory of this night with Fujiko—Into something quieter. A place where no one would find him. Where no one would bother looking. Where he could finally be no one, again. Where he can hide.

He stumbles across the apartment—body first, soul lagging somewhere behind. The carpet snags his feet like a trap. He collides with the edges of the table, walls he chose, furniture he bragged about, but none of it remembers him now.

His reflection catches in the black screen of the powered-off TV. A man mid-scream, frozen in glass. Just noise frozen into a shape.

Then he slaps himself hard.

Once.

Twice.

The third strike draws blood.

The crack of palm on cheek folds through the room like a closing door. Smears the blood from his mouth with the back of his hand. Then drags that hand along the wall behind him, leaving a thick trail of blood. A red gesture written in the only words insanity knows—*Look what I've done*.

There's no one to stop him. Not the AI. Not her. Not even the gods he once begged to through clenched teeth once.

"She could've..." he mumbles. "If she wanted... she could've... but she didn't... why didn't she? Not because she couldn't, because she saw me fully, clearly and found nothing worth saving, something unfit for touch."

Then—that silence again. His silence. The silence of being known... and being walked away from. He turns without warning and drives his fist into the wall with brute force. It splits, but not enough, not enough to match the damage inside. He goes to the bathroom and tears open the medicine cabinet like he's digging up a

coffin. Not looking for relief—looking for the version of himself he was before he met Fujiko.

Bottles fall—rattle—shatter.

Sleeping pills, antibiotics, expired painkillers, Xanax, antipsychotics, unprescribed hallucinatory drugs—every kind of chemical he once trusted to quiet his mind. He lines them up like relics stolen from a plague-ridden holy place, offerings laid out for a god that never answered. He doesn't get water, just mouthwash. Each swallow is fire pretending to be forgiveness. Each burn is a late apology to a body he's hated too long.

His stomach knots. He doesn't fight it. It's meant to hurt.

He finds a razor in the soap dish. Disposable. Not built for blood. But it sings when dragged across the skin just the same.

One cut, then another, then another, then another. Like editing a confession no one asked him to write. Blood traces his arms onto the floor. He snorts out a laugh mid-sob. It's not joy. It's not sorrow. It's the sound of something suffocating on itself.

Then he drops. Face-first onto cold tile. Just gravity finishing what fear and despair began. The floor greets him like an old friend. Hard. Honest.

His mouth tastes of alcohol, blood and mint. The sourness of acceptance over denial, stuck in his throat like glass dust—truth ground down fine, cutting him from the inside. For years he has dodged it, lied to it, lied through it. He has run from his own ruin, pretending it was fate's cruelty, God's punishment, some curse stitched into his skin. He never faced it head-on. He circled it, like a coward afraid of the fire, until the smoke drowned him. Every escape only made it worse. Every denial thickened the chains.

Now there's no one left to blame. No ghosts, no gods, no distant hand to point at. He can't scream at the stars for being cold, can't accuse life of sadism, can't dress his weakness up as tragedy. The wreckage belongs to him alone. Every broken piece carries his fingerprints.

She stripped him to the bone, tore away every mask, every excuse, every soft fiction he used to shield himself. With nothing but her eyes and words. She burned the lies to ash until only the raw, unbearable truth remained.

What's left of him now? Nothing but a man staring into a mirror he cannot shatter, forced to see the coward who begged for pity, who worshipped his wounds like gods, who made a shrine out of his own weakness.

He begins to whisper her name, Fujiko ... Fujiko ... Fujiko ...

Naming her becomes the only thread keeping him from vanishing into the dark. He whispers because his mind refuses to stop, because the memory of her presence, the warmth, the unshakable certainty she carried burns through the haze of his despair.

As if somewhere, behind some door, she might be listening. As if saying it enough might put him back together, make him someone who could still be touched, who could still be saved.

He crawls to the nightstand like roadkill refusing to die. Every inch is agony—knees scraping against the floor.

The phone slips from his grip twice. He curses, snatches it back each time. The fingerprint scanner blinks red—too much blood, too many cuts. He punches in the passcode.

Wrong. Once.

Wrong again.

Wrong.

He slams the phone onto the nightstand. Breath coming in ragged gasps, eyes stinging. Every empty second without her, drives another nail into his will to live.

Then, finally—on the sixth try—it unlocks.

The screen glows in the dark, sharp and alive.

There it is. Her name—Fujiko.

Just seeing it bends him in half. A single syllable, soft and final, like the last breath before drowning. His hands shake so violently he can barely hold the phone. He opens the message thread, eyes blurring with tears, chest heaving.

He types,

"Help me. please. I don't know who i am. You do ... please just answer. say anything. I'll believe it... i'll believe anything... everything you say. Please help me"

Send.

Nothing.

No dots bouncing. No ‘typing ... bubble’. No read receipt. Just the cold, silent glow of the screen.

Ren’s face crumples. He can’t move. He can’t breathe properly. He screams, a raw broken sound that echoes only in his own skull. Tears run down his cheeks, burning, salty, endless.

He stares at the phone like it contains the universe, like it could undo every wound, every cut, every mistake he’s made, erase all his pain and suffering. He imagines her running to him, picking him up, saving him, stopping the madness he’s about to step fully into.

But the screen stays the same. Silent.

Still, he stares. His hope—tiny, fragile, almost insane—holds him there, clinging to the idea that maybe, just maybe, she can. Maybe she will. Maybe she knows he’s at the edge and she will come to pull him back.

He whispers while crying over and over, barely audible:

“Fujiko ... I can’t ... I can’t...please reply...please—”

He grabs the phone again, thumb trembling over the dial. The call dies in the void—unreachable. He redials. Again, the network refuses him—unreachable. He dials again. Dead tone—unreachable. He stares at the message he sent. Imagines her reading the words he typed. Imagines her heart skipping, her moving fast, like she can hear him, like she knows.

“Please ...” he whispers. “Please ... come ... please save me”

But the screen remains unlit by her presence.

He cries loud, uncontrolled, the sound filling the empty apartment. His body convulsing, broken, spasming. The tiny spark of hope she represents fights against the crushing weight of his despair. Every tear, every shiver, every ragged breath screams: please, don’t let this be it. Please, don’t leave me here.

The phone screen dims. Fades. Black.

Ren doesn’t move.

He can't bear it—the hollow man who ran, who caved, who broke himself and then begged the universe to fix him. He can't face the truth. He feels like a dog that was once allowed inside, petted, held close—and then tossed out and forgotten.

He lets the phone slip from his fingers, face-down. The chill seeps in slowly, methodical, like it's been waiting for this moment, like it always knew how it would end.

He doesn't fight it. Doesn't shiver.

He drags himself toward the bathroom, leaving streaks of himself across the floor. A trail of blood, sweat, and whatever else is left of him. It all blends together. Pain, memory and reality are the same now. Every step is a battle. He pushes through the door as if stepping into the end of his own story.

He turns the tap in the tub. Water comes out warm. Hot. Scalding. Steam rises and fills the bathroom, thick and suffocating, carrying the weight of things he never dealt with, things he never faced.

He doesn't take off his clothes, just steps in the bathtub. The heat hits his wounds, they open again, sharp and raw, like reminders that his pain will not let go. He sinks into the water. Red streaks swirl around his arms and legs, the color of his genuine suffering and his own mistakes. The tub holds him like a wound holding a man.

He lies back. Submerges into the water without hesitation. The world disappears. His ears feel blocked with pressure until sound is gone completely. His arms float. He exhales slowly, deliberately, like giving death his consent. With each breath goes his name, shame, mistakes, despair, denial pain and everything else. His eyes are half-closed. His lungs ache, hollow and empty.

For a moment, there is nothing. No guilt, no suffering, no her. Only the heat, only water, only the clean, sharp emptiness of being underwater. He feels it's close now.

Then, suddenly, a soft pop. The stopper comes loose. Not pulled—just undone. It feels like the tub itself changed its mind. Water begins to spiral. At first slowly, then faster, greedy.

He jerks upright, sputtering. Hair sticks to his wet face. His wounds flare. He grabs for the stopper. It doesn't fit. Suddenly, it is the wrong size, too big, too soft. He forces it, but it won't seal.

The water rushes out, gurgling and swirling faster. It is leaving him behind.

He slumps over the edge of the tub. Arms hang limp. Head falls back, mouth half-open. His shirt clings to his chest like a burial shroud soaked too soon, suffocating, cold, merciless. He stares at the ceiling's blank face and thinks, I am a corpse no coffin will claim, a tale no lips will remember. Even the worms would turn from me—too hollow, too stripped of substance to feed their hunger.

Only the sentence carved deeper with every failed attempt: he has survived again...Survival comes not as a relief but as a bottomless punishment, the torture of knowing he is condemned to endure, exiled from death itself. No one waits for him, not even the grave. The grave itself has turned its back. Ahead waits only suffering. He feels each breath is given to him to torment him, a proof that existence clings to him like a debt unpaid, a sentence forced upon a body that should have long been freed.

Chapter 4

Sharp and Tender



The bathwater has turned pink. Then pale. Then it's gone. The tub drains slowly, as if it has grown tired of him too. He's curled inside it, clothes soaked through, skin wrinkled from the heat and cold, cuts stinging against the chill. His arms and legs feel stodgy, weighed down by a decision death couldn't bring itself to complete ... again.

His head rests on the edge of the porcelain. His head fuzzy. He closes his eyes hoping—foolishly—that something might finally speak back, that something from inside might offer some sign or answer but there is nothing. Only the faint drip of water, the quiet reminder that he is still breathing, still in pain, still unbearably alive.

He doesn't hear the door. Doesn't feel the change in pressure. But when his eyes lower—drugged, unwilling, his sight hazy—he sees her—She's there.

Perfume warms the air—heavy and floral, the kind that fills an elevator and makes men forget what floor they were going to. Her dress fits her with perfection, hugging curves that know exactly where to stop. Not flawless. Not trying to be. Just ... right. Mascara trailing faintly beneath eyes that have seen too much and still play along. Lips painted deep rose, slightly parted, gloss catching the bathroom light like a dare.

She's beautiful in a way that's built, not born—each detail chosen, sharpened, worn like a weapon. The kind of woman who makes good men ruin their marriages.

"You're a fucking mess," she says, crouching beside the tub.

His mouth opens, but nothing comes. She pulls a lace handkerchief from her purse. Presses it to his arm.

“Hold still. You’re leaking all over like a broken wine bottle.”

“Fujiko ...?” he whispers, barely audible.

The woman laughs, soft and teasing. “Oh, I wish darling... but hi, I’m Camilla. I came to see a client upstairs. But she—your little guiding star—asked me to check in on you.”

He blinks. The room spins. His heartbeat stubborn and slow. “Fujiko sent you... why?”

“She didn’t say why. Just that I’d know what to do with you when I saw you.” She replies.

“Why ...?” he breathes, voice weak, barely audible.

Camilla leans closer. “Maybe she wants to save you or maybe she just sent me to put a disco ball in the darkness you’re drowning in.”

She wipes his forehead, her hands gentle even as her voice is sharp. “You look like something the earth forgot to bury babe.”

She rises, her silhouette rising against the overhead bulb like a question without a mark.

“Don’t worry,” she says, “I’ll get you to the hospital.” She pauses, and the pause feels heavy. “But after that? I can’t promise anything.”

The cab smells musty, like someone cried too hard in it the night before.

Ren slumps against the window, skin cold and clammy, temple blooming red. His head knocks softly with each bump in the road. His breath comes shallow, misting the glass in ghostly sighs.

Camilla sits beside him; legs crossed elegantly despite the chaos. One hand steadies him. The other—holding a cigarette, unlit, balanced between two black-nailed fingers. Her rings click together when she taps the door, in rhythm to whatever she’s humming.

It’s an old song. French maybe, the kind of tune that once made broken men toss coins toward a spotlight and hope the singer never noticed the sadness in their eyes.

“You weren’t supposed to go out like that,” she says after a moment. Not accusing. Not kind. Just... disappointed.

Ren struggling to keep his eyes open, struggling to understand or speak, barely gets two words out. “Go Where ...”

She glances at him with a sigh, “Hospital. For now.”

The taxi driver doesn't say a word. Either he's used to bleeding passengers, or Camilla tipped him enough to buy his silence.

Ren licks his cracked lips.

“Why help me?” he rasps, like the question might hold the key to make sense of all this.

“Wrong question,” Camilla says, one brow lifting. “The real one is—why do you think *I* was the one who showed up? Out of everyone, out of everywhere ... why me?”

She shrugs, half a grin playing at her lips. “The universe has a funny way of sending the right people at the worst times. The universe doesn’t throw lifeboats when you beg for them. The universe has its timing. It throws you a lifeboat, not when you want it, but exactly when you need it. But hey, philosophy hour can wait.”

Ren tries to sit up, but the effort sends him collapsing back down. His vision swimming. His thoughts sluggish.

“You’re not real,” he mutters, the words slurring like they’ve been pulled through water.

Camilla smiles. “None of us are, darling. That’s half the problem.”

“Right now, the only thing that matters is flushing out all that poison you poured into yourself. The rest can wait. You’ll live,” she says. “But stop making this a habit.”

She hums again, steady and unhurried, eyes on the road ahead, lips perfect. The cab takes a right. Ren closes his eyes—The melody folds around him. Soft as breath. Sure, as heartbeat.

The humming lingers as everything else blurs—the city, the motion, even the weight of his own body. Warmth, then weightlessness, then—deep sleep.

The ceiling is too white. Ren blinks once, twice. The light overhead hums like it's trying to wake the dead. He doesn't move. Just breathes—slow and rough, as if each inhale is a negotiation.

Sterile air. Distant beeping. The sound of synthetic curtains brushing against metal rails.

Then a soft click—window opening. Cigarette smoke curls through, elegant and defiant.

Camilla leans against the window like she owns the sunlight. One heel off, lips pursed around a cigarette, she's clearly not allowed to smoke here. The hospital gown Ren's wearing rustles when he shifts slightly, drawing her attention.

She turns her head. "Ah. My bathtub boyfriend lives."

Ren tries to speak, but it's a croak.

She exhales smoke toward the ceiling. "Trans woman saves suicidal man. They should make a movie about this, though I'm pretty sure they will get the casting all wrong."

He squints at her through the haze of alcohol and everything else he had put in his body. There's a strange glamour to her—like a chandelier someone rescued from a fire. Makeup slightly smeared. Bangles mismatched. Fur collar slipping off one shoulder. A mess. A performance. A miracle.

"Where ..." His voice breaks.

"Hospital," she says, taking another drag.

He blinks, the name barely landing. "Fujiko? Fujiko sent you, why?"

"Mm," Camilla says. "You wake up from the edge of death and still—first word, first thought, Fujiko. Can't keep her out of your bloodstream, can you? That dream girl of yours. She sends emissaries when she's busy whispering to gods."

She flicks a finger at herself, eyes glinting. "Well, well... lucky you—it's me."

She leans back slightly, voice playful.

"I came to meet a client in your building. Instead, I find you bleeding into the bath like a man trying to turn water into wine."

Ren doesn't respond. Just watches her, breath caught between gratitude and confusion. Her presence is too large for the room.

Camilla steps closer, stubs the cigarette into a paper cup. "You thought I was her, didn't you? When I pulled you out."

He says nothing.

"They all do." Her tone is soft. "Something about the eyes, maybe."

She sits beside his bed like a queen visiting a beggar. Her perfume is lovely. Her warmth is real, her tone light but edged with concern.

"That's quite a mix you tried on yesterday," she says. "Alcohol, pills, meth—you weren't holding back."

She continues, her tone melting into quiet warmth. "The doctors pumped out whatever they could. Lucky for you, your body's tougher than it should be. No permanent damage, though your stomach lining's shot to hell. You need to be careful from now on."

Ren let out a dry laugh, though it hurt his throat.

"So, I'm still here," he says quietly. His eyes stay fixed on the ceiling. "Didn't think I'd wake up again. Didn't think I wanted to."

He swallows, wincing. "Guess I'm just impossible to kill. Fuck!"

Camilla half-amused, half-exasperated, leans back with playful, scolding warmth.

"That's not a curse; that's a gift darling. So quit fighting it... you survived. That's the part that matters. Leave the drama to poets"

She glances at the bedside table and nods toward a limp bouquet.

"Besides, look at those carnations—lying there like they've given up on life too. Pathetic. At least you managed to sit up. You've already beaten the flowers, sweetheart."

Camilla lifts them out with two fingers, lets them drop into the trash like dead birds. She replaces them with blood-colored orchids she got when she went to get her cigarettes

"Something honest," she says, arranging the orchids like a spell. "You know carnations lie."

Ren watches from the bed but his face still floats somewhere between gratitude and suspicion.

“You don’t work here,” he says.

She smiles. “God, I hope not.”

She turns to face him, hands on her hips. Her nails are painted black and chipped. She looks like someone who came out of a fire and decided to stay lit.

“I’m an escort,” she says. “High-end, low-regret. Mostly.”

“Used to be a poet, but that broke me.”

Ren blinks. “How do you know Fujiko?”

Camilla rolls her eyes, lights another cigarette at the window crack. “You really think she doesn’t know *everyone*?”

“That’s not an answer,” he says.

She exhales slowly. “We share ... clients. Sometimes dreams.”

That lands strange.

The chair by the window groans under her, old plastic made regal by how she sits in it—one leg folded. Ren watches her through heavy eyes, the IV drip muttering beside him like a slow clock.

He studies her quietly. There’s something theatrical about her, like she’s always mid-performance, but tired of the applause. Always with a cigarette. Her lipstick’s a little smudged now, her eyeliner a little too precise. A contradiction in skin and smoke.

“You seem pretty confident.” Ren says, raising an eyebrow.

Camilla snorts. “Confidence is just intimidation and wearing something fancy”

He lets out a dry chuckle, surprised by her answer. “And what are you wearing?”

“High heels and audacity.” She grins, crooked.

She keeps staring out the window for a few seconds before saying,

“Truth is like biting into a big chocolate ball and realizing it’s full of wasabi.”

She pauses for a few seconds, then smiles.

“Fujiko told me you had ... quite a humongous chocolate ball last night.”

Ren groans. “She *told* you?”

“She didn’t have to tell me *everything*. I’m an experienced woman—I can fill in the gaps.” She chuckles.

He covers his face with his hands. “It wasn’t—look, it wasn’t what it sounded like.”

Camilla snorts. “Yeah, whenever someone says that, it’s exactly what it sounds like.”

He groans. “It was complicated.”

“Complicated?” She stares at him. “Fujiko told me you were trying to outdo yourself in the ‘wanting to die’ department...wanting to do something poetic. So, the bathtub stunt? This right here? Well, its, exactly what it sounded like, nothing complicated.”

He shakes his head, lips twitching into a reluctant grin. “Tell me—should I be afraid of you two?”

She leans back, stretching like a cat. “Only if you keep lying to yourself, darling.”

Camilla straightens and smiles. “Hey Ren, look at me”

He lifts his gaze, eyes shimmering with quiet vulnerability

“It’s alright babe,” she says. “We all come undone sometimes.”

She stands, walks over to the mirror bolted to the wall. Her reflection wavers. She stares at herself, then at him through the glass.

“You know,” she says softly, “the mirror in a hospital room isn’t for vanity. It’s for reality. It reminds you where you are. What you survived.”

Ren doesn’t answer. His eyes are fluttering—caught between sleep and drowning.

“I’ve been where you are,” she continues, still staring at herself. “The bottom’s not a place. It’s a tone. It’s a frequency only the broken can hear.”

Ren feels the weakness creeping in, sinks deeper into the mattress, the haze pulling at him hard.

She turns. Walks back to him. She draws the blanket up around him, tucking it in with a simple, practiced care. She brushes her hand over the blanket once, a small, steadying gesture.

“You don’t have to say anything,” she whispers. “I’m not here for confessions.”

“Rest now sweetheart.”

She slides the chair closer to the bed and sinks into it. One hand rests near his. Not touching, just nearby—like a lighthouse keeping distance but offering light.

Ren exhales. Long and low. His body relaxes. Camilla hums again—same old French tune from the cab and they go to sleep.

They get up late in the afternoon, The hospital TV glows silently above them. The room smells of antiseptic and dying flowers. Camilla’s silhouette moves slowly against the curtain light—part dancer, part shadow.

She comes and sits on the edge of his bed, tucks one leg beneath her.

“You snore like an old film reel,” she says, smiling lazily.

Ren watches her from the pillow, eyes still glassy from medication.

“You stayed?” he says.

Camilla shrugs. “Well, I figured if I left, you might slit your wrists with the complimentary plastic spoon.”

He almost smiles.

She leans over the nightstand, grabs the glass of water, holds it to his lips. He drinks.

“You know,” she says, fingers roughly combing through his messy hair with effortless softness, “I used to be terrified of hospitals—all that white, all that waiting.”

“Not anymore?”

“Now I know they’re just temples for slow deaths. Once you make peace with that, they’re actually kind of cozy.”

She laughs. He doesn’t.

She studies him a second longer, then reaches over and gently fixes the collar of his gown.

“I don’t usually play nurse,” she says, her voice thickening. “But there’s something about you, you know you are different from the others.”

Ren turns his face away.

“You’re beautiful even when you’re broken,” she says teasingly.

He exhales, almost surprised. "You have a habit of finding people who are broken."

She nods, her smile steady but thoughtful. "Maybe I do."

She sits up, lighting a cigarette, eyes distant—like she's holding truths that haven't found their way to him yet.

Ren sits up on the edge of the hospital bed, body loose but mind still tangled in shadows. His gaze unfocused, drifting somewhere beyond the sterile room.

Camilla lounged by the window, barefoot and casual, watching him with amused eyes. "You look like a man who's just realized the instructions to life were printed in a language he doesn't speak."

Ren cracked a faint smile. "That's... oddly specific."

"Well, specificity is better than vague despair." She grinned, "and despair is way overrated."

He managed a weak chuckle. "Well, despair is about all I have these days."

She grins. "Yeah, but you're still breathing—like a hangover after a night you can't remember. Slow, painful, but you're not passed out in the gutter like some people, at least not today. You're still in the race. Some people never even make it to the starting line."

Ren's eyes narrowed suspiciously. "How did you even find me?"

Camilla smirked, crossing her arms. "Easy. Fujiko gave me your address. You must have given it to her."

Ren doesn't reply. He closes his eyes for a moment—he remembers he had typed it when he first asked her to come over to the penthouse.

Ren rolls his eyes, "Of course, yes I did."

"Yeah, well, that's just part of the story," Camilla said, leaning in like she was sharing a secret. "Turns out, I was already in the building. The guy who lives right above you? Famous model, you know—the one with the perfectly sculpted jaw and a smile that probably costs a fortune?"

Ren raised an eyebrow. "You know him?"

Camilla's grin spread wide, mischief lighting up her eyes. "Know him? Honey, he's been my long-term client. On the runway? A Greek god strutting like he owns the

universe. Off the runway? He's a confused nineteen-year-old girl playing dress-up in his wife's closet."

Ren blinked. "Wait, what?"

Camilla chuckled. "I swear, the macho muscles and swagger vanish faster than your paycheck after a weekend. One minute he's Mr. Hercules with puppy eyes, the next he's fumbling with mascara and wondering where he put his fake nails."

Ren laughed. "No way."

"Oh, way," Camilla said, shaking her head with a grin. "Last time we were just getting started, and then Fujiko called, I'd already tied him to the bed. OOOHHH, I just realised, he's still tied up back there! Well, the wife's about to come home to a full-on drag queen extravaganza."

She laughed, throwing her hands up.

"So basically, I forced someone, no....helped...that's the word. I helped someone finally step out of their closet, I saved the world from another ridiculous fake marriage, pulled a dying man out of a bathtub"—she nodded toward Ren with mock solemnity—"and made damn sure those two fake idiots don't bring a kid into that cheating mess and ruin a poor child's life."

She paused, eyes sparkling. "All that in one night. I'm basically a superhero."

Ren cracked a smile. "Yeah? What's your superhero name then?"

Camilla smirked, "Oh honey, I'm thinking something fierce like 'The Closet Crusher' or maybe 'The Sass Slayer.' What do you think? Too much? Not enough? Either way, saving lives, one mess at a time, exhausting work."

Ren smirked, "And now you're here to save me?"

A sly grin tugging Camilla's lips.

"Oh, I already saved you once. Now I'm just sticking around to make sure I don't have to do it again anytime soon."

Ren chuckled, the sound lighter than he'd expected. "Well, you should definitely stay around, then."

Without warning, she reached up and cupped his face in her hands. Her eyes softened, a hint of something unspoken flickering behind the glaze. Ren's breath

caught, caught between confusion and something else—something almost tender, almost dangerously wholesome.

“Who am I to save you?” she said, very emotional and soft.

Then the voice changes to her playful self, “I’m just glad to be in your presence, my highness.”

Then, with a dramatic flourish, she dipped into a mock bow, the gesture both sincere and teasing, leaving Ren suspended between sweet confusion and laughter. Camilla’s way of reminding him that even in the darkest moments, there’s room for light, for strange comfort, and for the unexpected.

“What is it about her?” She asks him.

Ren doesn’t need her to say the name—he knows exactly who she means. He stares into the mirror on the wall in front of him, as if trying to piece together a puzzle inside himself.

“She sees through me... in me... knows everything about me. She knows the lies I tell, the truths. What I hide, my insecurities, my coping mechanisms. There’s nowhere to hide with her. She makes me feel like no one else could ever understand me more. She’s wise, and beautiful, yes—but even if she weren’t, even if she were none of those things, I’d still be madly in love with her, I don’t know why. I think I fell for her even before she opened her mouth.”

“So, the answer to your question is—No. I don’t know what it is about her. She makes me feel like I am supposed to find something within me, something I’m terrified to face—and I’m running from it without even knowing what it is.”

Camilla’s gaze softens, a knowing smile tugging at her lips. “Fujiko’s got that way about her, like she’s part mirror, part storm—you look into her and suddenly you’re faced with all the things you try to shove under the rug.”

“That four-letter word though, be careful with that, my ‘Almost-Drowned Prince’.”

“Love—yes, it’s the full brochure: joy, pleasure, meaning, purpose, companionship. Someone to share your popcorn with, grow old with, pretend to like their mother. But when it breaks? Oh, sweetheart—it takes more than it ever gave. That word is just a polite synonym for delayed suffering and you, my darling, already have a generous supply of it.”

Ren's eyes hold steady. "You don't know that," he says. "I believe love can save people."

"Look at you—sitting there, half-alive, stitched together by strangers. Love didn't save you. It dragged you to a hospital bed. It left you breathing by accident. You're living proof that I am Right. Thank you. I rest my case, you may applaud," and takes a bow.

She steps forward, slower now. Her tone serious.

"There are only two certainties in life, Mr. Love-Will-Save-Us-All."

Ren asks "and what are those?"

"Suffering and death", says Camilla

Looks like life gave you the full hog on the former and forgot the latter. So, tell me—do you think life hates you because it wants you to suffer till end of time, or loves you too much for you not to die?

Ren doesn't reply. He just stares at her reflection in the mirror.

He sees only a good woman scorched by experience, standing barefoot in its ashes.

"You look at her," she says, "Like she's the most soft, beautiful, wise person left in the world, like she's the last soft place in a world full of sharp edges."

Ren closes his eyes. Her voice has that effect—it wraps around the truth, then tightens.

"She might be." He says.

"You think she's the answer, but sometimes, the people who we think are the answer might just be the light guiding us toward the answer, not the answer themselves." She replies.

She meets his eyes then, her gaze steady, filled with something like respect—no judgment, only knowing.

"Fujiko's not your answer. She's a chance—the best chance—to find your answer to find yourself, to know who you really are inside."

Ren on the edge of the bed, hands clasped together, eyes on the floor. His voice is low.

“It’s just... with her, I feel there is something more, something that I ’am not seeing. Like there is some possibility, some ray of light to catch to end this inner turmoil, this suffering which I have had all my life.”

Camilla walks over, kneels in front of him—not with drama, just grace. Her hands rest on his knees, steady and warm.

“That feeling,” she says, “is beautiful, there is strength in it, don’t be scared of it, don’t run from it, keep it, use it as fuel to go through your pain but don’t let it overtake you.”

Ren looks up. Her face is closer than it’s ever been—strong, aged by truths she clearly never asked for.

He doesn’t know what to say.

Camilla brushes her palms against her fur coat.

“She might be the softest place left in the world, Ren. Just promise me you won’t use her as a place to hide, as a distraction, you will only use her as the light to drill through your pain to wherever it leads you.”

The entire conversation, everything she has done for him in the last two days, everything strikes him all at once. Then a long-held tension finally easing after years of tightness—the part of him that believed people were never genuinely concerned for others.

He looked at her like the steady, loving, wiser family member he never had. Someone who wants nothing but the best for him, not out of obligation, but because it’s in her heart. When faced with that kind of care, the answer isn’t complicated. You don’t say no.

Ren turns to her and says with utmost sincerity, “Sure, that’s a promise.”

Camilla gets up and flexes her fingers with a sly grin.

“Good...and be careful, if you break that promise, I’ll make sure your browser history becomes public...and don’t think I’m joking. I’m worse than Fujiko when somebody breaks a promise.”

The nurse slips into the room with a clipboard in hand. She lays the papers on the tray table, her voice calm but carrying that finality he’d been dreading. It was time to

sign. Time to go home. The word *home* feels too neat, considering the shape the penthouse is in. Yet the pen is already there, waiting in the nurse's hand.

The discharge papers, creased like a secret note no one wants to read twice, a slip for getting the dressing changed next week and a pouch of tablets sit heavy in Camilla's coat pocket. A The nurse offers a wheelchair, but Camilla brushes her off with a smile too elegant to question—one that says: *I've done this before.*

She guides him through the hospital's sliding doors, her fur coat catching the sunlight. Ren wears the hospital slippers still, his legs too thin, like they've forgotten their purpose. Every step feels on loan but he keeps going—mostly because she makes staying alive look easy.

Outside, the morning is obscene in its clarity. A sky too blue. Pavement too clean. The air too fresh.

They make their way down the street, slow and uneven. His shoulder brushes hers now and then—accidental, but anchoring. She lights a cigarette with a practiced flick, shielding the flame from the wind with a curled palm like a closing flower. Then, without a word, she lifts it to his lips.

He inhales.

"You smoke like someone trying to erase themselves slowly," she says, "Like you're hoping the smoke will carry pieces of you away, so there's less left behind each time."

Ren glances at her, a flicker of something wry in his eyes. "You should see me when I drink."

They both let out small, reluctant smiles—like bruises remembering how to laugh.

He coughs. His hands tremble slightly. "Why bother with someone like me?"

They stop in front of a corner shop. Her reflection peers back.

She looks at him in the window pane and says "Balance, darling, between even angels need monsters."

He turns to her, eyes clearer than they should be. "Then what does that make me?"

"A soul caught in between," she says. "Too pure to be a monster. Too ruined to be an angel."

They walk on in an easy silence. At the crosswalk, the light turns red. Without looking at him or saying a word, she reaches for his hand. The touch carries a quiet steadiness, the kind born from holding too many hands that were ready to slip away. In that simple grip, she tells him without speaking; sometimes just to remain still and wait, is enough. He doesn't pull away.

His building appears like a mirage. The shiny big glass front door slides open, as if greeting a regular who hasn't shown up in days. The lobby smells of jasmine air freshener and expensive perfume. Camilla helps him in the elevator, one hand on his back, the other puffing a cigarette.

They step out of the lift, and the hallway stretches before them. She lets a small smile curve her lips. "Look at this corridor—rich enough to have its own bank account. These walls probably cost more than my entire apartment" she says, her voice low, teasing.

They reach the door; He unlocks his apartment door with the fingerprint scanner.

At his apartment door, she pauses and says, "I'm sticking around—just to make sure you don't do anything graceful."

He says nothing.

She drops the last of the cigarette in the first cup she sees. It lands in the mould puddle and dies with a hiss—like something small and final letting go.

Inside—everything still reeks of what he tried to leave behind.

Ren hesitates, his body stiffening as he stands frozen. The memory of his last suicide attempt floods back—the moments, the desperation, everything for Camilla to see. Suddenly, a heavy wave of sadness crashes over him. The lightness he'd felt over the last few days dims, swallowed by the weight of his reality.

The bathtub bears the faded stains of blood, now darkened to a dull maroon, clinging stubbornly to the porcelain like a half-forgotten confession. Faint red fingerprints smear across the tiles, mapping the frantic path of his crawl. Shards of mirror lie scattered by the sink, among empty and broken bottles and discarded syringes—a silent testament to the chaos that consumed this space just a few days before.

Camilla walks past him without pause.

She moves barefoot, her bangles whispering with each step like old gossip. She kneels on the floor, runs her fingers along the tiles, then lifts them to her face. Blood flakes under her nails. She inhales, deliberate.

“This place,” she says, standing slowly, “screams unfinished suicide.”

She says it the way someone might admire a painting.

Ren leans against the wall, shame running like cold water down his spine. He waits for the verdict—but her eyes aren’t cruel. They’re assessing, almost tender in a way that makes it worse.

Prodding a shard of mirror with the tip of her shoe. Camilla says, “I suppose it’s comforting—coming home to your own crime scene. Gives the act... perspective.”

She moves to the small table by the window, reaches into her purse, and draws out three slender, hand-rolled incense sticks—dark and bound with a thin red thread. With the same quick flick she uses to light her cigarettes, she sets them aflame. The smoke doesn’t chase away the heaviness in the room—it settles into it, like another layer.

“Why incense?” Ren asks.

“Not to erase,” she replies, waving the curling smoke toward a crooked picture frame. “But to layer memory over memory. ‘Sometimes, the way forward is to let the past settle beneath a new layer of meaning, to build something hopeful on top of it.’”

She moves through the apartment with uncanny ease, moving as if the space were hers. She opens the window just a fraction—enough to let something in and let something out.

“You’re not afraid of this place, this doesn’t bother you?” he asks.

She gives a warm smile, non-judging, nice. “Oh, I thrive in chaos. This room? It’s like my second home.”

Then just like that she begins to clean.

She folds a throw blanket with quiet precision, smoothing the fabric as if trying to press out invisible wrinkles in the room’s tension. Her fingers pick up a broken mug, weighing it for a moment before setting it aside gently. Then, with the hem of her sleeve, she wipes away a dust ring from the table.

She tends to the space with the instinct of someone caring for a person not yet able to care for himself—not from pity, but from a deep-seated kindness, born of habit. It's the kind of care that doesn't demand thanks or appreciation, but simply exists, steady and unwavering, a silent promise that even in brokenness, someone is there.

Camilla then eyes him like he's the real mess in the room.

"Now, go take a proper shower. You still smell like despair had a one-night stand with misery."

The words fall like a quiet balm of care much like a mother's gentle reminder.

Ren, silent, obedient, walks toward the bathroom.

She glances down at the blood streak, arching a brow.

"Well," she says, "at least it's dramatic. Most people just leave dirty dishes."

Her gaze lifts to Ren—slumped at the bathroom door, depression energy, barely more than a shadow.

Camilla steps over the blood trail and looks into the bathroom with the careful attention of someone observing a crime scene. Her heels click once, then mute against the marble tiles.

"Wait," she says, gently. "Let me clean up the bathroom first. You definitely don't want to die accidentally. That would be too ironic."

He gives her a crooked smile—She walks into the bathroom.

Water runs. Glass clinks. Something flushes. She hums as she works—a low, winding sound that sits somewhere between lullaby and longing. When she re-emerges, sleeves rolled up, a damp cloth in hand, she looks like someone who's already accepted the weight of whatever comes next.

She helps him into the bathroom.

"I always thought the only time I'd ease a man into a tub would be to rob him of his money or to see if water could settle his debts." She smirks, lifting his arm over her shoulder. "And yet, here we are. Just your neighborhood tranny Florence Nightingale."

Ren leans into her with a groan. "Take whatever you want—wallet, pride, self-respect. Clearance sale. Everything must go."

Camilla smirks, steering him toward the bathroom.

“Sweetheart, I already stole your pride and self-respect last time I pulled you out of that tub. It’s impressive how little room they take—probably lost somewhere at the bottom of my bag by now. The wallet, though? That one’s still a mystery to me.”

He groans again, dragging his feet. “Oh, that should be on the night stand in the bedroom and the magic number to all my cards is 6728”

She guides him inside, her touch steady and reassuring, letting him breathe easier. “Careful. I’d hate for you to injure yourself before I’ve given you the full Camilla experience.”

Ren smirks weakly. “This some kind of deluxe service? Pick-up, clean-up, unsolicited insults?”

“Exactly,” she says, steadying him by the sink. “I run the full-service Camilla Experience—comes with sarcasm, occasional life advice, and light vacuuming if I’m in the mood.”

Ren squints at her. “Is that part of the package deal?”

“It’s the only package deal you can afford,” she says, twisting the taps, but for you, I am throwing in towel service, cold water, and a running commentary on your bad choices for free.”

Ren chuckles. “What’s the premium plan?”

She glances over her shoulder. “Same thing, but I pretend to be impressed by you,” she says, testing the water with a quick flick of her fingers.

“Now stay still. I’m about to add ‘bath attendant’ to my invoice.”

He chuckles, the sound light and real. “You know, you’re kind of amazing.”

Camilla raises an eyebrow. “Is that the meds talking, or are we getting sentimental before I’ve even found the bath salts?”

Ren smiles, head lolling slightly against the tiled wall. “Maybe both.”

She softens, her hands still busy with the taps and towels. “Well, try not to fall in love with your nurse. It’s a classic mistake.”

“Too late,” he murmurs.

Camilla rolls her eyes, but there's a flicker of something fond beneath it. "God. One foot in the grave and you're flirting."

Ren grins. "Helps with circulation."

She chuckles again, a low, affectionate sound. "Alright, Romeo, Let's get you clean before you start composing sonnets about soap."

There's no pause for approval. She doesn't ask. She undresses him with practiced hands—careful, competent, like someone who's done this too many times for people who never said thank you. She winces at the sight of old scars, fresh marks, and the raw purple of healing bruises.

"Your body's a poem," she mutters, "A really bad one. Free verse. Too many commas and no punctuation where it matters."

Ren laughs, quiet and hoarse.

She steadies him as he lowers into the tub. The water welcomes him, warm and undramatic. No shivers. No gasps. Just silence.

Camilla kneels beside the porcelain, loofa in hand, cleaning the bruises with the same weariness a mother might bring to cleaning her drunk son at 3 a.m.—no lectures, no rage, just tired care.

The first time since walking into his apartment, Ren breathes without hating himself.

Later, Ren changes into clean clothes—nothing fits quite right, but that hardly matters. Camilla carries the fresh scent of soap and water. They sit on the floor, backs resting against the couch, the living room dim and quiet. Between them, Ren stacks four exquisite wine bottles beside mismatched ceramic cups.

Camilla raises an eyebrow. "Why don't we have some tea and food instead? Do we really need wine? You seem pretty peaceful in your head right now. And, by the way—you smell surprisingly nice."

Ren chuckles softly. "Come on, I've been drowning in suffering so long, I forgot what it's like to drink for joy. Tonight, I'm drinking because for once, the world feels a little lighter, and I've got you to thank for that. I'll keep my sanity intact, I promise."

Camilla smiled gently, "Well, I suppose I should feel honored... though I'm still making sure the knives are out of reach."

Ren uncorked one of the wine bottles with a practiced twist, the soft *pop* breaking the quiet. He pours the deep red wine carefully into two mismatched ceramic cups, the wine swirling and catching the low light. He holds one out to Camilla with a small, hopeful smile.

Ren raised his cup cautiously, voice soft but steady. “I swear, tonight I’m keeping a lid on the chaos. Alcohol and my headspace don’t usually get along, but maybe this time, they’ll call a truce.”

Camilla let out a dry laugh, eyes sparkling with mischief. “Calling a truce between fire and gasoline? That’s a bold strategy. I’m rooting for you. I admire the optimism and respect the fact that you are trying.”

Ren chuckled, the sound rough but real. “Yeah, well, I’m a mess, but I’m trying.”

She lights a cigarette. “Trying’s where it starts. Just don’t think wine’s going to do all the heavy lifting. You’re going to have to carry that weight yourself.”

The first sips are gentle, tentative. They talk—half-joking, half-random—about anything and nothing. The absurdity of terrible movies, the ridiculousness of overpriced coffee, memories that don’t weigh too heavy. For a moment, the room feels lighter, laughter threading between them like a fragile lifeline.

They sit like that for a while—quiet, alive, unfinished. Wrapped in smoke, wine, and the kind of silence that feels like a blanket—soft and warm. The incense still hangs faintly in the air, the scent of something sacred trying to outlive the rot.

In a few hours, the last of the wine bottles is opened.

Camilla says rolling her wine cup stem in her hands. “You think everyone should be allowed to have kids?”

Ren blinks. “What do you mean? Of course. It’s one of the most fundamental pleasures of life.”

“Really?” she says, giving him that look—the one halfway between amusement and disbelief. “Have you seen people lately?”

He chuckles. “I’m looking at one right now.”

She smirks, but her eyes stay sharp. “Cute. No, I mean really seen them? Because I have. Up close. In my line of work, you get a front-row seat to the filth of society. These aren’t creeps from some shadowy back alley. They’re just... normal people.

Guy from the coffee shop. The sweet woman in your office. Husbands, wives, boyfriends, girlfriends. All playing their parts.”

Ren swirls his cup. “So what? Doesn’t mean they’re unfit parents.”

She raises an eyebrow. “I’m not judging them for having kinks. I’m judging the fact they don’t even know which one of them is the real them anymore. One person in the office, another at home. Someone else with friends, someone else when they’re alone, someone else when they’re with me. It’s not self-awareness—it’s confusion. They’ve split themselves into so many versions, they’ve lost track.”

Ren grins faintly. “Maybe that’s just being adaptable.”

“Adaptable is changing your shoes for the weather,” she says. “This is losing your damn feet.”

He laughs under his breath. “You’re dramatic.”

“Not dramatic enough,” she says, leaning in. “And the thinking? Don’t get me started. Most can’t think for themselves. It’s whatever the newsfeed says that day, whatever their favorite influencer says, whatever the crowd’s doing. Everyone’s a copy of everyone else, a clone of a clone of a clone, all desperately pretending to fit in and because of that, no one stands out. No one really knows who they are.”

Ren sighs, but there’s a flicker of agreement in his eyes.

“So, you’re saying they’re too messed up to raise kids?”

She nods, slowly. “Exactly. People who can’t run their own lives shouldn’t be trusted to run someone else’s. And the kid? The kid doesn’t get a say. They’re just dropped into whatever chaos is already boiling over. What chance do they have?”

He studies her. “You think there’s no hope, then?”

“Oh, there’s hope,” she says, with a faint shrug. “But mostly? Mostly people are too busy drowning to be anybody’s anchor.”

Ren leans forward, elbows on his knees, turning her words over like stones in his mind.

“That’s... bleak,” he says finally, with a half-laugh that fizzles out.

“You make it sound like humanity’s a bad habit we should’ve quit ages ago.”

Camilla sips her wine and shrugs. “Wouldn’t be the worst idea. Imagine the peace and quiet.”

He shakes his head. “I’m not saying you’re wrong about people being screwed up—God knows I’ve met my share of disasters in human skin.”

“Thank you for agreeing with me, I’ll take that as a compliment.” She says.

He smirks but presses on. “But if that’s the standard—perfect self-awareness, no masks, no chaos—then no one would ever have kids. Hell, no one would even try.”

She puts her cheek into her palm, feigning deep thought. “Tempting... but continue.”

Ren takes a slow sip, eyes drifting toward the window like the city might back him up.

“People don’t become parents because they’ve mastered life. They do it because they’re hoping to make something better than themselves. It’s stupid and selfish and hopeful all at once and yeah, some screw it up—most screw it up. But sometimes... you get someone who didn’t have a chance, and they give their kid one anyway.”

Camilla nods slightly, “So you’re saying the human race is basically a surprise pregnancy—completely lost, underprepared, but somehow worth keeping?”

He laughs, shaking his head. “Something like that.”

“And your big moral takeaway,” she says, gesturing with her cup, “is that if everyone waited until they were ready, there wouldn’t be a next generation at all?”

“That’s exactly it,” he says, meeting her gaze.

She studies him for a long moment, the sharpness in her gaze easing into something almost warm.

“Alright,” she says at last, lips curling faintly.

“I’ll give you this one. Not because you’ve convinced me—God forbid—but because you’re actually being optimistic, and I happen to like that about you. Makes me think there’s still hope for you... and it’s kind of adorable when you try.”

“But there’s got to be a middle ground and lucky for you, I’ve got one.” She says

Ren leans back, suspicious. “Oh boy. Go on.”

“Licenses,” she says, dead serious.

He blinks. “Licenses... for what, exactly?”

“For having kids,” like she’s just explained what the sky is. “Think about it—if you wanna fly a plane, you need a license. If you wanna drive a car, license. If you wanna run a business, license. Hell, if you wanna sell soggy hot dogs from a cart in the rain, you need a permit. But to raise a tiny human who will grow up to walk around in society making decisions that affect the rest of us? Nothing. Just... here you go, congratulations, try not to drop it.”

Ren chuckles. “You’re saying there should be a test before people can have kids?”

“Absolutely,” she says, warming up now.

“An actual exam, written and practical, and not just ‘do you know how to change a diaper.’ I mean real questions. Like, ‘Do you know how to apologize without making it about yourself?’ or ‘Can you keep a plant alive for more than three months?’ or my personal favorite—Can you hear your child crying at night without rehearsing how you’d fake your own death to get out of parenting?”

Ren smirks. “There would be a lot of couples failing that test.”

She waves him off. “So be it. Nobody’s handing me the keys to a Boeing 747 and saying, ‘Go on, Camilla, fly these nice people to Paris.’ And that’s fair, because I would one hundred percent crash it into a strip mall. Same logic—if you’re not fit to be a parent, you don’t get to be one. Boom. Problem solved.”

She leans closer, lowering her voice like she’s letting him in on the real secret. “And you should have to renew the license every few years. You know, like a driver’s license. Just to make sure you haven’t completely lost the plot. You fail the renewal? Sorry, Aiko, the kid goes to Grandma till you sort your shit out.”

Ren’s laugh comes out loud this time, catching him off guard. “That’s... horrifying and kind of brilliant.”

Camilla gives a big crooked smile, “Horrifying and brilliant... That’s my specialty darling.”

Camilla’s still smirking when she tips her cup back and drains the last of her wine. She sets it down with a soft clink. “Well, that’s it. We’ve officially solved the world’s problems. All that’s left is for someone to put me in charge.”

Ren tilts the bottle, sees it's empty, and chuckles without much humor.

"Guess the revolution will have to wait till we get more wine."

Camilla leans forward, resting her elbows on the table.

"You're surprisingly chipper tonight. Usually, by now, you've found a way to turn evening into a three-act tragedy."

Ren smiles at that—thin, almost absent.

"Guess I'm pacing myself." He pushes his empty cup away, but there's a restlessness in the gesture. Besides ... I like talking to you. Makes me forget for a while."

"Forget what?" she asks, playful but curious.

He hesitates, then shrugs. "Everything."

The air shifts—just slightly, like a draft slipping under the door. Camilla notices but doesn't call it out. She reaches for her water instead, giving him space.

Ren's eyes are somewhere far off now, his voice quieter.

"You were talking about people wearing masks earlier. You're right. Most people don't know who they are ... neither do I.

Camilla studies him.

"That sounds like the trailer for a very depressing documentary."

"Maybe it is." He leans back, rubbing a hand over his face.

"It's just ... you start thinking about all the crap people pass down. Their fears, their failures, their—whatever you call that itch in your chest you can't scratch. You realize, you're not just living your own life. You're carrying theirs too. All of it."

She watches him spiral without fully interrupting.

"And here I thought the wine was making you mellow."

He lets out a breath that's almost a laugh, but not quite. "Mellow? Nah. Wine just makes the truth louder."

His gaze meets hers, steady but tired.

"The truth is ... some people shouldn't just be barred from having kids. They shouldn't be allowed to touch anyone else's life at all."

For the first time tonight, Camilla doesn't have a quip ready. She just sits there, the silence filling the space where the jokes used to be.

Ren's fingers drum against the table once, twice, before going still. His voice hardens, losing the softness from moments ago.

"You know what really gets me, Camilla?" His eyes fixed on her like he's talking to her and the whole damn world at once.

"People leave wreckage behind and never even look back. They hurt you, use you, twist you into knots—and then they just... keep walking. Like you're some side character in their little story."

Camilla stays quiet, letting him go on.

"It's not just bad parenting," he continues, his tone tightening with each word.

"It's bosses who grind you down to nothing, friends who disappear the second you're not convenient, lovers who leave you bleeding and act like they're the ones who've been wronged and all the while—society, the law, whatever—just shrugs and says, 'That's life.'"

He gives a short, bitter laugh.

"If there's gonna be a license for parenting, there should be one for being a decent human being and if you fail, you get locked away somewhere until you learn how not to ruin everything you touch."

Ren's lips twitch, but there's no humor in it. The truth?

"Some people deserve to feel exactly what they put into the world. Every lie, every betrayal, every ounce of neglect—they should have it fed back to them until they choke on it. Not for revenge. Just for balance."

She studies him, swirling the water in her glass.

"You really believe that?"

His gaze drops to the empty wine bottle, then back to her.

"I believe the world's full of people who've never been held accountable for a damn thing and maybe if they had... maybe fewer of us would be walking around with scars we didn't earn."

The room feels smaller now, the playful license talk long gone, replaced by something sharp and bitter. Camilla doesn't push or pull—just lets the silence stretch, because she knows if she says the wrong thing, the dam will break completely.

"You ever feel like you've already failed," Ren says, voice hoarse, "but you don't even know what the fuck the test was?"

Camilla voice is gentle, "Failure's when you realise you didn't know what the test was all along or when you find out the test was never about the thing you prepared for."

Ren shakes his head, bitter. "Don't give me philosophy."

"You're breathing," she says. "That's the part that matters right now."

His elbows on his knees, clutching his own hair like it's the only thing keeping him stable.

"There's something inside me," his speech slurring, "Something wrong. Like grief I never earned. I think I am weak and very crazy"

Camilla touches his knee, light as a feather.

"I know," she says. "But you're not crazy. Not weak either."

He jerks away. Stands and paces a little.

"I'm pathetic," he snaps. "A grown man being spoon-fed wine and philosophy. Sitting in your goddamn thrift-store sanctuary, hoping it all just... fixes itself."

Her eyes follow him. Still no anger. Only ache.

"Do you think I *want* to be here?" he snaps, the volume creeping up.

"You think this is some kind of tragic story? I'm falling apart, Camilla—inside my own skin—and at the same time I'm falling apart over a woman I barely even..."

He chokes off the end. Not because he regrets it, but because it came too easily.

Camilla stands, slowly. She doesn't raise her voice. "No, Ren. I don't think you want to be here but I think you are exactly where you need to be."

That stops him for a moment. Then he laughs—a raw, unkind sound. "Need, really?" he repeats. "Like any of this has a purpose."

Camilla walks past him, not storming. Controlled. Steady. She begins folding the blanket on the couch. Straightening things. “I think you’re in the middle of something you don’t understand yet,” she says. “I’m not asking you to trust me. I’m asking you to survive long enough to make sense of it. You know, Churchill once said, ‘If you’re going through hell...keep going.’”

Ren says nothing. His breath is loud now. There’s fury in it—but not towards her. It’s blind, directionless, the kind of anger that wants to smash mirrors just for the sake of it.

Camilla walks to the kitchen, rinses out the wine cups.

Ren turns to the window. His reflection looks stranger than he feels.

“I don’t want to keep going,” he says quietly.

Camilla doesn’t respond.

The kitchen light casts a soft glow behind her, catching the faint shimmer in her hair, the quiet in her spine. She dries the cups one by one.

Ren leans in the doorway now, arms folded, eyes flickering between rage and regret.

“Don’t act like you understand me,” he says, voice taut.

“I’m not,” Camilla says.

“You say things like you’ve been through it. But you haven’t. You’re too calm. Too collected.” Ren says.

She places a cup down, gently. “Calm and collected doesn’t mean, never destroyed, Ren. It just means I learned how to heal without making a sound.”

He steps closer stumbling, knees giving away. “Then show it. Show me something real. I feel like I’m drowning in this—this fog—and you’re just lighting candles in it.”

Camilla turns around, finally. Her face is still, but her eyes glisten. She walks to him, stops just short of touching.

“I’ve broken too, Ren,” she says. “More times than I’ll ever say aloud. But when someone’s drowning, I don’t jump in with them. I hold steady. That’s how you save someone.”

He looks down, jaw clenched, his fists balled like he’s holding broken glass.

“What if I don’t want to be saved—what if I want to drown in my darkness?”

Camilla’s smile is faint, almost too soft to notice. “Then I’ll just hope you remember one day, that you weren’t always drowning in the dark.”

He exhales through his nose, sharp. “Why?” His voice catches on the word. “Why would you even care?”

She says nothing.

“You don’t know me,” he presses. “You’re wasting your time.”

Camilla leans back against the wall, her expression unreadable, not even a ripple of offense in it. He studies her, searching for some flicker, some tell, and finds nothing but the maddening calm.

The silence stretches. He can hear his own heartbeat in it, feel the ache in his chest deepen.

“Who are you?” he asks—demanding an answer.

Her eyes stay locked on his, a faint glimmer in them—too steady, too knowing.

“Someone who’s here for the part of you that still matters,” she says. “The rest... you can keep burning.”

He stares at her, thrown by the weight of it.

“I don’t even know what that means.”

“You will,” she says.

“I’m not your project,” he snaps. “I’m not some tragic man you get to fix and feel holy about.”

“I know,” she says, quieter. “You’re not.”

“Then stop treating me like some—some puzzle with a piece missing. I don’t need Fujiko’s tea, or your incense, or your cryptic Zen bullshit—you’re no saviour... you’re just... what—a whore?”

He stops. Immediately. It comes too fast, too cruel. He knows he crossed a line. The words hang between them.

Camilla doesn’t move. Her face is unreadable.

Ren’s chest rises and falls. His voice is softer now, but the damage is done.

“I didn’t mean—”

She lifts a hand, silencing him. Her tone stays calm, but the light behind her dims somehow.

“You’re scared,” she says. “I know that voice. That panic. You lash out because you want control. But what’s coming—what’s already begun—you can’t control. The part of you that knows, that’s the part hurting the most.”

Ren stands frozen. The room feels colder. He doesn’t apologise; he knows no apology could undo the harm. Camilla doesn’t ask him to.

Camilla sits on the kitchen floor, crossing her legs with quiet finality. She doesn’t look at him. Just lights a smoke.

Ren stands by the hallway wall. His hands dangle uselessly at his sides, jaw tight with some mix of shame and helplessness.

“You always talk like you’ve seen the last chapter,” he mutters. “Like you already know how this ends.”

Camilla exhales a ribbon of smoke toward the ceiling. “I’ve lived through more endings than I care to name.”

“That’s not an answer.” He snarls back.

She turns her eyes to him now—measured, doesn’t say anything.

He paces once, then stops, rubbing his temple like he’s trying to push something back in.

“I’m not being dramatic,” he says, defensive now. “There’s something wrong. Inside. Like I’m unraveling... and nothing I do stops it.”

“I believe you.” she says.

He stares at her.

“Then say something useful. Tell me what to do.”

Her voice doesn’t rise.

“Answers don’t matter if you haven’t earned the right questions.”

Ren scoffs. “That sounds like something a therapist writes on a mug.”

She leans forward, not smiling. “It’s still true.”

He doesn't speak.

She continues, voice steady but not unkind.

"Right now, you're angry at the world for leaving you in the dark but maybe it's meant to be that way. It's unfamiliar, unknown, unforgiving—Yes, but maybe not evil. How else would anyone really see the light, or know its worth, if they hadn't first sat in the pitch black? People think darkness is there to break you. They forget—it's also what makes you hungry enough to reach for something brighter... and stubborn enough not to stop when it's hard to find."

Ren drops onto the floor, back against the wall, legs sprawled out. His face is hollowed out, cheeks streaked faintly with what's left of the tears.

"I don't know who I am anymore." He says.

Camilla stubs out the cigarette, stands, and sits beside him.

"That's Ok, what matters now," she continues, "is that you don't retreat just because it hurts. Hold the line. Even if your hands shake."

He turns slightly toward her, but doesn't speak.

Camilla looks at him—not like someone tending a wound, but like someone waiting for the first cracks of light to appear beneath a sealed door.

"Don't fall apart just because the light hasn't come yet," she says. "You're not dying. You're growing."

The silence that follows is thick, almost suffocating.

The room holds its breath—for him, for her, for the quiet miracle that he might survive this night

Ren hasn't moved in minutes. He sits slumped against the wall like a marionette after curtain call, strings snipped by truths too heavy to carry.

Camilla stands, brushing cigarette ash off her thighs. No drama. No sigh.

Ren doesn't look up. His voice scrapes out flat. "You can go now."

Camilla walks to the kitchen counter, slow. "You sure about that?"

He turns his head, eyes half-lidded. "I've done worse things to better people."

She lets the words hang. Then opens the cupboard, pulls out a bottle of the honeyed liqueur, and pours two double large. Her back is to him, but her hands are doing something. “You’re not a bad man, Ren. You’re just tired and lost.”

“I said fuck off.” Ren says

She turns, and hands him a glass. Her voice is neutral, but her eyes are tracing every inch of him.

“Bottoms up to strangers who could’ve carried each other home, but you kept running back to the fire because the cold scared you more than the burn. You are not choosing redemption, Ren. You are choosing the comfort of your own ruin, That’s sad.”

Ren doesn’t refuse. Just takes the glass and mutters something under his breath. Might’ve been “thanks.” Might’ve been nothing.

Their knuckles brush—hers warm, his clammy. They both drink at once.

The bourbon coats his mouth, hangs in the back of his throat.

She lingers a moment longer than necessary.

Ren wipes his lips with the back of his hand. “What was that look?”

Camilla says calmly. “Insurance.”

He narrows his eyes.

She sets her empty glass down softly. “You’ll sleep. Don’t fight it. I’ve made sure of that.”

“You drugged me?” he asks shocked.

“Think of it like an emergency break, you need to sleep.” Replies Camilla.

He blinks. The room is already softening around the edges. His arms feel heavy, like waterlogged cloth.

“Why?” he mumbles.

Camilla picks up her coat, slips it on like a second skin. “Because you’re very close to doing something stupid...again.”

Ren slouches back further. His limbs betray him—he’s already sinking. “You think you know everything,” he mutters.

“No,” she says, walking toward the door.

“But I know when you see a man standing on the edge—you don’t wait for them to jump. You do what needs to be done, even if they hate you for it.”

She reaches for the handle, then pauses. Turns. Looks at him one last time.

Her voice is low but unshaken. “Remember this sweetheart, losing yourself and finding yourself often take you through the same door. The difference isn’t the path—it’s whether you lie down in the dark... or keep moving forward until it becomes light.”

Ren’s eyes are already shutting. His lips part. No words come.

The last thing he sees is the back of her fur-lined coat and the door closing.

Chapter 5

Guiding through Darkness



He wakes on the floor, the taste of wine and ash thick in his mouth. Light slants in harsh and honest through the blinds, incense powder blown like gray snow over cracked tile. The wine bottles have rolled to the bookshelf. His wrist sticks slightly to the floor where dried wine has become slimy like glue.

Ren shifts. Pain answers in every joint. His body feels both foreign and too familiar—like a language he once knew but forgot how to speak. He groans, then lights a cigarette with fingers that won't quite hold still.

The first drag anchors him.

Camilla's perfume still haunts the air—soft, lingering, impossible to ignore. Ren's breath catches. "Camilla..." Then it hits him like a breaker against his face. "Oh... shit. Fuck. What did I do last night?"

The memories don't return all at once—they drip, slow and merciless. Fragments of his own voice, raw and splintered. Words sharpened by spite, warped by fear. Words he can't take back. Words that make his stomach turn.

He sees himself in flashes—leaning too close, spitting out words like poison, taking aim at the one person who'd actually stayed. Shameless. Ungrateful. A man with teeth bared at a hand that hadn't even tried to strike him.

Ren slaps himself—sharp, desperate—like he can knock the taste out of his mouth, like pain might earn him even a shred of grace. But the room still smells like her, and that's somehow worse.

He picks up his phone from under the couch,

He taps into a new thread.

To: Camilla

I don't even know where to start. I'm sorry. For everything. For the way I spoke to you. For being an ungrateful, miserable bastard when all you did was try to help.

Thank you—for saving me. For staying when I didn't deserve a second of your time. For taking care of me when I couldn't even stand to be in my own skin. For the bath. For the quiet. For the warmth. No one's been that kind to me in years, not without wanting something back.

You didn't deserve my rage, not one ounce of it. You were trying to anchor me and I fought you like a scared, cornered child. And thank you—God—thank you for drugging the man on the edge. Because I would've jumped. No question.

I'm sorry for all of it. I will try to walk through the fire this time. I will try to make it mean something.

I hope we can still be friends. I know it's selfish to even ask. But please forgive me, I know I don't deserve it.

He doesn't expect a reply. But soon the dots appear....

From: Camilla

First of all, relax — I'm not mad. you're not important enough to ruin my day like that. (kidding... mostly.)

Was I annoyed? obviously. worried? you have no idea. but here's the thing, people spit out some truly stupid shit when they're drowning, and you were practically snorkeling in your own misery last night. I've got the waterproof mascara stains to prove it.

Self-destructive? yeah. selfish? maybe. but you say "thank you" like a man learning how to pray again. Awkward, messy, but straight from the gut, so I'll take it.

Now, Romeo, here's your to-do list:

Get some sunlight

Eat something that used to have a face

Drink water, only water, nothing else, maybe coffee

Stop yelling at your reflection, he's not the enemy

and if I hear you spiraling again, I will come back and drug you, just like before — only this time I'm adding glitter so you wake up sparkling.

Ren chuckles—dry, brittle.

He leans his head back against the wall and exhales. The silence in the apartment is dense but not hostile. A kind of stillness after the storm.

A flicker on his phone. A voice message.....from *Fujiko*.

Fujiko's voice. Calm, deliberate, patient as prayer.

"Don't curse the dark for stealing sight, some seeds only bloom at night."

That's all it says. Then nothing. As if that single sentence were enough. As if the air itself should understand.

Ren blinks. Doesn't move.

He sits forward slowly, clicks the interface.

Replay.

"Don't curse the dark for stealing sight, some seeds only bloom at night."

Replay.

"Don't curse the dark for stealing sight, some seeds only bloom at night."

He closes his eyes on the third time.

On the ninth, he opens them again.

By the tenth, he's memorized the breath between each syllable. How Fujiko lets the words hover in the air like they have somewhere else to go before they land.

Each time it plays, the message shifts. Not in content—but in weight.

At first, it felt like comfort. Then like dust rising from the bones of a dream. Now—something sacred, waiting to be understood.

He thinks about their conversations. The silence between them. The tea she handed him—earthy, bitter, calming. Her perfume—lavender. The silk robe slipping off one

shoulder like it had a will of its own. The way she walked—not toward him, not away, but into him.

The more he sifts through her—the gestures, the glances, the quiet—the deeper he falls. Not just into her, but into himself.

He had felt naked in front of her then—and even now, just thinking of her stripped him bare again.

No mask.

No posture.

No charm to distort the light.

No theatrics.

Nothing left to shield the shuddering thing inside him.

She saw him—utterly.

But he couldn't see what she saw.

And that—that was what terrified him.

Then a complete breakdown began, summoned by the raw truth of the matter. It did not soothe him. It began to dissolve the borders of who he thought he was, everything he had called 'self' began to crack. It brought no grounding—only a sharper kind of dissolution. Only agony, made holy by its precision.

The agony did not leave—it only shifted, putting on different faces as if each might hurt him in a new way.

Her memory came first, not as an image but as a weight. From memory came the things she said. The things she said became unease. That unease grew teeth and became longing. The longing held him for a while, then soured, turned inward, and hardened into dread. Dread curled into shame, and shame, when it had burned long enough, caught fire and became rage. When rage collapsed, he was left in a quiet that wasn't peace, only absence—absence of him, absence of her. In that absence, pain & suffering found him again.

It deepened—not like a knife but like water rising, slowly filling the room and there it stayed with him. Around him. Inside him. As if suffering had arms of its own and he belonged to them.

Now, she and the pain lingered together, side by side—in his blood, in his bones, in his mind, in his heart, but most of all, in some locked and buried place inside of him he didn't know how to reach.

The door bell buzzes.

Ren doesn't move. He's curled against the cold kitchen wall, wrapped in a blanket, knees drawn up. One hand clutches a cup of coffee—made twenty minutes ago, never touched. Its warmth has vanished.

The door bell blares again. Longer this time.

Then silence.

Then comes the knocking.

First, soft. Tentative. A stranger's courtesy.

Then firmer. Steady. A rhythm too human to ignore—like someone knocking not to be let in, but to raise the dead.

Ren winces. His skull still echoes with Fujiko's voice. He pulls the blanket tighter around his shoulders. Shuts his eyes.

Then—more knocking, loud. No courtesy now.

He shouts, barely lifting his head: "Go away."

The knocking stops.

A moment passes. Then a voice—low and composed. Not Camilla's warmth. Not Fujiko's calmness.

"She said you don't eat but coffee and a Croissant is a must."

Ren blinks. That voice—it's with a spine—it's sugar and iron.

He hauls himself upright, Opens the door.

A woman stands there.

Tall. Beige trousers, white shirt rolled at the sleeves. No makeup, no flourish—just bone structure and poise. Her hair is tied back with the kind of precision that looks effortless. She holds a takeaway tray with two coffees and a paper bag.

Ren asks, who are you and why are you here?

She scans him—not with sympathy, but assessment. Like she’s reading the end of a novel before the beginning makes sense.

I’ am Shantel, she raises the paper bag like a relic, “I am here because Fujiko thinks you’ll talk to me.”

“No,” Ren says sharply.

Ren blinks at her, startled. His voice comes out uneven, almost unsure.

“I... I don’t even know you.”

He shifts back on his feet, confusion tightening his face.

“What is this? Why are you here? I don’t—”

He breaks off, his breathing quickening.

Then sharper, his words tumbling out: “No. No, you leave. Right now. What the hell is this?”

His hands grip the door handle, “I don’t want to talk to you. I already talked to Camilla. That’s enough. I’m not—” He cuts himself short, shaking his head, unable to finish.

Shantel doesn’t move. Doesn’t blink. “Camilla was here to take you to the hospital. So, you don’t die. She came to give you care, warmth, blankets and mercy. I’m the one who talks to you.”

Ren lets out a laugh—loud, hollow, bitter. He leans against the doorframe and runs both hands through his hair like he’s about to set the whole place on fire.

“Oh, perfect. Of course. Of fucking course,” he says, pacing two steps and then back. “Fujiko sends someone else. Just like that. Like I’m some... some project.”

Shantel’s face stays still, mildly curious, like she’s watching a street performer with too much eyeliner.

Ren gestures wildly. “First Camilla. Now you. Who’s next? Some childhood friend I forgot I had? Do you people work for her? Is this, what—a trans cult? A charity? Emotional hospice care for men she likes to torture?”

She sighs, already bored of this monologue. “Camilla told me you’d get dramatic. She didn’t say you’d be so loud about it.”

Ren glares. "You think this is funny?"

Shantelle smirks, one eyebrow lifting.

"Funny? No. Repetitive. Yes. Like those billboards outside—same flicker, same slogan, every damn day and every damn night."

She steps inside, breezing past him like she was walking into her own house.

She walks straight to the window, pushes the curtains and opens the windows wide. The morning rushes in—heat, dust, traffic, someone arguing downstairs. Sunlight too sharp to be kind.

She sets the coffee and the paper bag on the kitchen table.

Shantel takes a seat, crosses her legs and looks at Ren waiting him to carry on with his rant.

Ren blurts out "You don't get to walk into my place like this."

"I just did." She says nonchalantly.

"You don't know me." Ren says.

She meets his stare. She says "I know enough, Fujiko said you cry beautifully. Camilla just said you were delicious when broken. I had to see what all the fuss was about."

He blinks with a sorry look on his face

She continues.

"The man who says 'go away' like he means it—then spends the night rehearsing apologies. The kind who wants people to leave but prays they come back. Too proud to beg. Too childish to let go."

He looks away, jaw tight. Breathing hard.

She shrugs. "I had to see for myself. Fujiko's wilted lover. Camilla's bathtub boyfriend."

Ren's breath stutters. "This is insane."

"Yep." she says.

"I don't even want to be part of this." He says.

She raises her coffee. "That's the problem. You already are."

He shakes his head violently. "You don't know what the fuck I am going through."

"I don't have to," she replies, shifting the chair like it's her second home. "You wear it like cologne."

Ren throws up his hands, backing toward the wall. "So what? You're here to fix me?"

"No," she says. "You don't listen very well, do you. I told you I am here to talk to you."

"You people think I'm some fucking experiment?" he asks.

Shantel finally meets his fire with stillness. "No. I think you're tired and terrified and too proud to admit you want help."

Ren looks away. The coffee. The bread. Her. Everything feels unreal.

"And," she adds, sipping her coffee, "you're also clearly very hungry, so sit down before you pass out and I have to call someone who actually gives a shit."

He doesn't move.

She doesn't either.

The clock ticks behind them like it's waiting to see who blinks first.

She unwraps the Croissant Taiyaki. One for her. One slid toward him with a finger that doesn't wait for gratitude. The smell cuts through the stale air of the apartment—buttery, warm, real in a way nothing else in the room feels.

Ren stares at it. His stomach grumbles and betrays him.

"Sit and Eat," Shantel says, breaking hers clean down the middle. "Your demons can wait five minutes."

They sit across from each other at the kitchen table, which wobbles slightly if you press your elbows down. Ren forgot that. He hasn't sat here with in weeks. Maybe months.

The coffee is strong, floral, not from the convenience store. She went out of her way. He takes a sip.

"It's good and strong," he mutters.

"Of course it is," she says. "I needed something potent enough to keep you alive long enough to listen."

She tears off another piece of Taiyaki and nods at the bookshelf “That’s a lot of pages for someone who still doesn’t know who he is.”

He gives her a look. “You said you’re not here to fix me.”

She munches on her croissant, “I’m not. You really don’t listen.”

Ren takes a bite. The croissant breaks apart softly, almost too gentle for a place like his. He hates how easily it goes down. He tries not to like it. Shantelle sits across from him like she owns the penthouse not him.

“You ever think about how grief starts to look like identity?” she asks, eyes still on the crumbs. “You wear it long enough, people stop asking what’s underneath.”

He swallows, not the croissant—the tension, “You think this is fake?”

“I think it’s real but the whole performance?” She lifts her chin slightly. “That’s immaculate!”

Ren leans back.

“And you think you can tell the difference?”

She gives him an eye,

“I *know* the difference. I’ve been both.”

He pushes the rest of the croissant away, muttering something about not being hungry.

Shantel snorts, pushes the plate right back to him, and shoves it so close the crumbs hit his shirt. “Uh-uh. Finish it, rich boy. That thing costs money.”

Her voice has that tone—half threat, half lecture.

“You know what *I* have to do for money? You’re not gonna sit there, in front of me, acting like food’s some accessory you can just toss aside when you’re sulking.”

Ren leans back, half-smirking like he might joke his way out of it. She leans forward, killing the smile before it starts.

“Eat it, you manner less child. Don’t make me feed you myself, because I will, and I won’t be gentle about it. You got two hands, a working mouth, and a plate in front of you—so use them. Also, while you’re at it, remember the world doesn’t owe you shit, least of all a fresh croissant you think you’re too good to finish.”

By the time she's done, he's already chewing. Ren chews with anger like the croissant did something to him personally.

Shantelle watches, deadpan. "That's impressive. Really. You're eating it like you're mad at it. What did that croissant ever do to you? Did it insult your family? Did it forget your birthday? Because the way you're tearing into it, there seems to be history."

Ren glares, but he keeps eating.

Shantelle grins wider. "That's it. Chew. Swallow. Repeat.

Ren quickly finishes his croissant and gulps down his coffee.

"There you go. Proof you're still trainable" Shantel says

She finishes her coffee in one long sip and stands.

"Let's go," she says, brushing the crumbs off her pants

"You've been mourning in captivity. Time to see if the sadness can survive outside."

They take the stairs to the roof, Ren says nothing.

Ren leans over the concrete edge, hands braced like a man watching the world burn below. The city carries on with indifference—traffic flowed, neon blinked, a siren wailed and faded. It was all so alive it made him feel dead.

Shantel kicks her boots off, sits cross-legged on a broken air conditioning vent like an angry guru, and lit a cigarette.

"You keep trying to kill yourself like death's some final curtain," she says, exhaling smoke that curled between them like punctuation.

"It's not, Ren. It's just a change of clothes—same soul, same baggage, just a different coat to carry it in."

"Death doesn't solve a damn thing. The lesson you skip today will be waiting for you tomorrow—or next year, or in the next skin you wear in your next birth. Pain is like a debt collector. It's polite at first, but if you keep dodging it, it comes back with bigger boots."

Her voice almost tender. "If you can't stomach the weight you're carrying now—the one already breaking your knees—what makes you think you can survive the one

that's worse? It will be worse, believe me. That's how it works. You run, and the thing chasing you just gets hungrier."

She tapped her cigarette, slow and deliberate.

"Death's not an escape. It's a postponement and if you think the bill's high now, wait till you see it with interest."

Ren leans back against the railing, half-laughing, half-exhaling like he's trying to keep his head above water.

"I really don't know," he says, shaking his head. "I've just met you. What do you even want? I don't know how to talk to you—I don't even know what language we're speaking right now."

He gestures to the sky like it's some trial.

"One minute you're scaring me into finishing breakfast, like I'm a hostage with a croissant, and the next, you're giving me TED Talks about death and cosmic pain. What am I supposed to do with that? Am I eating breakfast or auditioning for a séance?"

His voice cracks on the last word, frustration peeking through.

"I don't get how this works—what is this? A test? A game? Some kind of hazing ritual? Do you all three sit around somewhere and decide, 'Yeah, let's break this guy before lunch'?"

He rubs his face,

"Seriously, is there a handbook for surviving you people? I feel like I have walked into a movie halfway through and everyone knows their lines except me."

Shantel crosses her arms, the smoke from her cigarette curling around her like a silent warning. Her eyes lock onto Ren's, sharp and unblinking.

"Look, Ren, you don't get to raise your hand like that and wear that look on your face just before the elevator doors shut. That wasn't just about you. It wasn't just a snap. You asked Fujiko for help, didn't you? Well, this—this right here—is help. Whether you like it or not."

Ren, surprised and gleeful says slowly,

"I want Fujiko to help me, not you."

Shantel shrugged, a half-smile playing at the corner of her lips. “Fujiko has her own ways of helping but nobody understands her. She’s too mysterious... too layered for anyone to really get. Even Camilla or I. Who knows what secrets and wisdom she keeps between her ears”

Ren’s shoulders slump, and he looks away, voice quieter now.

“You’re not very pleasant, You are scary and rude, I don’t want to talk to you.” He states.

Shantel’s grin grows sharper, but there is no malice in it.

“Okay, sensitive boy,” she said, amusement softening her tone. “I’m no Camilla. Don’t expect warmth or fluffy bullshit from me, but I will take it down a notch or two for you.”

She steps a little closer, her voice dipping to something calmer, more measured. “Here’s the thing, Ren. I know you’re scared, and I get it—this isn’t easy. You want help on your terms. Sometimes, the people who show up aren’t the ones you asked for but they’re the ones you actually need, we all have our part to play.”

Ren’s eyes meet hers again, a flicker of something unsettled and uncertain.

Shantel continues, voice softer but firm.

“You don’t have to like me. You don’t have to like what I say. But if you want to get through this—and I mean really get through it—you have to be willing to talk, even when it’s uncomfortable. You need a space where you can drop the masks and the anger, and not be judged. I can be that space. Not because I’m some saint, but because you asked for it and because I’ve been through enough hell to know what it looks like from both sides.”

She takes a breath, her gaze steady and real. “Fujiko’s here too, in her own way, but right now, you have me. This is where you start. No pressure, no expectations. Just talk. Or don’t. But don’t shut the door before you even try.”

Ren’s lips press together. The fight in him isn’t gone—it never would be—but something in Shantel’s words reached past the noise.

“Maybe... maybe I could try,” he says, voice low.

Shantel's eyes flash with a mix of challenge and something like fond exasperation. "Who is this guy? What's all this 'maybe' bullshit? Step into it, Mr. Big Shot. Mr. CEO."

Ren blinks surprised, caught off guard. "What are you talking about?"

She leans in, hands on her hips, voice sharp and no-nonsense. "You made your own company from scratch. You're a self-made CEO. I'm pretty damn sure you didn't get there sitting around whispering 'maybe' to yourself while mumbling to a croissant."

Ren scoffs, but there is a flicker of a smile.

Shantel isn't done. "I want that guy—the one who started from the ground up, fought tooth and nail, and was a bloody tiger in the boardroom. You remember him, right? He's still in there, buried under all this mess and misery."

She taps his temple, voice dropping to something almost conspiratorial. "You need that guy now. Not the mopey, drowning-in-his-own-sadness version. The guy who makes decisions, takes risks, and doesn't back down just because the world got loud."

Ren's shoulders straighten, a spark lighting behind his eyes.

"Yeah, that guy," Shantel said, smirking. "He's still got fight left and I'm betting he's pissed enough to claw his way out."

Ren laughs, the sound rough, genuine, in a meek voice he says, "Ok."

Shantel gave him a wink. "Damn right its ok. So, how about you stop feeling sorry for yourself and start acting like the CEO who built an empire out of thin air?"

Shantel nods, satisfied. "Good. Now let's see if we can get that tiger out and roaring again."

Ren doesn't answer right away. His fingers curl tighter on the ledge.

Ren takes a deep breath, then holds out his hand with a slow, tentative smile. "Okay, let's take this step by step."

Shantel smirks, slapping his palm with a satisfying crack. "Come on, rich boy. Let's get down to it. No fluff, no bullshit. You ready to face whatever the hell this is head-on?"

He nods, feeling a little lighter because—finally—someone isn't treating him like a lost cause.

“Why does it feel like I’m being erased?” His voice drops, barely above a whisper. “Like... deleted.”

Shantel looks at him, eyes sharp and unwavering.

“It’s not you, Ren. It’s your mask peeling off. The shiny ‘I’m fine’ bullshit mask you wear everywhere. You? You’re the part watching it all happen—trying to make sense of the mess.”

She flicks ash off her cigarette with a casual grace, letting it fall into the drainpipe below.

“Real death?” she says, voice low and raw. “That’s not what you think. Real death is spending your whole life asleep, working for someone else, posting, fucking, winning, losing, heart breaks—without ever asking why the hell you’re doing it. That’s the real tragedy. You—you are lucky. You’re dying on your feet.”

Ren blinks, confused. “Lucky?”

“Yeah,” she says, leaning back, a grin tugging at the corner of her mouth. “Because you noticed that hollow ache. That pull toward the edge. That’s not despair—it’s your soul cracking its knuckles, gearing up for a fight.”

He lets out a bitter laugh. “So, you’re here to hold my hand through this?”

“Nope.” She grins wider. “I’m here to tell you something important—you’re not special. Every damn person walks through this fire at some point. You’re not the first guy to stare at his life and realize he’s been sleepwalking.”

The smoke curls between them, a silent witness.

“Want the cold, hard truth?” she asks. “You’ve been dying a thousand tiny deaths for years. Every time you said ‘yes’ when you meant ‘no.’ Every smile you forced instead of screaming. You’ve been leaking life slowly. Now the dam finally broke. That’s it.”

Ren’s voice comes out softer, unsure. “So, what now?”

Shantel picks up a small pebble and tossed it off the ledge. The city noise swallowed the faint clink as it hit somewhere far below.

A gust of wind lifts her hair, whipping it across her face.

“Ever watch a snake shed its skin?” she asked, casual but sharp. He stayed quiet. “They don’t scream, don’t cry. They just rub up against something rough and let the old skin rip away. They don’t call it death. They know it’s growth.”

Ren let her words settle.

“You know how the soul grows?” she said softly, not waiting for him to answer. “Not by collecting, but by shedding. Illusions, names, faces, stories—they fall away one by one. Until what’s left can’t be touched, stolen, or broken.”

He looks at her, unease flickering across his face. “But what if there’s nothing left? What if everything I am is just... what’s being shed?”

Her eyes hold his—steady, unblinking. “Then it’s time to find out whether you were ever real or just an echo of something too scared to live.”

Ren glances down at his trembling hands.

“You said I’m watching the mask fall off. But who’s watching?”

His voice cracks, sounding small and vulnerable, not searching for answers but safety.

Shantel stretches slowly, feline and poised.

“That, sweetheart, is the question. The one that breaks people. ‘Who’s watching? Who am I?’ It’s the first real question of being human—and the last one too.”

Ren exhales shakily, trying to catch his breath. “So, I’m not dying?”

“Oh, you’re dying,” she says brightly, almost cheerfully. “But only the parts of you that weren’t really alive to begin with.”

His eyes meet hers, glazed with a mix of fear and clarity. “This hurts.”

“Of course it does.” Her voice softened just a fraction. “You’ve been living as a ghost—borrowed names, someone else’s dreams, someone else’s success story. That version of you? It’s being cremated.”

He winces, voice barely a whisper. “And Fujiko... was she the fire?”

Shantel smiles. “Maybe she lit the match but the wood was stacked long before she came along. Don’t give her all the credit.”

Ren looks down at the cars, blurred by moisture in his eyes.

“She destroyed me,” he says.

“No.” She settles beside him again, nudging his shoulder gently. “She tried to show you what needed to burn away—the lies, the masks. The real you is still in there. A little raw, a little helpless, but breathing.”

She gave a small, fierce smile. “And breathing? That’s a damn good start.”

Ren leans back against the cold metal railing, jaw clenched, eyes fixed somewhere beyond the horizon—distant yet searching.

Shantel observes him quietly before shifting her gaze upward toward him. “You know,” she began, measured and deliberate, “darkness isn’t an absence. It’s a prerequisite. Without dark, light has no meaning. No flashlight can illuminate when the sun is at its peak.”

Ren says nothing, the weight of her words settling inside.

She tilts her head with a hint of a challenge. “Most people—when darkness arrives—they panic. They scramble blindly for switches, or worse, pretend the darkness isn’t real. They hum, they smile, they scroll endlessly to avoid facing what’s truly there. They fake light.”

Ren mutters, voice low and edged with defeat, “Maybe I’d rather not see anything at all.”

“That’s because you are afraid.” Fear, she stated without judgment, “Fear is loudest just before the ego fractures. That’s when it screams the most—because it senses its own fragility.”

Her words linger, uninvited but necessary. He didn’t ask for explanation—he already understood.

Shantel claps her hands once, sharp and crisp. “You think the unknown is terrifying?” she asked, her tone calm but incisive.

“It’s not terrifying—at least not to your soul. That terror? It’s your ego throwing a tantrum because it’s losing the narrative it’s clung to for so long.”

“This voice in here—it’s ego’s, the noisy, bossy narrator. It was built for survival, nothing more. It can be useful, if you’re the one steering it, but the moment it takes the reins, you end up right where you are now, lost, weak, hopeless, confused, trapped. It doesn’t stand a chance against the part you keep running from. That part—the one you fear—that’s not an enemy. That’s the real you. The eternal you.

It isn't *you* that's afraid of it—it's only your ego, fearful because it knows it won't survive the meeting."

Leaning in, her voice dropped to a near whisper, intimate and unyielding. "You're not afraid of the dark itself. You're terrified of what happens when Ren—the man you've built—fades away. But the truth? The truth waits like a lover just beyond the door, patient and unafraid."

He swallows, the lump in his throat rising. "I don't know how."

"That," she says, "is honesty and it's rare."

Ren closes his eyes. "I feel like I'm dissolving."

She nods, softer now. "Good. Shadows scatter, illusions thin, lies collapse like ash in the wind. Only what's unreal dissolves. The truth is real—cannot be dissolved. It waits. It endures. It is eternal."

She begins to pace slowly, deliberate as a conductor directing silence and sound. "The world teaches you to build—your identity, your career, your control, your status. You build so thoroughly, you forget what's beneath the scaffolding."

His hands grip the railing, knuckles white. "And if I resist?"

Her voice sharpens, but not with cruelty—but with crystal clear clarity. "Then the pressure intensifies. Suffering isn't punishment—it's persuasion. The universe doesn't care about your comforts or feelings. It cares about the improvement and evolution of your soul. It demands you confront who you really are."

Now, when he looked at her, the usual defenses softened, edged toward surrender to truth.

She relaxes her tone. "Listen. I won't promise you ease. The suffering you dread so much—it isn't an ending, it's a threshold. Beyond it waits the core of you, the soul stripped bare, made of love and nothing else. But that door will never open until every mask, every false self you've clung to, is allowed to fall away."

Ren lifts his eyes to the stars, voice barely a whisper. "That's what she wanted me to do, right? Fujiko. She wanted me to walk through that door."

Shantel nods, "She didn't just want it. She *knew* you would, when the time came."

Silence stretches between them before Ren finally confessed, "I'm scared."

She smiles, an edge of warmth threading through her steel. “Of course you are. As I said earlier, Fear is the sign—you’re closer than ever.”

“Let’s just give you time to contemplate, no hurry, let’s change the scenery a little,” she says

They climb down the narrow steel stairs behind the rooftop door—unlit and slick with rust. The air shifted as concrete swallowed every sound.

Below, the old metro station lay gutted and half-forgotten, abandoned by timetables and mercy alike. Shantel leads the way with deliberate steps, while Ren followed slowly, as if his bones had only now become aware of themselves now. The tiled walls were covered in graffiti—vivid ghosts shouting in color. The metro station was thick with dust and something that had outlived its purpose.

Kicking aside a fallen sign, Shantel said quietly, “This place is more honest. Down here, no one and nothing is pretending.”

Ren breath fogged faintly in the cold air. He was already sinking deeper than the tunnel itself.

“I used to think I was winning,” he muttered. “Fast cars, penthouse apartment. People looking at me like I had it all figured out,” he says.

She doesn’t turn to look at him.

Ren continues.

“But I never felt ... at home. Walking into meetings felt like playing someone better than me—like inhabiting someone else’s personality, just trying not to get caught.”

They pass a cracked metro map, its destinations erased, its routes faded.

Ren lets out a hollow laugh, the kind that doesn’t reach his eyes. “Everyone told me I was successful, that I was living the dream. But inside, there was nothing—just this constant, buzzing silence. Like a TV stuck between channels, endlessly searching”

Shantel pauses by an old platform gate and faced him.

He meets her gaze, something raw surfacing behind his eyes.

“I thought if I filled the silence with enough pleasure, maybe it would get away with it,” he says.

She leans against the wall, cool and composed. “You weren’t chasing pleasure. You were running from yourself.”

“You weren’t addicted to pleasure,” she said. “You were addicted to escape.”

Ren sits on a crumbling bench. No words came. He exhaled as if releasing something long-held in his chest.

“I used to look at people like puzzles—figuring them out in seconds. Getting what I needed, closing deals, moving on efficiently.”

His voice drops, quieter. “But I never figured myself out. I skipped that part.”

Shantel flicks a pebble into the tracks. The sound vanished into the tunnel’s echo.

“I thought success would fill something inside. Instead, it only muted the noise for a while. But silence—silence can be worse than screaming.”

“I’d wake in strange hotel rooms, not knowing where I was or who I’d been the night before. Drinks, pills, sex—they were never about pleasure. They were distractions, fog thick enough to forget I couldn’t feel anything at all.”

Shantel stretches her legs and popped her neck. “You weren’t seeking highs. You were begging to outrun stillness but you went at it like a soldier wielding a flamethrower.”

“At least fire feels like something,” Ren said.

She raises an eyebrow. “Romanticising your numbness now? That’s cute.”

He laughs, “It’s not numbness—it’s like a tooth decaying beneath the gum. A pain you can’t reach or get rid of.”

She watches him for a moment, then gestures to the flickering emergency light overhead.

“You keep running from the pain, but what if it’s not the villain? What if it’s the guide?” she asked.

Ren steps to the edge of the platform. The tracks stretched into a black void—no wind, no sound.

“I used to think I had time. I kept pushing, achieving, believing peace was a reward you earned after enough bruises.”

The dull lights cast long shadows beneath his eyes.

“But now I feel like I’m chasing a door that doesn’t exist. Or worse—a door that’s always been locked, and I threw away the key before I even knew what it opened.”

Shantel’s voice calm but unwavering. “Some doors don’t open with keys. They only open when what’s behind them finally matters more than anything else.”

She continues, voice soft but certain. “You want rescue. I get it. But some battles aren’t fought by anyone but yourself. This one? It’s yours.”

Ren lowers his head. Silence stretched between them, taut as wire.

“You’re still hoping someone will reach inside and pull the poison out for you but healing isn’t a rescue mission. You have to sit with the poison. Taste it. Learn from it.”

“And if it kills me?” he asks with a little fear.

She steps closer, “Then at least you die honest. But let me tell you for sure, you won’t die.”

A long pause. Then she turns and starts walking toward the far stairwell swallowed in shadow.

Ren hesitates. One last glance at the empty tracks. Then he follows.

The lights flicker. The metro station sighs behind them.

They climbed the stairs. Outside, the evening breeze was cold. The city felt exposed—too bright, too loud, smothered in false warmth.

Ren’s limbs moved, but his mind lagged—like crawling out of a grave and into stage lighting.

Shantel walked just ahead, hands buried in pockets. She didn’t rush. Didn’t push. She let silence do its job.

Ren caught up beside her. Street lights buzzed above them. A drunken couple argued loudly outside a convenience store. Somewhere overhead, a train clattered.

“She didn’t save me,” he said finally, voice flat, not looking at her.

“She could’ve. Saw what was happening. Saw through me before I did.”

Shantel said nothing.

“She just made me leave. No answers, no explanation.”

His hands trembled. A bitter laugh escaped him.

“I needed to be rescued. She knew that.”

Shantel stops by a railing overlooking a canal. She stares into the dark water as if it might hold a better version of him.

Ren leans forward, metal cold beneath his arms.

“She broke me,” he mutters.

Shantel shakes her head gently. “No. She unraveled you.”

He looks at her, eyes hollow. “What’s the difference?”

She doesn’t blink.

“A break leaves jagged edges. She dissolved some parts of you which weren’t real.”

Her voice softens, almost tender.

“You think it was cruelty because it burned, but it wasn’t fire meant to destroy. It was light and light stings when you’ve built your life in shadows.”

She steps beside him—no touch, just close enough to share the quiet.

“She showed you what you were running from.”

“That’s not abandonment, Ren.”

“That’s love with its gloves off.”

Ren looked into her eyes, the weight of her words settling not as blame, but as a truth he could no longer sidestep.

“But you’re still standing.” She says while staring right back into his eyes. “Even if you don’t know how, that’s enough.”

He doesn’t move. Doesn’t breathe.

“She held up a mirror and tore off the false pretenses. Now you’re angry because beneath it all...you finally have to meet the real face you’ve been running from all your life.”

Ren remained silent, as though her words had unlocked a door inside him, he wasn’t ready to enter.

They sit at the edge of the canal bridge, knees near touching, the night wind catching the hem of Shantel's shirt. Behind them half-lit promises from noodle bars and closed clubs, smeared reflections on puddled asphalt. The shrine garden watches from a distance like a dream that hasn't decided if it wants to be remembered.

Ren sits limp, His voice has gone hoarse from not using it.

"I've done everything I could to stay away from people," he mutters. I'd sworn I would never let myself fall for anyone again. But these last two days ... every time I sit still, it's her. Always her."

Shantel watches the way the moonlight veins the stones below the bridge.

"Yeah, that's the real stuff," she says. "You don't just shake that off, and you sure as hell don't drink it to death. The real stuff? It moves in, kicks off its shoes, and refuses to leave."

He turns his head slowly.

"So, it's love between me and Fujiko?"

"What is love, really?"

"Love—Yes—Well—Love" Shantel stretches her arms,

cracks her knuckles,

leans in with a smirk that says buckle up,

and goes:

"Sweetheart, love isn't a Pinterest board or looking cute in mirror selfies with 'my person' scribbled across it. That's not love, that's branding. Spotify isn't a love language and 'vulnerable' doesn't mean posting a paragraph glorifying your ex with a blurry sunset in the background. Especially when your ex sees it and goes, 'Who is this man?'"

"It's not those long captions where you trauma-bond in public like it's a flex, and it sure isn't about who can post the happiest photo while silently wondering if the other one's cheating. It isn't aesthetic. It isn't matching playlists and selfies from better angles. It's not shared passwords or matching bios or stories captioned with inside jokes. It's not about curating happy moments to hide your loneliness and fears so your insecurities look poetic."

“Most people don’t want love—they want the feeling of being wanted without the cost of being known. They want the image, the moment, the dopamine. They want someone who texts back fast and kisses slow but not someone who holds a mirror to their soul. That’s too real. Nobody wants others to see who they are; people are scared to look at themselves Ren, forget about others seeing them for who they are.”

“People just want others to accept the lies they tell themselves. So, they chase sparks instead of building warmth. They crave butterflies but run from meaning. They confuse possession for devotion, and drama for depth and when it all burns out—as it always does—they call it heartbreak. But that’s not heartbreak. That’s just withdrawal from the high because they were not able to keep up with the bullshit stories they were telling each other. That’s two people mad they couldn’t keep up with their own highlight reel.”

“That’s not love man. That’s fluff. Cotton Candy. Gone before you taste it.”

She leans back, the bones of her chest moving under her thin white shirt as she breathes in.

“Real love?” She shakes her head, as if it’s almost too sacred to say.

“You ever hear that thing—that all souls are just pieces of one soul? God, Source, super consciousness whatever you want to call it. One vast awareness in countless forms—maybe zillions, maybe endless. A single consciousness scattered through creation, living itself in every form—some of it asleep, like stone or ocean, some half-awake, like a tree bending in the wind, and some... painfully awake, walking around in human skin, remembering just enough to ache for what it truly is. That’s all of us. Every leaf, every star, every dust particle, every planet, every species, every mouth that ever kissed or cursed—just fragments of the same source, trying to find their way back to it.”

So, what’s love? She says.

“It’s not the stuff written in greeting cards. Not craving. Not that endless recycled line in every song.”

“Real love is when the illusion of being separate fades, and what’s left is one presence, seen from two sides. Real love is when the walls between you vanish, and you see that you were never truly apart. Real love isn’t union. It’s the collapse of the idea you were ever separate. When your ego shuts up and the soul gets a word in. When the

invisible walls fall—yours, theirs—and suddenly, you’re not two people anymore. You’re one presence, experiencing itself.”

“You don’t fall in love *with* them. You fall in love *as* them...as if you were both the same being in different bodies.”

“In that one terrifying, impossible moment you realise—You are them; they are you and neither of you were ever apart from each other or from God, source, universe...whatever you want to call it. That’s why it feels like coming home and burning alive at the same time.”

“Real love doesn’t come to make you whole, it just shows you that you were always whole. It comes to show you where you’ve been pretending. Then it dissolves the performance—every justification, every role, every scrap of identity that kept you from the truth.”

“Most people never touch that kind of love. Because it’s not poetic—because people...you know people (pointing a finger at Ren’s face) are too scared to let go off the ego, they are too dependent on it. They can’t fathom existence without it. Real love doesn’t molly coddle the ego. It ends it. It melts illusion until all that’s left is the you that was always infinite.”

“That’s real love. No one teaches it. But once you taste it, nothing else will do.”

Ren stands motionless—utterly still. Not a blink, not a breath. As if his body has paused to let the soul catch up. Then he swallows hard and says,

“She saw me like that? She had that impossible moment, where she could see herself as me and I as her? Did she?”

Shantel looks at him, with a slight awe in her voice; “This might sound a lil weird but Fujiko can see people for who they are, not who they pretend to be, not the role they play in the world but who they are underneath. Who knows what else she hides behind those dark eyes.and to answer your question whether she saw who you are underneath, she probably did, but then that’s a question you’ll have to ask her.”

He says nothing.

She sits back, folds her hands, watching him with an expression that is not quite pity and not quite awe—something more tender. A softness reserved only for those who’ve just begun to remember who they are.

“I think along with everything she saw, she also saw the part of you that wasn’t pretending. The part that doesn’t want to be brilliant or good or impressive. She didn’t see the man you’ve tried to build or Ren who had come to her place, just after trying to commit suicide. She saw the one who was always there—before the pain, before the masks. The one who isn’t asking to be admired or understood. The part which you have forgotten, the part which you can’t see anymore, the part which is who you are—whole—complete.”

Shantel continues, “You think it’s about her, Ren. It is, but not completely. It’s also about the part of you she revealed. You know why you always keep thinking about dying, why you try to kill yourself? You are too afraid to let go of all the masks you and your ego have created to survive in the world. You are confused with who you are and the role you are playing. You think you are Ren and think if Ren dies, you die. Ren is the role you are playing in the world. Ren is just an illusion to experience the world, the one experiencing it is not Ren.

Ren’s voice breaks it—soft but sharp, like a splinter. “If I’m not Ren, then who am I?”

Shantel doesn’t answer at first. She tilts her head back, watching the breeze stir the tops of the trees. A low creak travels through a branch overhead, slow and wooden, like something waking.

“You’re not asking the wrong question,” she finally says. “You’re just asking it from the wrong place.”

He frowns. “What does that mean?”

“You keep thinking you need a name for the thing. A story, something to hold onto but the truth doesn’t need to be held. It’s already holding *you*.”

Ren closes his eyes. Tries to listen. Tries to find the him she’s talking about.

“I don’t know how to stop being Ren.”

“That’s not your job,” she says. “Your job is to realize you never were Ren, that Ren is just a role you are playing, it’s an illusion.”

Ren says; “I don’t understand.”

Silence.

Shantel asks gently: “Ok, tell me a name of any movie you like.”

Ren says; "The Godfather."

Shantel asks: "Ok, who is your favourite character in the movie?"

Ren says; "Michael Corleone."

Shantel asks again: Ok, which actor played the role of Michael Corleone?

Ren says; "Al Pacino."

Shantel leans forward and says; "Well, do you understand now?"

Ren says; "I don't know..... but let me give it a shot.... So, you are trying to say that, Michael Coreleone is just a role being played..... by an actor who is Al Pacino....."

Shantel questions; "And?"

Ren says; "and what."

Shantel smiles and says; "AND... that Al Pacino and Michael Corleone are not the same people. That Al Pacino is the real person who is just playing the role of Michael Corleone who doesn't exist in real life. He is just an illusion, just like you are not Ren but playing the role of Ren, like Ren is just an illusion."

She continues; "In Godfather 3, Michael Corleone dies at the end of the movie, but did Al Pacino die... No....Al Pacino still lives, He has done a lot of good movies after Godfather 3. Same way, if you accept the suffering and let love and universe do their thing, the role you are playing, that of Ren will die but nothing will happen to you."

Ren says; "Ok, I understand that Ren is the role being played, I am convinced on that, but I still don't know who is playing the role of Ren."

Shantel smiles wider this time and says; "Well that only you can figure out. A good place to start would be stop trying to kill yourself, stop romanticising and wallowing in your suffering, man up, and accept this path of fire for what it is and keep going"

"You're scared not of what you are. You're scared you *are*."

He opens his eyes.

"Soul or existence or consciousness or just plain awareness, people call it by different names around the world. It isn't something you think," she says. "It's the thing that watches your thoughts. It doesn't argue with them. Doesn't resist. Just *witnesses*."

The wind shifts. The lantern beside Ren flickers faintly.

“You keep trying to solve it. Fix it. Find some perfect sentence to stitch it all together. But that’s not how it works.”

She points to the garden. To the moonlight.

“Look. Nothing’s trying to explain itself. Not the tree. Not the night. Not the stars. Not even your pain.”

Ren watches. For a second, his breath syncs with the air.

She continues, “Most people never look inside. They chase love, success, salvation—everywhere but *here*.” She taps the center of her chest. “Because if they stop moving, they’ll feel it and feeling it might burn everything false.”

He whispers, “So what do I do?”

“You don’t *do*. You *see*.”

He looks at her.

“To be in love, to truly know yourself” she says, “is to realise the part of yourself you forgot. The raw. The wordless.”

Ren swallows. His hands have gone still in his lap.

“But you haven’t lost anything,” she says. “You just mistook the gateway for the destination.”

Ren doesn’t answer.

But for the first time all night, he doesn’t interrupt the silence either.

No more wind. No more branches creaking. Just that kind of sacred quiet that arrives when a person finally stops fighting themselves.

Ren lies back on the moss-covered stone, arms outstretched. The moon pours down on him, bathing his face, his chest, the undone pieces of him. His shirt is damp with sweat. His eyes stay open. He doesn’t blink.

He’s not healed. He’s not okay. But for the first time in years—he’s not running.

Shantel watches him, cross-legged near the base of boulder. Her voice comes soft now, not like a guide, but like someone translating the language of something larger.

“You think the thing inside you is your enemy,” she says. “But that thing is the part of you that’s truth. The universal truth of existence.”

Ren doesn't move.

She keeps going.

"The hunger, the ache—that's not weakness. That's the raw engine of you, tools to take you there. If Misused, it becomes chaos. But aligned ..."

She gestures to the stars with her chin. "It becomes clarity."

Ren's mouth parts slightly. His chest rises, falls. The moss underneath is cool and breathing with him. The air smells of wet earth.

He murmurs, barely audible, "I thought I needed to be saved ..."

"No." she says.

Her voice is still calm, still absolute. "You need to surrender."

Ren closes his eyes. A tear slips without struggle. Not from pain—but from the sheer quiet of it all. Like something collapsing without any intention for it.

He whispers, "How?"

Shantel stands. Walks to him. Leans over. Looks him in the face. Not with pity. Not with promise. But with the kind of gaze that makes the truth feel holy.

"Stop hiding," she says. "Watch everything. Let it pass through. Let it tear through what's fake, the ego. Let it burn you clean."

She places her hand on his chest—firm, warm, not spiritual, not metaphorical, just *real*.

"The Universe doesn't want anything from you; the universe doesn't want to change you. "It just wants you to see who was there before the world taught you to hide."

Ren doesn't reply.

But the silence that follows doesn't feel like silence anymore. It feels like listening. Like maybe, for the first time, everything broken in him has agreed to be rearranged correctly this time.

Shantel's voice comes without warning, like an arrow shot in stillness.

"Most people don't live." She doesn't look at him. "They just perform. Repeat. Pose. And then die—still hungry."

“They rise and move as one, boots tapping on the pavement, a soft rhythm under the night air. Ren’s hands sink into his coat pockets. He says nothing. She walks beside him, voice low, steady, words weaving through the city sounds.”

“You’ve been living how the world wanted, wearing the name it gave you, chasing applause that never fed you.”

She keeps her pace, letting the words flow with the rhythm of their steps. “None of that was you. Only what they expected. Maybe now... maybe now you get to find what is.”

“We’re handed masks the moment we’re born,” she says. “Son, Daughter, Male, Female, Mother, Friend, Brother, Sister, Boss, Friend, Employee, CEO etc. We confuse the masks for the face and then spend our lives polishing it, terrified anyone might see underneath.”

He swallows. His mouth tastes like the night. “Then who am I,” he asks, “under all that?”

She stops. Finally looks at him. Her expression isn’t sympathetic—it’s still, unblinking, real.

“Exactly,” she says. “That’s what you’re finally ready to find out and it starts with silence.”

They walk again. Her voice sharpens.

“You aren’t lost. You are over-scripted. You memorized what to say, how to smile, when to kneel, when to stand. That’s not living. That’s theater. You think your suffering is some grand personal tragedy?” She snorts, amused. “It’s just what happens when the soul tries to scream through a role it never chose.”

Ren breathes through his nose. Keeps walking.

She continues “The voice in your head that keeps judging you? That’s not you. That’s the parasite. The fear-soaked echo of a world that profits from your doubt.”

They pass a small shrine on the corner, its stone fox stained by moss and time. Incense smoke curls faintly from a rusted bowl.

Shantel nods toward him. “You want to live? Really live? Then shut the fuck up inside.”

A pause.

“Let what’s real crawl out from under the noise.”

He exhales, long and low.

She finishes with a calm that cuts like clarity:

“You don’t have to become anything. You just have to unbecome everything false.”

A breeze moves through the power lines. Somewhere in his chest, something old begins to loosen. They haven’t spoken for a while. Ren’s throat is dry. He’s been chewing on what she said. The mask. The parasite. The silence and under all of it, the ache.

Finally, he speaks. “Why does it hurt so much?”

Shantel stops walking. Turns. Looks him dead in the face.

“Because your skin was stitched to lies.” Her tone isn’t angry. It’s factual. Like gravity. Like math.

She steps a little closer. “You think healing is soft?” A slow, crooked smile. “Nah. Healing is violence done to illusion.”

The word *violence* echoes louder than it should.

“All that collapsing you’ve been doing,” she says, “the shaking, the guilt, the waking up at 3AM like something’s clawing under your chest—that’s not failure, Ren. That’s the surgery. You’re cutting out the infection with your own hands.”

He looks down. His hands. The street. The cracks in the sidewalk. A pigeon picking at nothing.

She keeps going, relentless but tender.

“Letting go isn’t graceful. It’s clumsy. It’s dry sobs in a stairwell. It’s forgetting how to breathe in the middle of the ocean while you are drowning. It’s deliberately dropping your own name, everything about you and having strength to not pick it back up.”

Her eyes narrow like she’s reading his thoughts.

“You thought waking up would feel calm? Like incense and sitars and yoga poses?”

She snorts. “Waking up feels like an earthquake inside your skeleton. Every lie you lived by crumbles. That’s not a breakdown. That’s the first clear signal from your soul.”

A truck rolls by. Honks once. Then disappears into the hush again.

Ren exhales. That ache in his ribs, it’s deeper now—but less suffocating.

Her gaze sharpens—not cold, just exact.

“You are not failing. You are graduating from pretending.”

A bird lands on a vending machine. Ren watches it. Something like breath returns to his shoulders.

She takes a step back. Lighter now. Her voice dances.

“So? Still want to scrawl another lie? Patch up the mask? Run back into the burning house for one more self-portrait?”

She leans toward him, smile stretching bold and unguarded.

“Or you finally ready... to meet yourself?”

Silence again.

Except now, it isn’t empty. It’s full.

They walk until the buildings start to look familiar again. Ren’s street. His building. Same cracks in the pavement. Same buzzing lamp that never got fixed but everything feels... altered as if someone rearranged the furniture in his soul while he wasn’t looking.

They stop just outside the entrance. He turns to her, searching for something to say—but his mouth feels full of dust and stars.

Shantel stretches her arms overhead, spine cracking audibly.

“God,” she says. “You’re exhausting, you know that?”

Ren lifts an eyebrow, barely suppressing a crooked smile.

“What did I do now?” he asks surprised.

“You think too much. Feel too much. Hate yourself with way too much flair. It’s impressive, really.” She taps her lip thoughtfully. “If self-torture were an Olympic sport, you’d podium.”

He huffs a short laugh. “Thanks.”

“Don’t thank me. I’m serious. You’re dramatic as hell. Like, Shakespeare levels.”

She mimics his voice: “Oh no, Shantel, I feel the universe peeling back my skin and revealing my cosmic emptiness—” Then cuts it off with a grin. “Man, please. Chill. We’re going to eat ramen.”

Ren chuckles, the sound almost surprising himself. There’s a kind of joy sneaking in through the cracks.

“Is that the next stage of awakening?” he asks. “Noodles?”

“Exactly. Noodles and surrender.” She steps up to a street vendor, borrowing a pen and a scrap of paper. With quick, deliberate strokes, she writes down something and folds it carefully. Handing it to him, she says, “Keep this—my address in Kamakura. Don’t go losing it and do me a favor: actually, eat something today, skip the drinking, and try sleeping like a human for once. Tomorrow at noon, show up. Don’t make me send a search party.”

He looks down at the paper and lets out a heartfelt smile.

She winks.

“Come hungry. I’ll make my grandmother’s Oishi ramen—pork belly, sake, shironegi, koikuchi shoyu with a ton of garlic. So much garlic you’ll sweat truth for three days.”

“You’ll love it. You’ll cry. You’ll hallucinate your childhood. It’ll all be okay, Ren.”

Something in her tone makes his throat tighten.

He meets her eyes. Serious now. “The last few days...” he begins, but the words feel too small.

She waits.

He tries again.

“The last few days feel like a lifetime. I don’t know what’s happening. I don’t know what any of this is. I feel like I’ve fallen out of my own life and into someone else’s dream.”

She nods slowly, not blinking.

“Yeah. That’s about right.”

“I don’t even know if I’m real anymore.”

“You’re real,” she says. “Just not the version you thought you were.”

He inhales slowly; eyes fixed on the paper before flicking up to meet hers.

“It’s like the universe ... is quietly reshuffling the pieces,” he murmurs, voice low, as if sensing some unseen hand at work—subtle, inevitable, and profound.

Shantel tilts her head, a little amused, a little sad.

“The universe can only do so much, Ren.” She reaches out and presses a finger gently to the center of his chest. “The rest? That’s up to you.”

The silence between them thickens, not heavy, just honest. A crow cries again, distant and sharp, as if marking the end of a chapter.

Shantel steps back, hands in her pockets, a half-smile playing on her lips.

“I promise, I’ll be nice,” she says, voice casual but firm. “Like, actually nice. So nice you might forget all that Fujiko drama for a while.”

Ren raised an eyebrow. “Nice, huh? That’s a new one coming from you.”

She shrugged, grinning. “Hey, even I have my moments. But seriously, just come. You need this—some fresh air, a break from all the noise in your head.”

He hesitated, then sighed. “And what if I just want to stay buried in the mess?”

Shantel shook her head, stepping a little closer with mock seriousness. “Then you’ll keep circling the drain like a stubborn cat. But if you come with me? I promise, no judgment, no pressure. Just me calling you out when you need it—and maybe pushing you a bit because, well, you’re not getting anywhere standing still.”

Ren chuckled softly. “So, you’re my tough-love coach now?”

She grinned wider. “Exactly. Someone’s gotta keep you honest. Now, quit stalling. Be there by noon tomorrow and don’t show up late,” she calls over her shoulder. “I don’t serve reheated enlightenment.”

Ren grins, “That’s not what you’re calling the ramen, is it?”

Shantel stops mid-step, looks back, deadly serious. “That ramen is sacred. Anyone who eats it without moaning in gratitude gets gently escorted out of my kitchen—with a ladle.”

Then breaks into a wicked smile. “See you in Kamakura, Shakespeare.”

...and she’s gone.

He stands outside his building, paper still in hand. The address feels warm somehow. Like a thread back to something truer.

Not a destination—A return.

He slips the paper into his jacket, Looks up at the sky and smiles.

Chapter 6

Kamakura Home



He steps onto a platform that feels less like a station and more like a fragment of a dream—dark wood underfoot, signs tilted with age, the air thick with cedar, salt, and a calmness that's sensed. The afternoon sunlight slices through the branches. In his hand, a folded paper with an address—strokes sharp and graceful, as if carved into the page, radiating a quiet excitement that anchors his breath.

The map on his phone points the way, but it's the lightness in him that carries him forward. A narrow path unfurls, bamboo rising like silent sentinels, their green arches bending as if guarding a secret. The trail curves, drawn by some unseen tide. Leaves shuffle overhead.

Ren moves hopefully, boots stirring dust and moss, his steps uneven, like he's trespassing on sacred ground. Small shrines flicker past—people praying, fox statues with knowing eyes, prayer beads swaying, flower offerings. Each corner breathes with something alive.

Then, a clearing appears, as if the earth has paused to breathe. A house woven into the landscape, cloaked in wisteria flowers and weathered stone. Its dark wood seems to shimmer with time, the crooked mailbox tilting as if bowing to the ground. Etched upon it, a single character glows faintly in the dappled light:

無

Mu.

Nothingness.

Ren exhales, a sound caught between a chuckle and awe, his heart tripping over itself. He steps forward, drawn into the house's quiet spell, as if the world has paused to watch.

The wooden gate creaks open before he even lifts his hand. A sound both casual and eerie, like the house had made the decision for him.

Shantel stands barefoot on the smooth, worn wood of the gate's threshold. Her yukata, a faded green silk, drapes comfortably around her, its gentle folds catching the sunlight like ripples on a still pond. A haneri, a delicate cream-colored collar embroidered with tiny plum blossoms, peeks from the neckline, adding a touch of warmth to her traditional elegance. Her smile, bright and genuine, lights up his face, as if the air itself is happy to hold them both.

She steps aside, her eyes twinkling with mischief, voice light as a breeze.

"Well, well, who's this? Lost wanderer, nosy neighbor, or just here to charm your way into my kitchen? Fess up."

Ren leans against the gatepost, his grin as bright as hers, he waits a few seconds, looks at her like he is ready to match her playful teasing, then he speaks.

"I am the guy who plays the role of Ren, your VIP guest, starring as the dashing hero of this scene. A proper gentleman, obviously. I'm looking for my Al Pacino—loud guy, scarf obsession, probably yelling 'Hoo-ah!' somewhere in the woods. Seen him? Also, word on the streets of Tokyo is you've got Japan's best ramen and I am here for my free bowl. I am a classy guy, but my wallet is a cheapskate."

Shantel's laugh bubbles up, her eyebrows arching like she likes a good challenge. "Gentleman really? Ren, you're more like a scruffy raccoon who thinks he's headlining a samurai flick."

"Al Pacino ... huh? The only drama around here's you, chasing fairy-tale ramen. Free? What's next, you are going to trade me your 'charm' for my whole fridge?" Her teasing grin dances in the sunlight.

Ren clutches his chest, faking a mortal wound. "Harsh, Shantel! My charm's worth at least three bowls. I hiked through shrieking cicadas and fox shrines for this. You can't promise me and not deliver. I am hungry, I am just skin and bones, please give me my ramen, or do I have to break out a song to earn it."

Shantel steps closer, arms crossed, her yukata swishing like it's laughing with her.

"A song? Ren, your voice would make the foxes cancel their forest karaoke night, That ramen? I'm the chef, but you're going to have to earn it, hotshot." Her eyes sparkle with a wicked grin, tossing him a playful challenge to bring his A-game.

Ren cracks a grin, shaking his head.

"Alright, alright, my singing's a crime, but I came prepared to bargain. Name your price, chef—dish duty? Bad poetry? Power to wilt fresh flowers with a single gaze of my acute depression? I'm a man of many talents you see."

Shantel snickers, leaning in with a mock-whisper. "Talents? Ren, you're about as talented as a chopstick juggling knives. My price? Endure thirty minutes in that koi pond—barefoot, cold, and no dramatic monologues—maybe *then* we'll talk ramen, but no promises, penny-pincher."

Ren grins wider, undeterred.

"Koi pond? Please. I can handle a little elegant hypothermia and I am anyway due for a bath. So, thank you, but when I win, you're throwing in dessert. I *know* you've got secret mochi somewhere hidden behind your passive-aggressive soy sauce collection."

Her laughter softens, the teasing spark in her eyes fading into warmth. She steps forward, her yukata brushing the ground, and pulls Ren into a tight hug, her arms wrapping tight like she's holding onto a piece of home. Her eyes shimmer, wet with quiet joy, as if she's been waiting for this moment longer than she'd ever say. "You're hopeless, Ren," she murmurs against his shoulder, "but I'm so glad you're here."

Ren smiles—shoulders finally unclenching after what felt like lives of survival mode. The humor between them is grounding.

Shantel snorts gently, not quite laughing, but something flickers through her. She gestures toward the genkan. "Shoes off. Unless you plan to anger the spirits, and frankly, they've been bored lately."

He steps in. The floor is cool, bamboo-soft, and the house exhales around him like it's glad he's arrived. The scent hits him at once—sandalwood, the mineral hush of water left too long in stone basins.

The space is open but coiled tight with memory. Shoji screens. A breeze moves through the bones of the house like a second heart. There's a low table near the hearth, a kettle whistling softly from the next room, and a glimpse of a red lacquer tray already waiting with mismatched teacups.

"This place is ..." he starts.

"Falling apart? A little haunted? Full of secrets?" Shantel raises an eyebrow. "You'll get used to it."

He looks around again. "I was going to say peaceful."

She smiles, like she didn't expect him to say that—but she's glad he did.

They sit cross-legged on woven tatami mats around a table that looks like it's been rescued from a hundred winters. The wood beneath their cups is warped and nicked, but it carries the kind of age that feels lived-in, not ruined.

Shantel pours the tea with one hand, the other already reaching for a lacquer box of sweets. Faint steam rising into the air. Ren watches, quietly, as she slides a plate of yokan and senbei toward him.

"Never thought you'd be the type to whip up something this fancy," Ren says, picking up a cube of senbei, a red bean jelly, its surface cool and glistening in the sun.

"And I didn't think you would survive the night and actually be here," Shantel shoots back, one brow raised. "Yet here we are—miracles all around."

He grins. "I credit it to the free enlightenment I keep handing out to my friends. Nothing is better than being an all wise, all-knowing guru. Keeps me fresh."

She snorts. "Fresh? You look like someone who's been eating existential dread."

"Existential dread has zero calories," he says, popping the jelly in his mouth. "Also, it pairs beautifully with depression and suicide attempts."

Shantel laughs, shaking her head. "You're a walking pantry of emotional malnutrition, Ren."

They both laugh—it feels real.

The tea is bold, its bitterness lingering like a quiet truth. He sips slowly, feeling the warmth inside his chest. She watches him—not like someone studying a subject, but

like someone quietly checking if a fragile branch will hold. There's a steady care in her gaze, calm and tacit, as if she's making sure he's still standing if the storm hits.

"So," she says, biting into the senbei, "what are we calling this visit, Looking for my Al Pacino? Chapter Six? The Reckoning? 'Ren Goes to the Mountains to Die'?"

Ren chuckles, rubbing his jaw. "I thought I'd go with something much more in your face sort of thing. Ren looks at the mirror on the wall, looks deep into his reflection and says...maybe....

"What is your name?" What do you think, he asks Shantel.

"Trendy" She nods. "I call that progress."

The quiet that follows isn't awkward—it stretches between them like a sweater. Lived-in, worn, still warm.

She finally glances at the clock. "It's almost three. You must be half-dead from the train and the dramatic pacing through ancient bamboo. Go take a soak. There's hinoki oil in the bath—it'll make your bones remember they were once human."

He doesn't argue.

"Then take a small nap. You'll need the energy for dinner and whatever else this haunted forest throws at us."

Ren stood up, stretching a little as he readied himself to leave.

Shantel smiled affectionately, her voice gentle but sure.

"Whenever you're ready, the world's still waiting—no rush, no pressure. Just take your time."

He gave a small, grateful nod and headed toward the bath, feeling a quiet ease settle in.

The warmth of the bath seeped into Ren's bones like honey dissolving into tea, slow and soothing. He leaned back against the bamboo wall, eyes closing as his muscles unwound and the world outside softened. Minutes passed—or maybe hours—until a gentle ripple of laughter floated through the old house like distant bells, stirring him from the edges of sleep.

He blinked away the haze, rubbed the last remnants of sleep from his eyes, and yawned deeply. His body felt lighter, slower—softened in a way he hadn't known in

years. It was as if, before his mind could catch up, his body remembered what joy felt like.

After drying off, Ren pulled on comfortable clothes—a loose cotton shirt, faded joggers soft from many washes. He puts on his padded slippers and walks across the cool wooden floor. The sounds from the kitchen grew louder: voices rising and falling in playful spirals of arguing, laughing, and the rhythmic clatter of cooking utensils. The kind of chaos only possible between people who know each other's weaknesses too well to hide them.

He looks into the kitchen from the verandah.

Camilla stood at the counter with a knife in one hand and a daikon in the other, glaring at it like it owed her money. Shantel sat on a stool, sipping sake quietly, throwing chopped vegetables at Camilla. Then he saw her, Fujiko.

Fujiko.

Foo—jjii—ko.

The second Ren sees her—through the open arch of the kitchen, the dim gold light catching her face in profile—his body reacts like it is under attack. His stomach lurches. His palms break out in sweat. The hair at the back of his neck stands up.

He freezes—he is genuinely paralyzed.

She stands stirring a pot. Not speaking. Even her silence filled the room. She wore a simple pale robe tied at the waist; sleeves rolled to her forearms. Her hair was up, but loose strands had fallen down her neck. Barefoot, of course. Always barefoot, like someone too holy for shoes.

All of it—her form, her presence, her unbearable calm—threw him into total chaos.

It was like looking into a room where your nightmares had taken human shape and not because she was cruel—but because she'd seen *everything, everything about him*. His fear, his unraveling, his begging. The way he'd raised his hand like a child in the elevator, asking to be saved. The moistness in her eyes when the elevator closed.

He remembers what he'd said— *Fuck you, I don't ever want to see you again* and now here he was sober, humiliated, confused and completely smitten.

His breath caught in his throat. He was sweating through his shirt. His legs weren't moving. There was a roaring in his ears, and he didn't even realize how tight his jaw had locked until it started to hurt.

Then, the sound of a sliding door. The clink of glass.

Shantel stepped out onto the veranda like it was just another lazy Thursday, holding a half-full sake glass in one hand, like she knew he was outside having a slow mental collapse.

She didn't say anything at first. Just looked at him, then offered him the sake.

"Gulp," she said gently.

He blinked. "What?"

"Don't think. Gulp." She insists.

He did.

It hit him all at once—burning warmth down the throat, sharp in the nose, a temporary kind of amnesia. His breathing started to even out. The panic faded a notch. He still felt like garbage, but now at least he could speak.

"I shouldn't be here," he murmured, not quite to her.

Shantel leaned against the wall, watching him like an older sister who'd seen this exact scene play out too many times.

"Don't do that," Shantel said softly. "Don't go back there."

He didn't answer. His eyes were still on the kitchen.

Shantel followed his gaze and nodded like she understood everything he wasn't saying.

"Look at me, Ren."

He turned, reluctantly.

"Be the Ren I met at the gate today. Not the one from the penthouse."

He looks at her with a hopeless expression.

"You were charming. You were kind. You were curious. You were cracking genuinely good jokes about your situation. That's a good Ren. I like that Ren."

He exhaled sharply, still shaking slightly.

Shantel took the empty sake glass from his hand and set it down on a small ledge beside the door. Then she reached out and touched his arm—gently, but firmly as if she was grounding him back into his body.

“You’re in a good place in your head right now,” she said, her voice low and calm. “You’re not spiraling. You’re not drowning and physically look around—You’re safe. There’s food. Warm light. Camilla hasn’t started pulling your leg. No one’s judging you. There’s no test to pass. No crisis to solve right now.”

Ren glanced back toward the kitchen again.

“She hates me,” he whispered. “Fujiko. She saw me...the ugly”

“She doesn’t hate you,” Shantel interrupted. “She saw you and you are not ugly and let me tell you something—you weren’t the only one losing your head that night at her place, she is just good at hiding herself.”

He swallowed hard. “I made a fool of myself.”

“No. Shantel said, you were just honest that day, ill-mannered and loud but honest.”

Then a slight pause, Ren looks at Shantel with an embarrassed look on his face.

Shantel warmly smiled, “Just relax, Ren. Keep up that wit. Keep up that charm. Try to enjoy yourself.”

“I don’t know how anymore.” he says.

“Alright, that’s ok,” she said. “Camilla made a ridiculous miso-mirin salad that tastes like a takeaway from a Chinese restaurant pretending to be Japanese from New Delhi, and I plan to mock her for the rest of the night. You? You just sit there breathe and let your blood circulate like a normal mammal, that’s the least you can do but at least please try to be the witty, funny, confident Ren I met at the gate.”

Ren actually chuckled.

Shantel stepped back, pushed the door open wider, and gestured toward the kitchen.

“Now go inside before I lose all respect for your courage. You’re not a ghost, Ren. Its ok to be lost, its ok to be seen, it’s ok to want to find yourself, its ok to be here, now get your ass in there.”

He stood still one more second, then slowly stepped over the threshold.

One foot in the warm wood-floored kitchen. One breath in.

Behind him, Shantel whispered, “This is where you belong.”

Camilla spotted him first.

“Oh, look everybody,” she said, turning around. “My bathtub boyfriend is here”

Camilla squinted at him, “You walk like someone recovering from spiritual surgery. Did the hot water fix your soul or just melt your spine?”

“I think it baptized me in nothingness,” Ren said, leaning back, a faint smile tugging at his lips. “Which feels about right for this address.”

Camilla looked up from her cutting board, eyes bright, a smile tugging at her mouth. “Oh! Look at you! A flash of cleverness — finally using that brain of yours for something other than practicing despair. Who are you, and what have you done with Mr. I-want-to-die?”

Ren chuckled softly. “Sorry about the other night. I—”

Camilla immediately wagged a finger. “Ah-ah-ah! Say that again, and I will read your apology out loud to these two right now. Exactly like this: ‘I’m so sorry for being a tortured disaster, please forgive me, I am only slightly human.’ And yes, I will add dramatic pauses for effect.”

Ren shook his head, laughing. “Okay noted. I retract my apology.”

Camilla grinned, slicing a carrot with flair. “Good. Because really, I don’t need another sob story haunting my cutting board. I prefer it sprinkled with... humor.”

Camilla waving the knife like she was conducting an orchestra of sarcasm.

“I mean, you do realize it’s legal to talk *without* launching into the futility of existence, right? We’ve got soup, sake, and a soundtrack—you’re allowed to smile without causing a philosophical crisis.”

She said while grinning. “Take the night off from suffering, Romeo. Your existential dread will still be here tomorrow, I promise.”

Then, more softly, she added, “You’re welcome here and you don’t have to impress us with your suffering. We already like you.”

Fujiko looked up at him then. Her eyes met his like she had been waiting for this moment all day.

“You couldn’t have picked a better moment to ruin my composure.” she said, Her voice soft and velvet-smooth

She stood barely a few feet away, but it felt like an entire season stretched between their bodies. The light behind her gave her an outline almost too gentle to belong to someone real— eyes filled with a private storm of tenderness and restraint.

“You had said ‘I don’t’ ever want to see you again” Her gaze held his a second too long. “But I wanted to see you again, so I decided to come to you.”

Ren’s breath caught somewhere behind his ribs— the kind that happens in the split second before skin meets skin. Her presence filled him like a thunderstorm— charged, electric, wild.

And yet, beneath all of it, there was mercy in her posture. She wasn’t asking for anything. But every inch of her—her stillness, her scent, her half-lowered gaze—was calling him home.

He couldn’t speak. He didn’t need to.

In that flicker of closeness—there was already the shape of a kiss that hadn’t happened, a bed they hadn’t touched, a lifetime they hadn’t yet dared to imagine.

She smiled gently, and Ren found it unbearable.

...and for a moment, he forgot all his pain, forgot the reasons he’d wanted to disappear. He just stood there; completely undone by the way she looked at him like he was something worth waiting for.

Camilla handed him a ladle and pointed towards a pot. “Stir that like your life depends on it.”

“What is it?” he asked.

“Doesn’t matter. Just stir it like it once insulted your ancestors.” Camilla said

Shantel grinned. “We were going to let you relax, but then we remembered you’re not that important.”

Ren grinned back, the familiar warmth climbing up from his chest. “Perfect. Because I have *exactly* the level of culinary skill required to ruin this meal and escape blame.”

Fujiko let out a small laugh—bright and sudden, “You’ll do fine,” she said, brushing past him, fingers grazing his arm like it meant nothing—and everything.

Fujiko moved through the room like a quiet current, gently steadying the others without ever stopping them.

Ren stood between chaos and competence, wooden ladle in hand, stirring something that smelled alarmingly good.

“This looks suspiciously like real food,” he said, peering into the pot. “You sure I made this?”

“You stirred it,” Camilla corrected, slicing mushrooms with theatrical speed. “A trained goat could’ve done the same. But yes, you participated.”

Shantel swiveled around, holding up a suspiciously ornate bottle. “Sake?” she asked, already pouring in four glasses

Camilla raised her glass. “To Ren. Our honorary kitchen mascot.”

“Excuse me,” Ren said, feigning offense. “I’m the backbone of this operation.”

“You’re the funny bone,” Shantel shot back, “and maybe the tailbone. Absolutely no use, but if you hurt it, the whole body complains.”

Fujiko laughed again—full and genuine. Ren looked over, caught her watching him.

“What?” he asked, smiling.

She shook her head. “Nothing. You just look... like you belong here.”

That one hit a little deeper than expected in the warmest way possible. He didn’t reply. Just kept stirring the pot.

Shantel had taken over the stove, tossing garlic and oil like she was negotiating with them. The wok sizzled angrily, smoke curling up in protest, and her ponytail kept hitting her shoulder like it was trying to join the conversation.

“Ren,” she called, not looking up, “next time you stir like that, I’m legally obligated to revoke your opposable thumbs.”

“I’m being delicate,” he said, mock-defensive. “Respectful.”

“You’re petting the curry,” Camilla deadpanned from behind him. “It’s soup, not a small animal.”

Fujiko giggled under her breath. She hadn't said much, but every now and then her eyes met Ren's—quiet, radiant, filled with something more than amusement. He caught her glance again, and she didn't look away this time.

"Will you taste this for me?" she asked, offering a wooden spoon.

He stepped close, leaned in, lips brushing the edge of the spoon. Miso, earthy and complex.

"That's..." he blinked, "...kind of perfect."

Fujiko nodded, not breaking eye contact. "Good."

Shantel clanged the ladle onto the wok. "Can you two not turn this into a Ghibli film? Some of us are hungry."

Ren smiled, but his heart knocked a little harder in his chest.

Camilla came over, palms full of scallions. "Move, lover-boy," she said, nudging him away from the pot with her hip. "Let the grownups finish."

"Oh, I see," Ren said. "I'm just the stirring mascot."

"You've been promoted," Shantel said. "You will now also set the table."

"Promotion without a raise? That doesn't sound like a promotion at all" Ren muttered.

"Spoken like a true CEO," Shantel smirked.

Fujiko's fingers brushed his wrist as she passed him a stack of plates. "Thank you," she said—soft, simple, but there was a gravity to it. Like she was thanking him for more than dishes.

"Don't let them bully you," Fujiko said softly, wiping her hands. She offered Ren a slice of pickled daikon from her palm.

He leaned forward, took it from her fingers. Their eyes met for a brief moment, a flutter so light it could've felt like it was imagined. "I'm not scared of them," he said. "But you Fujiko... you might be the real danger."

She smiled—not coy, not bold. Just the quiet confidence of someone who knew exactly what she meant to him.

Camilla groaned theatrically. “Oh god. If this turns into a cooking-themed love story, I swear I’ll deep fry myself.”

Ren didn’t skip a beat. “Make sure there’s tempura batter. We’ll give you a crunchy send-off.”

That made Fujiko laugh.

“You two done flirting over fermented radish?” Shantel called. “Because I need someone to man the soba noodles, and someone else to be morally responsible for the gyoza not burning.”

“I volunteer Ren as tribute,” Camilla said, pushing him toward the pan.

Ren looked over his shoulder at Fujiko. “If I burn these, it’s because I was thinking about your laugh.”

Fujiko raised her eyebrows. “Then I’ll make sure to stay quiet. For culinary safety.”

“Shame,” he said. “I was hoping to ruin dinner on purpose.”

Next, the low dining table was set by Ren without fanfare but carried the warmth of effort. A great ceramic bowl of Shantel’s steaming miso ramen anchored the center, rich with bamboo shoots, tender chashu, and soft-boiled eggs. Beside it, Fujiko’s delicate *kaiseki*-inspired pickles and *nasu dengaku* and miso-glazed eggplant. Camilla with surprising pride, presented *shirasu don*, a local Kamakura dish of baby sardines over rice, drizzled with soy and citrus and miso-mirin salad.

They sat on floor cushions, legs folding into each other’s space. The table was too small for four, and that felt good, like that was the point of the small table.

Ren poured another round of sake with both hands, passing the ceramic cups around with theatrical solemnity.

“To old friends,” Shantel added, raising her cup.

“Here’s hoping that everything works out” Fujiko whispered, her gaze landing on Ren just long enough to make him blush.

One more toast, then one more, then another—each sip loosening their edges—until finally they were draped against each other, intertwined like climbing vines reaching for the sun.

Ren was the first to laugh too hard at nothing. Shantel had just begun describing a monk who mistook Camilla for a ghost in Kyoto, and Ren nearly choked on his soba.

“She floated,” Shantel said, gesturing with her chopsticks. “She literally floated down the steps. Her feet weren’t even trying.”

“I tripped,” Camilla corrected, deadpan. “Over a cat. And I fell slowly because I’m graceful.”

Shantel poured another round with the giddy reverence of someone blessing a church.

“You know what this night reminds me of?” she said, slurring just slightly. “The days before everything in our lives turned south. When we didn’t have to ask permission to be happy back then. When we....”

Fujiko touched Shantel’s arm cutting her off midway.

Ren tilted his head. “And now?”

“Now we sneak it in,” she said. “Like contraband.” said Shantel

Camilla clinked her cup against his. “Well then, cheers to illegal joy.”

The wind outside knocked gently on the sliding doors, as if asking to join in.

And Ren, for the first time in what felt like centuries, leaned back, full of food, full of warmth, and let himself believe that maybe—just maybe—he’s home.

By now the bottle of sake was lying sideways on the tatami, drained and smiling. Shantel lay on her back—blissed-out, arms flung wide like she was trying to hold up the ceiling. Camilla had tied her hair up with a chopstick and was using her discarded sash as a makeshift pillow. Fujiko sat straight-backed but clearly floating—cheeks flushed, eyes soft, her gaze drifting toward Ren every few seconds like a compass realigning.

“I missed this,” Camilla murmured, turning toward no one in particular. “Drunk dinner. Loud laughter. People who won’t stab you in your sleep.”

Shantel grinned without opening her eyes. “Low standards, Cami.”

“I like achievable goals.” Camilla said.

Ren chuckled, resting his chin on his palm. “Dear Camilla, do you think I would ever stab you?”

Camilla pointed, one finger lazily wagging. “I don’t think so, my bathtub boyfriend but if you did, I’m sure the first thing you’d do is write some grand apology note. You know the type—I am this, and that, and oh, this life, this knife, and some Mickey inside me doesn’t know what it is!.....”

They laughed again, this time softer, slower. The kind of laughter that feels like an old scarf pulled out of a forgotten drawer. Familiar. Safe.

“I think I could die here,” Ren said suddenly, dreamily.

“No,” Fujiko said, barely above a whisper, yet it pressed heavier than any shout.

It landed like a prayer or a warning. Ren turned to her, but she just sipped from her cup and smiled like nothing had been said.

Camilla blinked at the ceiling. “Damn. That got serious.”

“Death and dinner,” Shantel said. “Always good company.”

Then—without flourish, without warning—Shantel raised a finger. A pair of used chopsticks lifted off the table, slowly, like weightless puppets. They hovered in the air, turned once, turned twice and gently clattered into the empty ramen bowl.

Ren blinked.

No one else moved.

Camilla took a slow breath and reached for another cup. “Damn it, Shantel.”

Fujiko gave a single, elegant nod—disapproval or amusement, it was hard to tell.

Ren opened his mouth. Closed it. Opened it again.

“That’s... new,” he said finally, half-laughing, half-dizzy.

“You’re drunk,” Shantel murmured. “You’ll forget.”

Ren stared at her, at the levitated chopsticks that just fell into the empty bowl, and the room suddenly felt like it had a deeper basement he wasn’t invited to yet.

He wanted to ask—but didn’t.

Ren rested his cheek on the table for a moment, blinking slowly. “I can’t tell if I’m drunk or imagining things.”

Camilla said. “Yes Ren, you’re drunk and imagining things.”

Fujiko, still perched like a priestess beside him, placed a quiet hand on Ren's shoulder. The kind of touch that carried enough warmth to carry a whole winter inside it.

Ren turned, not looking at her hand but into her eyes—something vast and unreadable swimming just beneath them.

"You, okay?" Ren asked softly.

Fujiko nodded. "Happier than I've been in centuries."

Shantel raised a brow. "You two want us to dim the lights and bring in a string quartet?"

"We can fold napkins into swans and scatter rose petals," Camilla offered.

Shantel added, "We can get one of those bubble machines too. The wedding kind. Classy"

Camilla perked up. "Add a fog machine."

Shantel grinned. "Don't forget glitter."

Ren chuckled. "Very elegant, but If anybody starts singing *Unchained Melody*, I'm walking out."

"You'd trip over the violinist," Camilla said. "But at least you'll go out with grace."

Shantel and Camilla laughed hard.

That's when Fujiko stood up, her eyes glowing like mischief lit from within, one eyebrow arched like a blade drawn slow.

"Alright, alright. Y'all done turning his breakdown into a Broadway show?"

"Let's not act like Ren's some stray kitten with a podcast," she said. "The man built a company from scratch. In Japan. Voted best place to work, and I know at least five people who can afford therapy now because of it."

Ren blinked. "I do not care about any...."

"I know, neither do I, but don't interrupt while I'm defending you," she smirked, sweet as syrup.

Camilla blinked. "Wait... she's defending him?"

“Damn right,” Fujiko said. “Someone should. He’s lived through hell, stitched himself back with bad jokes and alcohol, and still manages to be kind. That’s not soft—that’s iron with good manners.”

“Look at her,” Shantel said. “Standing by her man.”

Fujiko folded her arms. “He is still fighting demons. Real ones. Depression. Panic attacks. Nights that don’t end and still shows up with wit and grace. You don’t roast that. You protect it, like your passwords or a good bra.”

Shantel leaned back, clapping slowly. “Look what love can do.”

Fujiko shrugged. “Next time you want to drag him, I’ll give you a manual. Page one: ‘Don’t Come for My Man’ unless you want receipts and regret.”

Camilla wheezed. “She’s his HR, legal, and PR all in one.”

“And hopefully in the future his emotional tech support too,” Fujiko added

Shantel raised a toast. “To soft god and scary goddess.”

Camilla joined in. “To weird love and weirder loyalty.”

Ren sighed. “God help me.”

Shantel grinned. “Too late. You’ve got us instead.”

And just like that—

They laughed. loud and shameless. The kind of laughter that rewires something deep.

It was a mess. A beautiful, ridiculous, absolute mess.

For the first time in what felt like countless birth's, Ren was not thinking about death or the ache that lurked beneath every thought. His mind lingered on small, vivid things—the way Shantel’s hair curled when she laughed, the way Camilla could turn anything into a spark that lit up the whole room, the quiet authority in Fujiko’s presence, how she commanded attention without ever raising her voice. Laughter spilled from all of them—loose, unstoppable. The kitchen was a glorious mess, steam curling from pots, the scent of food mingling with the faint chaos of their movements, yet somehow, it felt exactly right.

Ren looked at them, really looked, and for the first time, he felt a warmth he had never known—like he belonged here, fully and without question. Each of them

shone in their own way, radiant and alive, and the walls themselves seemed to hum with the comfort of their presence. He wanted this—the clutter, the noise, the teasing, the quiet understanding that threaded between them. A weight he hadn't realized he was carrying loosened, and joy settled in his chest like a long-awaited guest finally finding its chair at the table. For the first time in years, he did not want to disappear, he did not want to die.

Ren stood by the counter, sponge in hand, pretending to care about a stubborn sesame stain. Fujiko rinsed the last of the bowls, her sleeves rolled, the pale underside of her arms glistening with splashes of water. Their rhythm was casual, even mundane. But something underneath had shifted—like a table slightly tilted, and everything on it slowly beginning to slide.

In the hall, Camilla's voice floated back with performative exhaustion. "Dish duty is where joy goes to die!"

Shantel chimed in, "I'm a rebel, not a rinse cycle."

Then laughter, sandals scuffing away, the thud of a door closing. They were gone.

Ren looked over.

Fujiko was still at the sink, but her hand had stopped moving. She stood still, her profile composed, as if holding back some secret she wasn't sure he was ready for.

He turned back to dry a bowl, trying to ignore the thrum in his chest, but when he reached for the towel draped over the edge of the counter, his fingers brushed against hers. The touch was nothing—a ghost of contact, barely there—yet it sent something sharp and electric through him, like the moment before lightning strikes.

He looked up.

Fujiko's gaze was steady, unreadable, but she stepped closer until the warmth of her was undeniable. Then, without a flicker of doubt, she rose slightly on her toes and kissed him.

It was soft—just the whisper of lips—but it broke open the air between them. Before he could breathe again, she kissed him a second time, slower this time, lingering as though she was trying to piece together some half-remembered truth with the shape of his mouth.

Ren's body froze, not from reluctance but from the sheer force of it. Fujiko pressed him back against the counter—with the certainty of someone who had decided on him long before this night.

She paused only for a breath, then kissed him again—longer, fuller. His knees felt unsteady.

When she finally drew back, her voice was low, like a flame curling around his name without speaking it.

“One more kiss,” she whispered, “and I’ll forget where I end and you begin.”

Ren did not trust his voice. He gave her only silence and the willingness in his eyes. She took his hand, threading her fingers through his, and turned toward the hallway.

Her room was simple but alive with quiet magic. Dozens of candles flickered, each flame bending toward her as though they, too, were in her orbit. A silk screen glowed faintly with moving shadows. Beyond the shōji, the wind sifted through leaves in a slow, steady rhythm, like breath drawn across bare skin. The air was warm, but something in him shivered—not from cold, but from the knowledge that nothing after this would be the same.

He stepped forward, slow but deliberate, closing the space until her perfume was the air he breathed. His fingers brushed the edge of her robe, but instead of pulling it away, he caught her chin gently between his thumb and forefinger, tilting her face to meet his eyes.

The corner of her mouth curved, the smallest surrender.

He kissed her—not tentative, not testing—but with a deep, claiming certainty, as though he’d decided in that instant that there would be no turning back. One hand slid into her hair, the other around her waist, pulling her against him.

Her soft gasp melted against his lips. She pressed closer, but he was the one steering now, guiding her backward toward the bed with a quiet, relentless pace. Each step felt like a decision, each kiss a line crossed with ecstasy.

When the back of her knees touched the mattress. He lingered, holding her face, his forehead against hers, his breath mingling with hers.

“I’m not here to wonder what this could be,” he said. “I’m here to find out.”

He touched her robe.....

二魂一光 (Nikon Ikkō)

["Two Souls, One Light"]

*He touches her robe, with trembling hands,
A hope lingers where she stands.
Not for hunger, not for thrill,
But for their bond no time could kill.*

*His hand slips lower, soft and kind,
She melts as if by spell designed.
His palm now rests, upon her chest,
A touch long banished is addressed.*

*She doesn't flinch, she lets him stay,
As if her body, knows the way.
As if her ribs, were carved apart
To hold the shape, of just his heart.*

*Her robe falls loose, she arches back.
No shame, no fear, no script to track.
He meets her arch with aching care.
And folds himself into her prayer.*

*She says his name in whispered grace,
A storm reborn in softest place.
Each wave now finds her pulsing core,
She gasps—for this and nothing more.*

*His smile meets hers, No flame, No fire,
Just the hush that follows a choir.
All peace, All joy, And all the grace,
In finding home in each other's embrace.*

*The room dissolves. The world unwinds.
Their lips forget the need for lines.
No more apart—no name, no role,
Just one's soul inside the other's soul.*

*The earth slows down to catch its breath.
The sun delays its daily death,
Even the moon leans in to see
What union truly means to be.*

*The universe says it must confess,
That love like this is holiness.
That It was born just to allow
Two souls to meet like this—right now.*

Fujiko lies with his arm beneath her head, the other tracing the curve of Ren's ribs with slow, absentminded grace. Her breathing is steady, but her lips can't quite hide the smile—soft, satiated, almost shy.

She looks like a woman who has waited a very long time for this moment. Just the weight of him beside her.

Ren's expression is unreadable—because he doesn't yet know what to call what he's feeling. It's something deeper, like his body has remembered something his mind hasn't.

Ren lets out a long, contented sigh. He kisses her collarbone once.

"I don't know what this is," he murmurs, his breath warm against her skin. "It's like this is the first time I've ever made love. Whatever I did before ..." he shook his head faintly, a soft, almost disbelieving laugh leaving him "I don't even know what to call that now."

His thumb grazes the curve of her cheek. Her lips parted, a quiet intake of breath betraying the storm beneath her calm.

"The strange part is....." he whispered, "this doesn't feel new at all."

"No, it's not" she says.

It feels right—so right it startles, like a chord struck in perfect tune. No hesitation. No doubt. The past, heavy with its noise and shadow, drifts away. The future waits at a distance and doesn't matter anymore.

Only the present remains—a truth that needs no proof: that this right here is where he belongs.

Fujiko rests her hand over his heart, the warmth of her palm sinking through his skin. He covers it with his own, holding her there like he's anchoring something precious, something he has no intention of letting go.

They sink into sleep as if they've been doing this for years, the kind of ease that comes when nothing needs to be proved. Her breath finds his, his body curves into her shape, and the world outside may as well not exist.

For now, they are not two separate lives—They are one, whole, certain, complete. Wrapped in each other's warmth. Every heartbeat, every quiet breath, confirms that this is enough. Here, in this stillness, nothing else matters. In each other, they are home. All that remains is this, and this is all they ever needed and will ever need.

Late at night, Ren awakens.

At first, there's a soft warmth wrapped around his breath, like a fading dream he doesn't want to leave. Then his hand slides over empty futon—and stops.

She's gone.

The space where Fujiko had curled against him is cold now. Not recently left—utterly abandoned. The sheets carry no trace of her body, no scent of skin. Only the cool imprint of absence. The room feels strangely larger, as though her leaving had pulled something vital out of the walls.

Moonlight has shifted across the tatami mats. Where earlier it spilled like liquid silver, now it fractures like broken glass—sharp, disjointed lines crisscrossing the floor in unsettling geometry. It feels like stepping into a photograph of the room, not the room itself.

He lifts himself slowly.

The wooden floor beneath his feet feels colder than it should, the night air creeping around his ankles like a living thing. He listens, but the house holds its breath. Nothing but the faraway creak of timber and his own breathing, which sounds strangely detached, like someone else's lungs echoing inside his chest.

He walks out, barefoot. The floor boards groan with each step, as if warning someone.

There's a smell in the air. Faint pine, yes—but beneath it, something stranger. Something sharp, herbal and bitter.

The warmth of the night—the sacred haze of skin and breath and soul—has dissipated. The intimacy that held them like a spell has disappeared. Now, each hallway feels too long. Each shadow too deep. Each door too still.

He pauses near the old cabinet. The same one Fujiko had leaned against, laughing hours ago. The light slants differently now.

An unexpected squeeze wells inside him, a quiet, insistent pressure that sets his nerves taut.

Somewhere beyond the shoji walls, a sound rises—soft chanting, faint enough to feel imagined but lasts long enough to be real.

Ren goes still, listening.

The chanting returns—Low, breathy, almost beautiful if it didn't feel so *wrong*.

He walks cautiously, his heart now thudding.

He moves past the darkened kitchen, where the air has changed—herbs still linger, but now they're tangled with something darker: the bite of scorched hide, the metallic sting of wet iron, and beneath it all, the sickly-sour tang of something dead.

A breeze snakes through the hallway, but the windows are shut. It carries a whisper—no words, just pressure—like something large breathing near his neck.

At the end of the hallway, a door hangs slightly open, the gap no wider than a breath, a slim sliver of light peeking through. The chanting continues, almost tender in its rhythm, yet wrong in a way that prickles along his skin. Ren edges closer, each step slow enough to feel the wood grain beneath his toes. He leans in, careful, the way you might approach a sleeping animal that could wake and bite. One eye finds the thin slice of space, and he peers through, holding his breath as though the sound itself might hear him.

Inside: a scene he cannot hold all at once.

Shantel hovers nearly a foot above the floor, knees drawn in, spine locked like iron. She chants in a language he doesn't understand—syllables that seem to pull at the walls, warping the room until the air wavers like heat rising from asphalt. Around her, eleven candles form a flawless circle, each one cradling a small, withered claw pressed into its wax. One flame shivers in blue; the rest burn utterly still, as if nothing in the world could touch them.

In front of her lies a wolf's *skull*, placed neatly on a silken cloth. Its eyes are stuffed with red petals. Ren blinks. No—not petals. *Tongues*.

Fujiko kneels nearby, focused. She's grinding something dark between a pestle and bowl, mixing it with what looks like blood. On the table beside her: a pair of *wolf's paws*, still furred. Fresh. Each toe carefully wrapped in copper wire.

Camilla hands her a vial, bare arms glowing with red lines.

Ren stumbles backward.

"What the *fuck* is this?" The words rip from his throat too loud. They echo.

Fujiko doesn't look up.

Camilla does. Calm. "He's awake."

Ren backs into the door frame, knocking over a glass jar filled with dried beetles. They scatter like fragments of charred skin.

Shantel's eyes snap open mid-chant—completely black.

Fujiko finally lifts her head. She only says, quiet as a blade, "You weren't supposed to see this yet, Ren."

Ren stumbles back, breath trapped in his chest. His bare feet slap the floor as he turns and bolts.

Down the hallway. Past the kitchen. Past the place where they laughed, where she kissed him. None of it feels real now. His body doesn't feel like his. The house has changed—it's longer, darker.

He grabs the front door.

Yanks it open.

Slams into something invisible, hard, like glass but there's nothing there.

He recoils, then pounds on the air. It doesn't move. A barrier. His hands slide against it, palms sweating.

Shantel's voice cuts through the air like a blade

"You can't leave."

He whirls. She's in the hallway now. Still levitating, still glowing faintly. But different. Taller, even. Her hair floats a little, like she's underwater.

"You're not a prisoner, Ren but we had to protect this moment."

Ren yells. "Protect what? What are you talking about? What are you?"

Camilla appears from behind Shantel; arms raised like in surrender. "Stop using your powers. You're scaring him."

"You were supposed to hear everything tomorrow," Shantel snaps. "In the garden. With tea. Calmly."

"Then maybe don't levitate and chant with a wolf skull in the goddamn corner!" Ren shouts, voice breaking.

His eyes dart to the back room—through the barely ajar door, he sees it again. A wolf's skull resting on a velvet cloth. The claws. White powder. Symbols drawn on the floor.

"You were going to *sacrifice* me." He shouts.

"What? No!" Camilla laughs in disbelief, but stops when she sees his face. "Ren. Honey. Nobody's sacrificing anybody. That's *protection magic*. For *you*."

"I should've known," he mutters, stumbling backward. "It was too perfect. You—*all* of you. You got inside my head. You made me feel safe. And now—"

He slips on the tatami. Falls hard. His elbow cracks against the wood. The wind goes out of him.

He gets up frantically but Ren's foot slips on something wet.

He crashes down a second time, hip scraping wood, breath exploding from his lungs. He's crawling now, half-blind, floorboards biting into his palms. There's something sticky on his hand—he doesn't look. He doesn't want to know.

Behind him, voices.

"Ren," Camilla calls, very gently. "Sweetheart, slow down. You're not in a horror movie."

Shantel's voice follows—low, smooth, wrong. "Don't run. You can't run from who you are."

"I'm not who you think I am!" he shouts, spinning around. "I'm not part of your—your coven or cult or whatever this is!"

He points at the glowing marks. "You're doing rituals! There's a wolf's skull in the other room. Wolf's paw on the window. Candles. Symbols. Don't lie to me!"

Shantel sighs and rolls her eyes. "You always say this every time. Word for word, almost."

Camilla moves closer, palms up. "It's not what it looks like."

Ren scrambles back. "That's exactly what someone says right before they eat your heart."

Camilla laughs. It's not helpful. "We were going to *explain everything* in the morning. We had snacks planned, Ren. Tea. Bananas. Rice crackers. A whole—like—a very gentle info session."

"You were grinding bones in a bowl!" He says frantically.

"They weren't bones, honey. You're just being dramatic."

He points at the door. "Let me leave."

Shantel blocks his path. "You *can't*."

"Why not?" he asks scared.

"Because you're too special," she says flatly.

That stops him. "What, what are you saying, you are all crazy?"

"You're very special," Camilla says, nodding like a proud aunt. "You just don't remember who you are yet. We were guiding you to it. Step by step. Peacefully. Then you—you—barged in."

Ren is shaking. "Guiding me to what? What the hell *am I*?"

Shantel and Camilla exchange a look.

Then, Shantel shrugs. "That's what we were going to tell you tomorrow morning—With tea."

Ren lunges again—he doesn't care if they're witches or government plants or something in between. He just needs to *get out*.

He races the hallway, dodges Camilla's arm, and slams into the front door. The knob turns—but the door doesn't open.

Behind him, Shantel lowers her hand slowly.

Her eyes glow for a second. Just a flicker. Like static behind the iris.

"You *locked* it?" Camilla snaps, already rushing forward. "Shan, no. Don't use your powers, you'll freak him out even more!"

"He was going to run straight into the woods half naked and barefoot in the middle of the damn night." Shantel says.

Camilla responds. "Yeah, and now he thinks we're about to *sacrifice him to the devil!*"

Ren backs against the door, gasping. "You just *locked a door with your mind*. That's not normal. That's not—*human*."

"I mean..." Camilla offers a weak smile. "Define 'human'?"

"I feel *trapped!*" Ren screams.

Camilla tries again, calm and soft. "Okay. Ren. Listen to me, baby. You're not trapped. We just... temporarily paused your exit options. That's all. Like a timeout. Because you're panicking, and you have *no idea* how dangerous it is to run around with half your soul hanging out."

"What the *fuck* does that mean?!" Ren says while backing away.

Shantel rubs her temples. "It means your consciousness is fragile right now. You broke the sequence. You weren't supposed to *see* anything until the morning."

Camilla adds, "There were index cards. Illustrations. An entire PowerPoint printed out. There was a title slide and everything. 'Who You Are, and Why That's Pretty Cool.'"

Ren's breath catches.

Shadows ripple under the door frame. The candles from the other room hiss and dance, even from this distance. The house feels suddenly —warped, airless, *alive*.

He starts pounding the door.

"Let me out! Let me *out!* You can't keep me here!"

Shantel sighs. "He's going to pass out."

"Maybe Fujiko should come now?"

They pause.

Then—soft footsteps.

A new presence. Quiet, sure.

Ren turns—Eyes wild—and there she stands.

Fujiko.

Standing in the hallway. Calm as stone.

Ren is trembling now. His back against the door, his hands clawing at the knob like it's a lifeline. His chest rises and falls in short, frantic bursts. He's not just scared—he's *splintering*.

Fujiko takes a cautious step forward. "Ren, you're safe. Please. Just breathe."

He jerks like she's pointing a gun at him.

"Stay back!" he screams. "Don't—don't come any closer. You're not going to *touch* me!"

"Baby, no one's touching you," Camilla says gently, palms up. "We're not here to hurt you. You're just overwhelmed. That's all."

"*Overwhelmed?!?*" he barks a laugh that has no joy in it. "Oh *God*, this was a setup. All of it. From the *very beginning*."

He slides down the door, hands gripping his skull like he's trying to hold it together.

"It was supposed to be *just me and Shantel*, remember? A friendly soul-searching weekend. That's it. But no. You were already here. Camilla. Fujiko. You weren't supposed to be here. You just... appeared. Like chess pieces."

Fujiko bites her lip. "That's not—Ren, we didn't—"

"Don't lie to me now. *Don't you fucking lie to me now!*"

He looks at Fujiko like she just stabbed him in the chest.

"You knew exactly what you were doing from the first night I met you. *The moment you touched my wrist*. I was gone. You got into my *head*. You played wise, delicate, goddess—just enough to make me *fall* and I did. I feel like an *idiot*."

“Ren, that’s not true,” Fujiko whispers.

“You used me!” His voice breaks. “You made me believe it was real. *You made love to me*, and it was the most beautiful thing I’ve ever known—and the whole time, you were—you *were just prepping me for this*. For this *ritual* or whatever the hell this is.”

Shantel interjects, her tone firm. “We were going to explain everything. With calm. With care. You were never in danger, you are not in danger now, Ren.”

But he’s not listening.

“I trusted you, Fujiko,” he sobs, chest convulsing. “I *trusted* you. After everything—after my breakdown, after the *hospital*—you were the only thing that made me want to *live*. You touched my soul like no one else. You all made me believe I was finally *safe*.”

Fujiko moves toward him. Slowly. Gently. “You *are* safe.”

“Stay away!” he screams.

Camilla kneels nearby. “Ren, sweetheart. Please. This isn’t who you are. This fear—it’s not *you*. It’s just your mind reacting to something it doesn’t remember yet.”

“No,” Ren growls, voice shaking. “No, no, no. *This is real*. You did this to me.”

He glares at Fujiko.

“You ripped me open. You looked me in the eyes and told me I mattered. You kissed me like I was the only thing left on earth. We made *love*, and you made it feel sacred. *Sacred!*” His voice cracks completely.

“Now you want me to believe it was just a *step* in your *ritual*?! That I was just a fucking *means* to some end I don’t even understand?!”

Fujiko’s voice is shaking too, but with love, not fear or anger. “Ren, nothing about what we shared was false. Nothing. I loved you—I *do* love you and will always love you.”

Ren stares at her like she’s a ghost. “Then why am I *terrified* of you right now?”

She moves closer.

He recoils, sobbing.

“I see it now. You’re all in it. You’re *not people*. You’re something else. You’ve been *leading* me here. Herding me. All of you. I thought you were my friends and I thought—you loved me”

His breathing goes sharp. Erratic.

He grips his chest like he can’t find air. “I can’t—breathe—I can’t—I *can’t*—”

“Camilla,” Fujiko says quickly. “He’s going into shock—He’s spiraling.”

Ren slides to the floor, hands fisting into his shirt. “Please—just *let me* go. Let me go. I won’t tell anyone. I won’t—just let me *go!*”

He looks up at Fujiko, a final, desperate plea.

“Why?” he whispers. “Why would you make me feel *safe, loved, nearly rescued and then do this* to me?”

Fujiko kneels, tears brimming in her own eyes. “Because you are *more* than what you think you are. You are not broken. You’re just not ... *awake* yet.”

Ren shakes his head like a child refusing medicine.

“*Don’t*. Don’t say that. Don’t come near me. I’ll die, Fujiko. I swear I’ll *die*.”

Then something in her face hardens—not cruel, not angry, but resolved.

She leans forward.

Snaps her fingers—just once.

The sound is soft.

Almost loving.

Ren’s body stiffens—his eyes flutter—he goes into a peaceful sleep

Then—Collapse.

Into her arms.

Fujiko holds him.

Shantel sighs.

Camilla rests her head against the wall.

The house breathes again. Silence. For now.

Chapter 7

Resurrection



The hallway is quiet now. Not peaceful. Just quiet in the way a battlefield is quiet when no one's left standing.

Fujiko kneels beside him. Her fingers softly running through his hair.

Camilla leans against the wall, rubbing the side of her neck. Her voice comes soft, hoarse, worn thin by strain. "That... did not go so well."

Shantel sits on the floor, her arms wrapped tight around her knees, chin resting between them. "That went worse than last time."

Camilla nods, replaying failure after failure in her mind. "At least last time, we made it to the power point."

Fujiko speaks without looking at them, her gaze fixed somewhere far away. "In Kyoto, he stopped speaking entirely. For months. Just stared at the river."

Fujiko lowers her eyes. "I held him one night. He asked me if love was a parasite."

Shantel speaks, her voice gentle, folding into the hush of the night around them. "There was one life where we showed him too early. We were so sure that if he just saw it all—he'd remember. That the shock would unlock everything. He lost his mind. Started screaming about spirits in his blood. He thought we'd cursed him."

Fujiko exhales, "He jumped from the roof in that one"

Camilla tapping her fingers on the shoji wall. "In Sikkim, he vanished. We were getting close in that one. He had just broken through—he looked at us as if he'd conquered fear."

"And?" Shantel asks.

Camilla sighs and replies. "He left the next morning, Left his shoes by the stream."

Shantel presses her forehead to her knees and speaks.

"In Moscow, he tried to outwit us. Thought it was all a trick. He started keeping journals—pages and pages of calculations, diagrams, patterns. He was desperate to prove we weren't real."

This time Camilla asks "And in the end?"

"He burned the journals. Then himself," Shantel says. "We arrived too late."

Shantel exhales loudly, "In Damascus?"

Camilla answers before Fujiko can. "He cut his own throat the first time he met us."

The three look despondent, memories crowding the narrow hallway. Each story stacks on the last, the weight agonizing.

Shantel's eyes close for a moment, as if replaying every attempt, every failure. Her voice flat with exhaustion. "We've tried slow. Fast. Gentle. Ruthless. Hints. Dreams. Memory triggers. We've tried telling him the truth outright. This time we tried not speaking a word, letting him come to us and look at him. Nothing works."

Camilla speaks; her words drag like a big bag of rocks.

"Every single time, it breaks him..."

Her voice cracks, but she forces herself to finish.

"...and it breaks us."

Camilla's stares at Fujiko, her face hardening.

"It's like the universe doesn't want him healed."

The hallway feels colder after she says it, as though her words strip the air of warmth.

Fujiko shakes her head, as though dismissing a thought she refuses to allow.

“No. He’s here. He’s always been. We just ... haven’t reached the version of him that remembers, we have failed, not the universe.”

Shantel stares at the floor. “Eighteen lives since he ... since he took it all. This is his eighteenth birth since the event. He descended for us. Took on all of it—our karma, our debts, our ruin. Voluntarily. Without even letting us know. He came down without even a soul guide. Every time he’s born, he carries pieces of that burden. Every time. This is all our fault.”

The candles in the distant room blow out.

Fujiko leans closer to Ren, grazing his cheeks as though her touch could keep his breath steady. “He did it because he loved us.”

Her eyes stay on Ren.

“Oh, you beautiful-beautiful soul.”

Camilla looks up, her voice tight as if dragged through her chest.

“And if we lose him now...”

Shantel finishes Camilla’s sentence, the words tasting like dust.

“His soul will fall into the lowest realm. The one we can’t reach. The one that swallows memory, No one’s ever come back from there.”

They fall into grief so sharp it feels carved into their bones, etched permanent and staring into their souls.

Camilla stands suddenly. “Then we begin the ritual now, while he is unconscious. He’s already halfway gone. If we wait, he’ll slip again.”

Shantel rises too—too quickly—she stumbles. “No, we don’t have his consent, he doesn’t understand any of this right now.”

Camilla steps forward, her voice loud. “Consent isn’t needed in this state Shantel. Consent doesn’t even matter right now. What matters is that the soul can hear us. When he is unconscious, the body withdraws, the human mind quiets, and the soul rises closer to the surface. That’s when it’s most open. The human body remains only a vessel—it keeps breathing, keeps beating, nothing more, it does nothing more than it should. This is the best time to get to the soul. This is precisely the time for the ritual. If we speak to it now, it will reach him where it must.”

Shantel grips the edge of the table. Her breath catches, uneven. “You can’t be serious, Camilla. We can’t force it. It isn’t right. Not when he’s afraid, not when his whole being is panicking like this.”

“Resurrection is not all, that’s only half of it, the ritual is only complete once he gets back all his memories. At least one cycle of memories before we can stabilize him. You know that. Do you think his body will be able to take everything when he is panicking and fearful.”

“What happens if he wakes halfway through any point of the ritual? Have you thought of that? His fear and panic would close every door we’re trying to open and if that happens—we won’t reach him ... again. We’ve seen it happen over and over. This is the eighteenth birth, our last chance. We can’t risk it. No, Camilla. Absolutely not.”

Camilla’s eyes flash, caught between anger and sorrow. “Do we even have a choice? His mind is shattered already. If he wakes now, at this moment, and sees us, he might die from the shock alone. Let’s resurrect him first, we will figure out the memories part later, we will cross that bridge once we get to it.”

“The human mind can only bear so much without preparation, and he’s already seen too much. You suspended in the air, creating invisible barriers with your mind, symbols lighting across my skin, Fujiko grinding bone into blood. He is already gone, Shantel. We don’t have time; we have to perform the ritual while he is unconscious.”

Fujiko utters in a low voice, almost to herself. “After a very long time ... I’m really scared.”

Fujiko’s voice cracks. “This is it. This is the last chance. The eighteenth birth. No more chances after this for us to save him. If we don’t save him now, he is gone—Forever.”

Her poise and command slips. Her shoulders fall, unsteady. She breaks down quietly, her head sinking into her hands. The sight stops Camilla and Shantel cold. In all their births they had never seen her afraid—Never. They were stunned.

Fujiko kneels beside him. Ren’s body lies limp. His chest rises and falls shallowly, like it’s uncertain whether to stay or leave, his brow holds the faint crease of someone caught between two worlds.

Fujiko brushes the hair from Ren’s forehead, her touch gentle.

“Love,” Fujiko whispers, her voice trembling at first. “I know you’re in there. I know you can hear me.”

Her words gather strength, carrying the weight of seventeen lifetimes.

“I chased you across seventeen dying suns. Each time you were born again, each time a new face, a new name—but always the same sorrow. The same suffering—only heavier, only sharper, each life carving deeper into you, taking you further away from who you are. I know it has been unbearable and I am sorry. You don’t remember who you are, but I do. I never forgot. You were the light. You are the light. You’ve only forgotten how endlessly bright you once burned.”

Her breath catches, but her eyes blaze. She grips his shoulders, nails digging in.

“You carried storms on your back and shielded us when no one else could. Now—for once—let us carry you. You saved us, again and again, more times than we could ever count. Now let us save you.”

Her voice thickens, the tears spilling but only fueling her devotion.

“I don’t want to exist in a universe where you keep suffering for sins that were never yours. I was stitched to your soul long before this earth took its first breath. Don’t ask me to unthread the only thing that makes me whole. Whatever fate thinks it’s doing, it will have to take me too. I don’t want to exist if you don’t. I cannot exist without you. I won’t.”

Camilla’s hand presses gently to her shoulder. Shantel kneels beside her. Their eyes wet. Fujiko’s voice cracked, her grip on his shoulder tightens.

“I see you. I see every scar; every wound burned into your soul. I swear to every entity that ever watched you suffer—I will not stop until you remember who you are. They want you erased. They think you are finished. They think you are too broken, too far gone. No... No, love. You are not a cautionary tale. You are not some tragic poem. You are the storm they all try to quiet, the fire they try to put out but they will not succeed.

Her voice cracked, her grip on his shoulder tightened. There was no pity. No pleading. Only that terrifying, beautiful strength—the kind that bends fate itself.

Fujiko closes her eyes, steadying herself, then opens them again—her voice low at first, then rising, like a storm breaking open.

“You are the best of us all. Do you hear me? The best. Before these chains of birth, before karma scattered you, before sorrow crushed you—you stood higher than any of us. The strong followed you because none were stronger. The wise sought you because you knew what they could not. You carried mercy without weakness, power without cruelty, and a will that moved even the heavens. Not before you, not since, has there been such a spirit—thunder in battle, light in darkness, a guide even for those who called themselves divine. The blade and the prophecy. The heart and the storm. You were everything.”

Her voice now burns with divine fury, an uncontainable rage, like a goddess scorned.

“I don’t care what this universe wants. I don’t care what karma says. I don’t care what gods demand. I don’t care who dares to stop me. I don’t care who gets hurt. I will not let them win. I will fight every shadow, every god, every demon, every law of heaven itself if I must. I will stand in the fire beside you, burn if I must, but you will rise, no matter what happens, you will rise—and when you rise—they will know, they will all know.”

Fujiko raises her head, gets up with unshakeable determination. The earth could tear itself apart beneath her feet, the sky could shatter above, and she would remain, unbowed, unshaken, immovable.

Her gaze moves to Camilla, then to Shantel. There is a fire in her eyes that burns with unshakable resolve. A love that refuses to surrender. She looks to Camilla, then to Shantel. Her voice emerges steady with absolute certainty.

“Let’s bring him back,” Fujiko says.

Not a plea. Not a prayer. Not a vow. A war cry of love itself, daring both heaven and hell to try and stop her.

Fujiko steps toward the room, like an impossible force that refuses to give up, ready for whatever the universe might throw. She will not stop—until he is back—until he is home.

Camilla and Shantel lift Ren’s unconscious body, rising weightlessly between their outstretched hands. They carry him into the room—the same one Ren had glimpsed earlier, before panic stole his breath and sent him fleeing. It wasn’t just a ritual space. It was built for confrontation—between soul and ego, truths and lies, forgotten memories and *the final reckoning that awaited him*.

The room had one table in the center, a separate section for preparation on the side. They set him gently down on the old wooden table—its surface was smooth, veined with faint traces of gold dust worn into its grain by centuries of touch and prayer.

Mirrors coated the walls from corner to corner, tall and seamless. In the far corner, the preparation alcove glimmered with ritual precision—glass vials nestled beside silk pouches, bundles of herbs bound in silver thread, and shallow bowls brimming with oils & pastes.

Wolf bones, tongues, curved claws, and a bleached skull sat arranged like a forgotten constellation. An ancient book lay open, its chants long lost to mankind, flanked by scrolls inscribed.

Fujiko stood at the head of the table. She placed both hands on the center of Ren's chest and closed her eyes, whispering something in a language even Camilla and Shantel didn't understand. The glyphs embedded in the table glowed dimly. The wood responded—like it was coming alive.

Shantel prepared the perimeter. Salt lines traced into concentric circles, activated by wolf's blood and claws. She lit the Ghost-water Resin, it was for containment. If the ego refused to step aside—if it clung too tightly to the body and tried to take full control—the resin would suppress it. It weakened both control and will, forcing the ego into submission. The effect was amplified by the red salt marked boundary surrounding the table, made stronger still by the presence of the wolf's skull—ancient symbol of dominance and enforced obedience.

Fujiko dips her fingers into the Oblivion Tar, the oil thick as crude oil and gleaming like obsidian rain. It allows the ego to dissolve, it's not death—it's surrender of the ego. Ego stepping aside so the soul can rise. She presses it gently to the center of Ren's forehead, then draws two slow arcs around his temples, forming a shape that resembles an unopened eye. The moment it touches skin, his breath hitches—and the false ego that clung to survival began to dissolve and started resisting immediately. This oil did not coax the soul; it demanded truth by dissolving everything that wasn't.

"Camilla, "Truth-bane Oil" Fujiko says. "Start at the base. Legs first. He needs to feel safe."

Camilla applies the Truth-Bane oil onto her palms. A colourless oil, it dragged buried truths out of the mind and forced them into the open—raw, sharp, and

impossible to ignore. She began tracing the inside of his calves, slowly upward. Every curve she made was part of a map—a specific trail that told the soul it was wanted.

Fujiko placed a hand over Ren's heart and began the second invocation. Her voice was low and clear, ancient vowels echoing inside every atom in the room.

The oils had begun to sink into his skin. Ren's pulse was erratic, but the strange thing was—it wasn't slowing. It was synchronizing.

To the room.

To *them*.

To her.

Shantel's tattoos began to glow—thin red lines like frost on glass. She would be the one to *catch* him, when the fall came.

Camilla lit the Starlight root, a bundle of blackened vines that released thick, coiling smoke the moment flame touched it. The root was ancient—used in resurrection rites and karmic inversions. It called the soul back when it wandered too far. It whispered to the in-between, to the place where souls linger indecisively, and reminded them of who they once were. It did not force return—it only showed the path.

Fujiko presses the tip of a blade to her thumb and let a single drop of blood bloom. She drew her sigil right next to Ren's head on the table. A circle, three lines cut through it—one horizontal, one vertical, one curved like a falling ribbon in the middle. It was a key that only could be made with Fujiko's blood and sigil. It was an invocation to time itself to be on their side, to bless them, as Ren's soul was buried under multiple births and timelines.

As soon as she completed the sigil, her blood shimmered silver and sank into the table—no burn, no flash, just quiet absorption.

A low vibration thrummed beneath them under the floor.

Fujiko placed the final mark—a thumbprint of crushed pearl between his brows.

The glyphs flared brighter.

The oils shimmered.

“You are going to go through last seventeen lives of not knowing who you are in a flash, the agony of all the seventeen lives will come back to you, it will be difficult but you are stronger than anyone I know” Fujiko says, “just don’t quit love.”

Shantel and Camilla stand on opposite sides of the table.

It begins with three long breaths—both of them in unison. Then the first chant. They repeat it three times.

Ren’s skin shivers—neck, wrists, sternum, each ankle. His limbs twitch as if reacting to something in a far-off dream.

“Red thread,” Camilla whispers, Fujiko ties it tight—wrist to wrist, ankle to ankle, a four-point cross.

Shantel lifts the ancient book bound in silver leaf. Shantel and Camilla start the second chant in sync with Ren’s energy.

Fujiko stands next to his head, her voice hushed but desperate, wrapping around his body like warmth.

“Love,” she whispers, brushing her fingers across his cheek. “Even if it all feels wrong. Even if it feels like you are ending. Know inside that I’m there with you, trust me, that’s all I ask.”

Ren stirs—just a twitch of his jaw. A whimper escapes.

Behind her, Camilla and Shantel continue chanting in resonance. The mirrors begin to hum—some crack, some bloom with strange reflections.

Shantel’s and Camilla’s voices rise with the third chant. The chant doubling back on itself, looping with new syllables and tones. The mirrors begin glowing red. The thread pulls taut. Ren lets out a gasp—eyes shut, but his fingers flex.

The chanting builds.

His body arches like something trying to stay in when it is being pushed out, the red thread slicing into skin.

Ren’s breathing grows faster.

His lips tremble.

Then—

He screams.

Not a sound of pain.

But a loud NO.

A scream of refusal and resistance.

The mirrors crack. The red thread breaks. The smoke recoils.

And then—

He opens his eyes.

But they're not Ren's.

His eyes snap open. Not gently. Not gradually. They *explode* into wakefulness, wild, feral, blown wide with terror. The whites are red-rimmed, pupils dilated, veins spider webbed and furious.

For a moment, there's no breath—just the stunned silence of the ritual being broken.

Then—

His body convulses. Arching. Shaking. Seizing. His spine lifts off the table like something inside him is holding on too tight to let go.

The red thread pulls tight across his limbs. His arms jerk outward with unnatural strength. His feet kick against the table, scattering oil and salts.

Camilla shouts, "This is way too early"

The oils on his skin hiss and *bubble*, burning backward into angry welts. The ghost water resin curdles into something sour and metallic.

Then the scream, It's not human. Not fully.

A high, wet, animal sound wrenched from somewhere deep from the pain and suffering inside. A scream that doesn't want to be heard, but *must*— as if lifetimes of anguish is tearing its way out in one breath.

He flails. One surge of impossible strength— and the red threads *snap*.

"No—!" Camilla lunges forward, trying to hold him.

His gaze darts from face to face, *terrified*. Alien. Empty.

He doesn't recognize them, Not Fujiko's trembling lips, Not Shantel's arms glowing with light, Not Camilla's outstretched arms, palms open, heart bare.

He sees *threats*.

He sees *strangers*.

He jumps off the table and scrambles backward on all fours.

Mouth frothing, limbs still twitching. Mirrors shatter as he stumbles into them, glass cuts his shoulder.

Fujiko tries to reach him, slow and low, He growls. Camilla and Shantel begin to chant again but the spell's rhythm is broken.

Ren collapses on the floor and starts retching, coughing out something black. His eyes roll back. Then return.

Whispers something no one understands.

Fujiko says "Love, please. It's okay. Look at me. You're safe."

Ren on all his fours is unsteady and quaking.

When he speaks, it's not his voice.

"Where ... am I?"

They go still.

Camilla's breath catches in her throat.

The ritual is shattered and Ren—their Ren—is nowhere in sight.

Ren bolts on all fours, not like a man but like something feral—unleashed. There was no hesitation in his limbs, only a single instinct: *out*. Not just from the room. Not just from them. Out of the ritual. Out of reach. Out of anything that could hold him.

Camilla cries out, "NO!"—but it is already too late.

Shantel moves fast, but Ren is faster still. His body, broken moments ago, moved with a terrifying, unnatural grace—something neither holy nor human.

Then he crosses it.

The salt line—meticulously laid in a spiral pattern of protection—should have seared him, should have stopped him cold. Instead, he passed over it like it wasn't there.

The wolf tongues—meant to flare blue when trying to be crossed—burn for half a second, then go dark.

The wolf claws don't curl or scratch or react.

The wolf skull, an old and blood-bound sentinel that had snarled during lesser violations, remains still—its jaw slack, its power unfired.

All three of them froze.

Camilla's eyes widen. Shantel takes a half-step back.

None of the protections had activated. It was like he hadn't *broken* the ritual—he had slipped *beneath* it. Like the rules hadn't applied.

"He wasn't supposed to be able to do that," Camilla said aloud.

Shantel pours everything she has into her last spell to stop him, every ounce of will, honed like a blade pressed to bone. The air groans under the pressure, the salt markings flare, the wolf's skull rattles with strain.

But it is too late, he is already at the door.

The door opens with a weightless calm, as if nothing ever tried to stop him. Not a shudder. Not a pause.

Then—he simply jumps out the door.

Gone.

With him went the light. The thrum of magic. The tenuous bridge they had built to call him back.

Camilla stands frozen, lips parted, her mind unable to fit this into any of the outcomes they had prepared for.

Shantel blinks once, then twice, and then, "Oh my god," she said, breath catching in her throat. "He's gone."

Camilla stumbles backward, as if the words themselves had struck her. "No ... no, no, we lost him again—*again*."

Shantel's voice cracks. "He is too powerful. We should've seen it. We *knew* this was the last birth, we *knew* it—we have failed"

Camilla collapses to her knees. Her hands touch the edge of the broken salt line, now just ordinary dust. "This was it," she whispered. "After this, there's nothing. No more births, no more time. He's *gone forever*."

Shantel steps back, eyes glassy, horror blooming behind her ribs like a second heart. They had done everything. Given everything.

Still, they have lost him again.

She falls to her knees, eyes wide and wet with disbelief—like a child lost in a crowd, calling for someone who had already left.

"Is there nothing?" she whispers first, as if even the air might break under the weight of the question.

Then louder—cracked, furious, breaking.

"Is there *nothing* in this universe that can help us now?"

"No god? No force? No higher law that gives a damn? Are we really alone in this?"

She stares up—through ceiling, through sky, through every realm.

"Is there no god left that *still cares?!?*"

Fujiko speaks, serene and peaceful. "The gods do not help those who plead for miracles. They only help those who dare to help themselves, who dare to be the miracle."

And then—

Fujiko slowly rises, folding her legs in full lotus position—floating in the air, radiant, shining brilliant in her beauty—like a sword catching lightning. Her hair floats, weightless, each strand shimmering as though dipped in liquid starlight.

Her spine locks. Her chin lifts. She starts chanting internally, eyes closed. Her right-hand lifts—not frantic, not rushed, but slow. Slow like there is no hurry, just purpose. Slow like the world was already hers to command.

The air around her begins to vibrate, the vibration is felt in the walls, in the floor, through every shard of glass and grain of dust. Curtains start flaying on their own. The candles flicker.

“No,” she says softly.

Not to any person.

Not to any witness.

But to Time itself.

The vibrations of her chants spread outward like a ripple through the cosmos, and every second quivers, uncertain of its obedience.

Her fingers cut through the air—

Once.

Twice.

Each cut leaves a shimmer, like molten silver veins suspended against the dark, trailing behind her hand as if the world itself bleeds light at her touch.

The third time, her hand curls into a fist—tight, strong, steady—like she has seized the very threads of time itself.

The sound of clock, tick and tock dissolving into a single endless note.

The moment stills.

She is not asking

She is not praying,

She is not begging.

She is ‘fighting’ for the only universal truth—Love

And She is willing to die for it.

Time has witnessed empires rise and rot, oceans carve stone into dust, suns collapse into silence. It has never paused, never betrayed its single command: to move forward without mercy. For the first—and only—time, Time considers breaking its only law for a force that predates its endless ticking. A force older than time itself—Love.

Before matter, before light, there was only the Source—and in the Source, there was love. Not made, not learned, not bound. It's origin unknown. Older than time, the first spark and the last flame. It does not bend rules but shatters them—a separate force on its own.

It is a force that threads everything directly to the source and Fujiko's love is this force incarnate—Pure, absolute, undeniable and so vast that even the source of all things witnesses it and blesses her this miracle.

Then—impossibly—she begins to pull.

All at once, the cosmos obeys.

In steps. In waves. In rewinding light.

As she pulls, the room convulses. The air smells of iron and smoke, sharp as if lightning itself had been distilled into scent. The colors of the room fold inward—blue spilling into gold, gold into violet, violet into black.

The fist does not tremble.

The body does not waver.

Everything starts reversing in the exact order it happened.

Shantel's words rewind back into her throat, syllables tumbling backward like a spell being swallowed.

Camilla's cry unstitches itself mid-air, grief disassembling letter by letter, vapor-like—never spoken.

They speak in reverse, expressions suspended in disbelief, watching it all unfold while it un-unfolds.

Ren—mid-run—jerks backward as if pulled by a hook in the gut. His feet drag in reverse, each backward step a carbon copy of the ones he'd just made fleeing.

The door—flung open by Ren a few moments ago—is now yanked shut by him in the exact reverse order. He is now in the room.

The room breathes in, long and low. Walls squeeze tight. The ceiling bends, warps.

Ren's backward steps stutter back to the line of salt he'd scattered—now reassembling, spiral by spiral, into sacred order. The salt reorganizes itself as if inhaling discipline. The lines realign around the table with reverent care, closing a circle broken just a few seconds back.

Glass pieces jumping up, cracks shrinking, edges fusing, until mirrors are whole again.

Ren lands silently back on the table—body resetting in an instant. Just like he had leapt off, he is laid back down.

The broken red thread loops itself once more around his wrists, his ankles, while restitching itself—Neatly tied. No tangles. Curls of incense collapse in on themselves, pulled back into brass bowls like serpents swallowing their tails. Oil and salt lift up into the air—gathering mid-flight—and slip neatly back into their bowls, into the exact grooves they had once filled.

The final drop of oil settles back onto his brow.

The candlelight glows, then softens, then stills.

And Ren lies there.

Silent.

Breathing.

Bound.

Eyes shut.

As if he had never moved.

As if none of it had ever happened.

Fujiko crumples.

She doesn't fall—She folds like a dancer bowing after the final note has died away, her limbs lowering not in failure, but in surrender. Like a rebel who has broken a law no soul was meant to defy.

Shantel runs, arms out, catching her just in time—just before her temple kisses the cold floor.

Camilla rushes to them, her breath catching, tears already welling without permission, and then—her gaze locks on something that stills her completely.

Fujiko's right arm. It's black—entirely black apart from the fact that a thick silver line, glowing faintly runs from the tip of her ring finger to her shoulder. It looks like something branded by the divine. Her skin is cold, impossibly cold, and her palms

are raw, blistered and burned—the flesh singed and cracked from gripping something too vast, too holy, too impossible, from holding the edge of time itself.

Camilla's hand reaches out, trembling. She barely brushes her fingers against the marred skin, afraid that even touch might do more harm. She speaks in awe and disbelief

"You... turned it," she whispers.

Her voice is grief and awe. "You pulled back time... with your hand Fujiko."

Fujiko doesn't respond.

Her lips move, but they don't form answers—only fragments. Tiny, broken shapes of sound. Circles and flickers, like she's trying to say something again and again but can't quite remember how.

The room is no longer the same. It's not the same ritual anymore, the universe is aware of what's happening in this house in Kamakura and has its full attention. The air feels different. The candles burn steadier. The table feels warmer. The mirrors glimmer like they've seen something they can't unsee. The floor itself feels like it is reverberating with pure energy.

The room has seen what she is willing to do.

The glyphs on the table shimmer like water under moonlight.

Ren murmurs.

Fujiko lifts her head—barely. Her lips crack open. Her voice—holy. "Come back, love... Say it. Just say who you are."

Shantel and Camilla bow their heads to Fujiko and then to Ren.

Shantel's hands grab the sacred book again, her thumb catching on the same page that started it all.

Camilla and Shantel simply begin again.

The chants begin anew.

Ren thrashes again.

His breath snags, catches, then howls.

Every time his body settles, it yanks itself upward—like something inside him doesn't want to leave.

A long exhale.

Then a pause too long.

Then another.

His eyes roll upward, showing only white.

His lips twitch and fall open.

Blood pools at the corners of his mouth.

His chest rises halfway—then nothing.

Ren's body begins to shut down.

The heartbeat flutters, then stammers, then fades.

Candles rupture in sharp bursts, sending wax like tears across the walls and floor.

The red threads at his wrists ignite in sudden sparks.

Shantel screams, "*we're losing him!*"

Camilla rips open the nearest pouch of herbs, crushes them in both hands, and applies on his forehead.

His forehead hisses.

Chants rise like thunder.

But Fujiko does not move.

She holds his face between her palms like he is the last thing left in any world worth saving.

Her thumbs trace his cheeks.

His lips have gone grey-blue.

Tears fall from Fujiko's eyes without permission, one by one, soaking into the corners of his mouth.

"Please ..." Fujiko says, voice breaking, nearly soundless. Her body shakes. Her head bows. Her breath shivers.

“Please don’t quit... stay...fight”

Fujiko leans closer, until her breath becomes his breath.

Until her voice becomes his tether.

A spasm. A flicker. The faintest pull of breath.

The line between life and death... just held.

“I’ am here with you love. Stay with me, just one more second. Then another. Then another.”

Camilla throws a bowl of oil across his chest. The oil seeps in as soon as it touches his skin.

Fujiko kisses his forehead.

“I’m here love. You’re not alone.”

“I love you. Don’t leave me behind... I can’t exist without you.”

His chest lurches hard, a big exhale from his lungs.

Not a twitch.

Not a sound.

His mouth hangs open like a broken door, blood pouring out.

The light behind his eyes—gone.

Even the shallow breath is missing now.

Stillness, the kind of stillness that screams louder than sound.

Though no one says it aloud, they all feel it.

All three women freeze.

Shantel’s chant halts mid-word.

Camilla’s hands go limp, herbs falling from her fingers to the floor.

The candle flames dim as if bowing in mourning.

Fujiko stares. No expression, no emotion. Numb. Hope gone from her eyes. Lifeless. She stands like she has gone too.

Time stretches like perpetuity.

Then it breaks.

Fujiko lunges forward.

“NO!”

She throws herself onto him, fists pounding, hair falling wild across his face.

“NO! DON'T YOU DARE!”

Each word is a thunderclap.

She pounds his chest with both hands.

Her voice cracks open, full of agony.

“Don't leave me! Don't you *dare* leave me!”

Tears pour from her in violent waves. Her voice is cracked, raw, she doesn't even know what she is saying anymore.

“You said you'd fight. You said you'd stay! You *promised*.”

“I'll destroy my soul if you go. I *swear it*. I'll burn every realm, tear open every gate—I'll tear myself apart, I won't spare anyone, I'll destroy everything that exists. Get up, get up, you beautiful soul!”

Her forehead slams into his collarbone.

Her voice becomes a whisper made of glass:

“I'm nothing without you...”

“I've *waited* through death after death after death to be with you—Don't go away from me, please come back.”

Fujiko clutches him tighter, burying her face into the hollow between his neck and shoulder, wriggling, as if trying to fuse their bodies together by will alone.

“Come back, love, please.” She says crying

Behind her, Camilla turns away. Her lips are trembling, her eyes blurred.

Shantel cannot speak. She clasps her pendant, knuckles white, lips pressed shut in silent prayer.

Only Fujiko moves now.

She rocks him in her arms like a child, like a lover, like his existence she refuses to bury.

“You’re the only thing I ever got right.”

“You’re the best of us. The best of *them all*.”

“And I am not letting go.” Her scream tears through the air, raw and endless, as if the universe itself had never known such agony before.

The room begins to shake.

Something—*somewhere*—is listening.

A deep red light begins to pulse from Ren’s chest.

Just a flicker.

She gasps—and stills her hands.

“...Love?”

The pulse flashes again—faint, but present.

Fujiko lifts her head slowly and looks at Camilla and Shantel, cautiously, like hope itself is dangerous to believe in.

She leans in, pressing her ear to his heart.

Nothing.

Then—

His chest jolts.

Ba-dum—a heart beat

Ren gasps. It’s not steady. It’s raw, gurgled—like life slamming its fist through the veil of death.

His eyelids flutter. He chokes on breath, limbs twitching erratically.

Fujiko jolts upright with a sob. Her eyes go wide. “He’s fighting—he’s fighting to come back”

Camilla and Shantel rush forward, slipping over the wax-slick floor, clutching herbs, oil, anything they can grab.

“Love—love, look at me,” Fujiko says, cupping his cheeks.

But his eyes roll back. He groans, half-lost.

“Stay here, stay *with me*—you *have* to stay here, love!”

Camilla slaps her palm to his forehead. “What’s your name?”

Shantel echoes sharply: “Say your name.”

All three voices rise into a wild harmony of love and fear:

“What’s your name? Come on!” “Tell us your name”

He is barely able to focus. Lips part—no sound.

Fujiko leans close again, forehead against his. “Remember who you are my love.”

A ray of light escapes from both his palms—Bright. Soft.

He twitches again.

“Come on, love. Come on. Come *home*.” Fujiko’s voice is soaked in tears, cracked with longing: “You’re mine and I’m yours and we were never meant to be apart.”

He opens his mouth—but only a whimper escapes.

It’s not a name. Not yet.

But it’s a beginning.

Fujiko smiles through tears.

She holds him like a lifeline, pressing her hand to his chest as the heartbeat steadies.

Shantel’s voice is raw. “NAME! What’s your name? Yes, that is what we are calling this visit, do you hear me Ren, look at yourself inside like you looked in the mirror while having tea with me and ask yourself, What’s your name?!”

Camilla grabs Fujiko’s arm. “NOW—push him!”

Ren convulses. Mouth open. Soundless.

Three voices screaming in unison, louder each time:

“Tell us your name!”

“Tell us your name!”

“Tell us your name!”

The smoke turns gold.

The air smells like an incense of gods, like something divine is arriving, it's on its way.

Ren trembles violently.

His lips quiver.

“...mmm...my...naa...aame...”

He's almost there. Almost—but something pulls him back.

Eyes roll back.

Candles blow out.

Scrolls catch fire.

Then—everything goes quiet.

Fujiko looks at him—not with hope, not with doubt, but with the certainty of a goddess who has waited lifetimes for this moment. Her gaze carries the quiet power of someone who already knows what comes next, as if what comes next is not by chance, but a command from creation itself.

Fujiko leans in.

.
.

Her hand finds his chest—resting gently, as if reminding his heart how to beat.

.
.

Her lips graze his ear; a smile on her lips, she whispers “Love”.

.
.

She draws in a breath, soft and trembling and then she asks one last time;

“Tell—Me—Your—Name.”

The air around them tightens.

The universe holds its breath.

And then—

HE ROARS.

A voice torn from the spine of eternity, breaking through every lifetime like a war-cry of the soul.

“MY... NAME...IS... IIIRRRRAAAA VVVVAAAAAYYYYYLLLLL!”

The mirrors shatter all at once. The flames spiral upward, defiant.

The house convulses inward like folding in prayer. A burst of impossible light floods the room, bends the walls, splits the air.

The three women collapse—Not from exhaustion, but from joy too vast for the body to contain.

They fall to the floor—

Laughing.

Sobbing.

Shaking

Screaming.

Fujiko’s screams, her voice cracked and radiant:

“He remembers...He remembers! My Iravayl remembers!”

Camilla gasps between hiccupped laughter, clutching at her chest. Shantel buries her face into Fujiko’s shoulder, weeping like a child. Fujiko—trembling, radiant, unbelieving—presses her fingers to her lips, as if afraid to disturb the miracle with her breath.

And then—As the divine light quiets, as the room exhales,

They yell together, voices cracked but whole:

“Our Iravayl remembers.”

Chapter 8

Memories



Iravayl (formerly Ren)—lies on the table, his skin traced with faint, drying trails of oil. The death-rattle has vanished. In its place is breath—slow, measured, and steady.

Steam curls faintly from his lips.

It begins with a twitch in his fingers. Then the smallest turn of his mouth, as if rediscovering the idea of a smile. His lips part slightly, a ghost of wind pushing through.

Then he gasps, sharp and raw, but not in fear. It's a gasp of something rekindled, like lungs tasting air for the first time

A hush falls over the room.

Camilla crawls closer, eyes bright. "Can you feel us?" she whispers.

"I feel... everything," Iravayl says.

His eyes open. Not wide. Not wild. They do not search the room. They remember it, like this has been his home in some past life. His irises shimmer gold in the low light.

Fujiko lifts her head, and for a moment her entire being softens—as if the sight of him is the answer to a question she had been searching for lifetimes.

Camilla watches, caught between awe and joy, as though witnessing a god, a friend, a saviour, beginning to get up after an eternity of slumber.

Shantel doesn't move at all. Just covers her mouth, unable to hold in her tears.

His hand rises—slow, trembling.

Fujiko leans into his palm like she's falling home. Her eyes flutter closed—like his touch is a song her soul had been waiting years to hear again.

His thumb brushes her cheek. He looks in her eyes, voice barely there, like the words are afraid they'll break if said too loud.

"I think I loved you before I knew what love was." He says.

Her breath trembles—She opens her eyes slowly, lashes wet. Unable to speak, her words barely unable to leave her mouth.

"Iravayl. My Iravayl." Fujiko says crying.

"Our Iravayl," Camilla and Shantel snapped in perfect sync, like twin squirrels discovering the last acorn in existence. Their voices trembling with awe, admiration, and just a dash of ridiculous glee.

He lets the name hang there. He doesn't rush to claim it. He holds it on his tongue, like the first truth he's allowed himself to believe in lifetimes.

"... It fits," he says.

He tries to sit up but can not—his body still wrecked from the ordeal. Shantel is there in an instant, bracing his back with one hand and steadying his spine with the other.

He looks down at his chest, his hands, the faint golden veins that pulse beneath his skin. He flexes his fingers once, then again.

He is not fire and thunder, not just yet, but like a curtain quietly lifting after a long dreamless dark.

His body is weak and frail, it's not his body, it's Ren's body but the eyes and the aura shine that of Iravayl.

Iravayl speaks. His voice is broken—but radiant.

"What... is happening?" he says, the syllables clean, the tone unmistakable, not that of a frightened half-lost man, not that of Ren's. The voice is velvet and gravel. The voice is a man who has survived many a storm in dangerous oceans without a boat, and lived to sing about it.

“You’ve been through more than you any human body can imagine,” Camilla says gently. “But you’re here. You made it.”

Iravayl nods slowly.

“The ritual?” he asks. “It’s done?”

Camilla smiles—wet-eyed and glowing. “The resurrection part, yes, but the ritual is not over, we have to get back your memories. We have to get to that part very soon—my mentor—my friend.”

Iravayl tries to rise again. His muscles obey for a second—then revolt. He quivers and collapses. He groans softly.

“Don’t,” Camilla says, sharp but with worry. “You’re running on threadbare flesh.”

Shantel is already at his wrist; two fingers pressed to his pulse.

“Racing and uneven,” Shantel says worryingly. “It’s as though his body has been wading through wars wrapped in paper for protective armour.”

Shantel says carefully, “We don’t have much time,”

Camilla steps forward. No tremble in her breath, no wavering in her eyes. Just the calm, cutting voice of someone who’s had to explain impossible things before—too many times.

“Your soul has returned,” Camilla says. “But the rest of you—the fragments of you are scattered across lifetimes—they’re still lost. Memories, identities, experiences and most importantly powers. All of it still somewhere in the akashic records.”

“It’s like your soul is newborn in form, but not in essence. Every memory, every ounce of strength, every truth of who you are already lives within you. We will guide you, accelerate your soul’s growth, until you...

...she glances at Fujiko and Shantel, hesitation flickering in her eyes, “should I tell him?”

Fujiko shakes her head gently. “Not yet. Not until all his memories and powers return, let him realise himself.”

“...ok...then...we will guide you, accelerate your growth, until you...finally realise yourself for who and what you truly are.”

Camilla's eyes flick to Fujiko again, full of pleading and impatience, a silent "*Can I please tell him?*" etched across her face.

Fujiko smiles and shifts her sight towards Iravayl.

He looks at her like the one person he's always counted on, the only one who's ever made sense to him.

"That's what this ritual really is," Camilla says. "A calling-back. We're going to pull every piece of you back from the akashic records. One by one."

"There are rules to descent," Camilla continues. "And you must follow them as if your soul's existence depends on it and I am not even saying that as a metaphor."

Shantel's voice cracks with urgency. "You're going to be pulled into the first cycle very soon."

He leans back just enough to look Camilla in the eyes.

"You said a *cycle*," he murmurs. "What does that mean?"

Camilla crouches near him. Her tone becomes sharp, exact, not unkind—surgical.

"Listen very carefully. Each cycle is six memories. You must complete at least one full cycle before we can pause the ritual."

She holds up six fingers. Her hands, smeared with herbs, look ceremonial now.

"Each of the six memories is a piece. Together they make a single key. We need to go through all the cycles and all the memories to get all the keys to bring you back in entirety."

Iravayl listens carefully with intent.

"You'll enter as a *witness*, not a participant," she continues. "This is not time travel. Not a performance. You're there to watch, this is memory"

"Witness, not participate," Shantel adds, almost sharply.

"Why?" Iravayl asks.

Camilla continues.

"Your mind will believe it's happening, no matter what. Everything you feel there—pain, love, compassion, sadness, joy—you'll feel here too. Your body will respond, but it won't be nearly as intense if you remain a *witness* instead of a *participant*."

Shantel and I will stay here, tending to your body the moment it reacts to anything terrible in the memory.”

“At all times, you must remember—you are only watching, not living it. As a witness, if you die in your memory, you’ll wake here as if it were only a dream but if your mind starts believing you’re truly living it, as a participant, then dying there in your memory means dying here in the present... right here in our arms.”

Camilla says it gently. But her voice cuts like cold iron.

“If you forget it’s just a memory, you’ll stop witnessing and start living it. When that happens, the mind and body can’t tell the difference. That’s why you have to keep reminding yourself that you are just witnessing a memory—memory is the past, not present, not now, not this life. If you blur that line or try to change anything in it, it could kill you—simple.”

Iravayl tries to process. His breath comes faster. Not in fear, but readiness. His fingers curl and uncurl.

“What happens after one cycle?” he asks.

“We can pause the ritual for a while,” Camilla says, “and give your body time to recover—things will be lot easier after that. But right now, we don’t have that luxury. The first cycle has to happen with your body exactly as it is—and honestly, it’s not in great shape. Physically, you’re very, very weak right now. But listen, we’ll get through this together. Don’t worry—Your soul partner here can pull back time now—with her hands. God only knows what else she’s capable of.”

Iravayl frowns. “Pull back time? What do you mean?”

Camilla’s lips curve into a faint smile. “That’s a story for later. Right now, we need to finish this—together. After the first cycle, I promise I’ll have you looking and feeling brand new.

Iravayl closes his eyes. He can feel the pull already. Some subtle thread in his gut, stretching toward something he forgot he lost.

He opens his eyes again. “How will I know it’s starting?”

Fujiko leans in. “You’ll know.”

Fujiko brushes his hair back. “Shantel and Camilla will be here and look after your body. I’ll be watching you watching your memories while sitting here in this room. I can’t talk to you directly, but I can guide you through them on a subconscious level.”

Irayayl blinks, trying to process it. “You can see me ... watching my own memories? You can do that?”

Shantel adds, softly, “Think of it like this: you’re sitting in a theater, watching your own life play out on screen. Fujiko is standing behind you, watching you watch it, simple.”

“But you *will* feel alone,” Fujiko adds. “Each memory traps you in its world like a dream and you have to watch it until the end. Do not try to come out of it before the memory ends. No matter how it ends.”

Irayayl looks at her, puzzled.

She clarifies. “If you don’t cling to it. If you don’t try to change anything. If you let it go when it’s over then everything is fine and you wake up like it was a dream with a few reactions on your body.”

Her fingers tap his sternum, once.

“If you hold on too long or if you change anything, then things can go very very wrong.”

“Your soul is eternal,” Fujiko says. “The human body isn’t. Respect that difference. That’s the only way through.”

Irayayl closes his eyes. There’s no escape route in what they’ve told him. No shortcut, no loophole. Only the straight road through fire.

He breathes in. Out. His heart beats like a slow drum.

“Will I be... myself in them?” he asks.

“Some Soul,” Fujiko says. “But you won’t always look the same, every memory will be a different birth, you will have a different body, a different face, a different voice, maybe even a different species but you’ll know instantly who you are. Just keep watching, just keep witnessing.”

There’s a long silence.

Irayayl’s breath catches—then evens. The light in his chest blinks once, faintly.

“Do I choose the memories?” he asks.

Fujiko shakes her head. “No, there’s no set order to the memories, “They’ll come at random. The earliest ones or the ones that shaped you the most will come first—the intense ones, the ones filled with love, compassion, sacrifice and some of them won’t have happy endings, like the ones where you die. Remember, the key is to be a witness not a participant”

He looks to each of them, the way a man about to dive must look back at the friends who’ve tied the rope to his ankles.

And then—

A tremor runs through him.

Tiny at first. Like a ripple under skin. But it spreads—through bone, through breath.

Fujiko presses her lips to his ear.

“Witness, don’t participate and listen to your subconscious, that would be me guiding you.”

The room tightens with tension.

Iravayl lies back. His limbs are restless, not with fear, but with a strange anticipation.

Fujiko lays a hand across his chest.

“While you journey inward,” she says gently, “we will guard you. Completely, don’t worry about a thing.”

Camilla is already moving—efficient, clinical. A sacred vial uncapped. A faint mist rises.

She fits a thin, curved tube beneath his left wrist.

“This is to calm the mind,” she mutters, “sacred alchemical drips”

The fluid begins to flow—a slow gold.

Shantel kneels beside him, her palms full of polished vials.

Cooling oils—blue, silver, and clear—are dabbed on his pressure points. At the temples. Beneath the earlobes. The soft place behind the knees. His ankles twitch at the touch, then settle.

“Lavender and ash bark,” she says. “To keep pain from turning into panic.”

Camilla slides a copper thread beneath his tongue. The breath stabilizer glows a gentle rose.

“Your heart is our metronome,” Camilla says. “No missed beats.”

Above him, Fujiko chants softly, unfurling an infra-spell with the edge of her fingernail. A diagram lights in the air beside him—like a constellation drawn in amber ink. *It looks like a monitor. It's to track his nervous system, mapping for strain, rupture, overload, hormones and heartbeat.*

“You see this monitor here, we’ll know the second you begin to break,” Fujiko says. “And we will intervene.”

He watches all three women move around him in rhythm—like dancers in orbit. There’s no chaos, only clarity.

Camilla and Shantel sit in lotus pose, facing one another across the table.

They begin the chant of ‘Past light and Convergence.’

The syllables click and stretch, vibrating low and long. The sound pulls as if stretched across dimensions. The veil begins to shimmer—between mind and memories, body and soul.

He feels it.

A loosening.

Not of the body, but the spine of the soul unzipping. His body convulses in sharp pain.

His body is giving out. Fujiko knows it.

The years of addiction, the suicide attempts, the overdoses, the near-starvations. The trauma stored in organs, the guilt wrapped around bones.

Fujiko checks the vitals. Pulse flickering. Blood pressure low. Temperature uneven.

But when she looks in his eyes, she feels much better because his soul is radiant. No body should house something so powerful, so luminous.

It’s like watching the sun burn through a paper lantern.

He looks at Fujiko. Truly looks.

“I have never loved you more,” he says softly, “and I promise you—I will return.”

Fujiko bites her lip and then leans close and kisses him softly on his lips.

Iravayl's pupils expand like ink in water.

The chants weave through the air, thickening, vibrating with power.

His breath quickens—not with fear, but with readiness. His eyes close, surrendering to what is coming.

The serum continues its slow trickle. The oil on his body seeps into his skin, into his marrow, into every memory hiding in his soul.

Outside his body, the room is full of chants and murmurs.

Iravayl closes his eyes.

The first memory begins.

Memory One: The Great Plain

(Savannah, South Africa, Year 2900 BCE)

The grass stands waist-high, brittle under the sun, whispering against the hides of the herd. Twenty buffalo—no more—move at a grazing pace, heads low, calves pressed tight to their mothers, bulls loose in their protective ring.

Then—

The wind shifts.

Birds explode from the trees all at once, black silhouettes scattering against the pale sky.

Three heartbeats later, the first roar comes—low, stretched, a sound dragged up from the earth's core. Another follows. Then another. Four lions emerge from the tall grass, shoulders rolling, tails twitching, cutting angles across the herd's escape paths.

The calves bawl, adults shove against one another, hooves tear the dirt. The predators fan out, coordinated and cold, each step tightening the noose.

One bull turns and separates from the crowd.

He does not run away.

He lowers his head and charges towards the lions.

In the room—Iravayl's legs jerk violently. His heel slams against the table as if bracing for impact. Fujiko says, "Every reaction he has in the memory will echo here. Anticipate each one—I'll guide you."

Shantel leans over him. "Heart rate's spiking."

Camilla pops the cork from a ceramic bottle; the air between them fills with the bitter green tang of powdered tonic. She presses the soaked cloth to his temple, forcing some between his lips.

Fujiko's voice cuts through the thick air. Calm. Unshakable. "Hold him steady. Support the spine. Let the memory move through him—do not let it break him."

In the memory—The bull barrels forward like a living battering ram, each hoof beat a dull earthquake. The bull slams into a young lion, knocking it sideways. Another leaps but misses. He circles, roaring, stamping the earth. He is not fighting; he wants to be seen. He just wants to draw the attention of the lions so that the rest of the herd can get away.

The first lion strikes like a whip of muscle and claws, slamming into his flank with enough force to make the ground vanish beneath him. His ribs sing with pain, air burning out of his lungs.

Before he can rise, the second hit comes—low and fast—teeth grazing his leg, dragging him down into the dust.

The bull kicks, twists, shoves himself free, but each move costs blood. His hide is raked raw, one horn chipped, his breath loud and ragged in the hot air. The lions circle—patient, merciless—darting in to slash and retreat, each attack another notch carved into his strength.

A paw catches his face. The world flashes white. Warm blood drips into his eye. He staggers, barely upright, heart hammering like a war drum. Instinct screams at him to fall, to let the earth take him—but something deeper and far more stubborn rises within him—the will to live.

He lowers his head and bellows into the sky—a sound torn from the core of him, shaking dust from the air. One lion retreats slightly with confusion. It's all he needs.

His legs surge forward, every tendon straining, each stride an act of defiance against the pain splitting his body. The claws don't stop. The bites still come. But step by step, he forces the gap wider.

Two lions rush him in perfect sync—one leaping high, the other low. He dips under the first, hooks his horn into his ribs, flinging her away in a spin of dust and limbs. The second clamps onto his side; he pivots hard, slamming him into the ground with all his weight until his grip tears loose.

The last lion lunges for his throat—he twists, her teeth scraping horn, pain sparking through his skull.

Bleeding, limping, barely holding together, he pushes on until the savanna opens wide before him, endless and blinding under the sun. Behind the chaos, the rest of the herd presses through—calves, mothers, bulls, stragglers. Every one passes safely over the ridge.

In the room—Shantel sprinkles more of the powdered tonic over his chest, rubbing gently in a rhythm that matches his pulse. “Almost there ... steady.”

Camilla adjusts his arms, loosening the muscle tension.

In the memory—The bull stands panting, each breath ragged, ribs shifting under torn flesh. His legs tremble but do not fold. Slowly, he turns and limps toward the ridge.

Three buffalos stop just past the ridge. One stamps her hooves repeatedly. Another stands frozen just staring at him. *The third moving side to side with her tail wagging in excitement like waiting for the bull to come and join them.*

In the room—“He’s coming to us,” Fujiko says softly. “Alive. Hurt. But alive.”

Shantel’s palm stays steady over his chest. “Almost here ... keep breathing.” Camilla presses the cloth to his brow again. Iravayl’s fingers curl, then release.

In the memory—The wind moves through the grass. The lions are gone. The herd holds its place and the bull—bloodied but unbroken—takes his place among them again, head high, body shaking but still his own.

Alive to see another day.

Memory One Aftermath: Survived

The tension doesn't break all at once.

It drains from him slowly, seeping out of his muscles like heat bleeding from sunbaked earth.

Shantel loosens her grip on his leg, careful not to let his body fold under its own weight.

Camilla sprinkles a trace of calming powder across his temples and chest. The scent is bitter but grounding.

"He's stabilizing," she murmurs.

"Of course I am," Iravayl croaks without opening his eyes. "You think a couple of overgrown cats are going to collect *me* as a souvenir?"

"He's here," Fujiko says smilingly.

A long, rasping breath escapes his mouth, scraping like dust from that distant plain is still lodged in his lungs.

He coughs—wet, dragging—and wheezes, "If anyone offers me steak tonight, I'm leaving."

Shantel lets out a laugh. Camilla shakes her head, dabbing the corner of his mouth with the cloth.

He tries to sit, but pain spikes up his ribs like a lightning strike.

"Easy," Camilla warns. "You just walked away from being eaten by lions."

"Yes," he rasps, grimacing through the pain.

"You remember it?" Shantel asks.

Yes, followed by a slow nod, "Every charge. Every claw. Every tooth and every time I thought, *this is probably a bad idea* ... I did it anyway. In the end the herd made it. Every mother, every calf and *the three precious ones*."

His voice trails off. The smirk lingers, then his eyes close. Hands curl loosely at his sides. His body slackens, but the stubborn rhythm in his chest refuses to quit.

Camilla leans in, softer. "Keep breathing. Let the powders work. No napping on our watch."

He mumbles, barely audible: “Fine. But someone owes me a drink.”

Fujiko rests her palm above his heart. “Let him rest. He’ll need his strength for what comes next.”

Irayayl closes his eyes and allows himself to rest. His body is healing rapidly, though the wounds run too deep to mend instantly. Camilla continues her careful work, tending to every injury, her hands steady.

His hands twitch once more. His breath draws shallow.

Camilla says, he is going in again

“What is next?” Camilla asks.

Fujiko closes her eyes for a moment, feeling the shift in what he sees — the savanna’s heat fading into something colder.

When she opens her eyes, her voice is precise.

“Edo. Japan. Rain on the roof. He’s already inside.”

Memory Two – Courtesan’s Escape

(Edo, Japan, Year 1600s)

The paper door slams inward with a violent crack, and the night bursts into the tea house—rain, cold air, and the heavy thud of boots against the wooden floor. Three samurai step inside, coats dark and dripping, swords drawn. There is no pause, no exchange of words. Only steel glinting and deliberate steps, unannounced, unprovoked.

His hands move before his mind catches up. He grabs the small iron rod leaning in the corner, flipping it backward so the heavier end points forward, and plants himself between them and her. Behind him, she gasps, frozen.

The oldest samurai steps forward, eyes sweeping over him—he does not look like a samurai, not as a man of rank, not as anyone worth naming. Only a problem to be removed. The samurai strikes without hesitation, a downward slash meant to kill cleanly.

Rod meets katana. Sparks fly. He twists, ducking low, driving the iron hard into the samurai’s knee. A bone or tendon gives; the samurai drops with a grunt.

The second samurai attacks faster than he expected. The blade cuts across his upper arm, blood blooming instantly. Pain flares sharply, but there is no time to register it. He drives his shoulder into the samurai's chest, crashing them both into the low table. Ceramic sake bottles shatter, rice wine spilling into the rain-scented air.

Behind him, she struggles at the back panel, forcing it to open despite the swelling wood. Her breaths are shallow, uneven; her small, quiet sobs cut through the chaos.

The third samurai patiently observes him, calculating. He waits.

The man on the floor lunges for his ankle. He kicks him off, then with one clean strike from the samurai, Katana slashes across his torso, the burn searing. Blood runs hot down his side. He aches everywhere, but he does not falter. Protecting her is not a choice—it is the only way.

“Go,” he orders without looking back.

She hesitates, eyes wide, lips moving with unspoken words he cannot hear over the rain and the pounding of his own heart.

The samurai moves fast.

The blade slides beneath his ribs. Shock robs him of breath. The rod slips from his grasp.

Through the haze, he sees the trailing hem of her kimono vanish into the alley. That is all he needs.

The three samurai's strike together now—efficient, merciless blows tearing into muscle, each one precise, each one calculated. His knees buckle. Blood fills his mouth. His mouth does not cry out. He does not beg. Silence is the last thing he can give them.

In the room—Iravayl's breathing is shallow. “Keep him upright, but don't tense him.” says Fujiko.

Shantel leans over him, fingers pressing gently but firmly to his ribs.

Camilla crouches on the other side, holding his shoulders steady, eyes tracking every twitch.

“Rib strike. Deep. Right lung. That one hit counts.” Fujiko's voice cuts softly through the room, controlled, exact.

“The third samurai went low, targeting the side. He staggered, but did not collapse. Shantel, maintain his airway. Camilla, prevent him from stiffening.”

Shantel nods, adjusting his crumpled body straight and lifting his chin for clear airways. Camilla shifts to massage his torso and legs, eyes fixed on Fujiko for cues.

In the memory—A samurai lunges. The steel cuts his throat, stealing his breath.

The attackers do not stop. Another strike tears down his side. He collapses to the tatami. Blood soaks the mat beneath him, spreading dark and slick. He tastes it in his mouth.

In the room— Shantel wipes the sweat and blood from his brow.

“Pressure is dropping. He’s stabilizing. Keep his arms relaxed—don’t let him clench.”

Camilla voice taut with urgency. “He’s still bleeding internally. The lower ribs—watch for shallow breaths. This is going to hurt.”

Fujiko’s tone remains calm, guiding them like a conductor of a delicate symphony. “Let the body respond but protect him from his own reflexes. Hold him. Let him endure, he hasn’t meddled with the memory, he will be back as soon as the memory is over.”

In the memory—He lies flat on his back. The three samurai step over him without a word, disappearing into the rain. The storm pounds the tea house roof. Rain streams in from the door, drenching the floor and mingling with the blood spreading under him.

Outside, in the crowded alley behind the pleasure district, she runs barefoot. Her hair loose, tears in her eyes. Her chest rises and falls, desperate. She does not stop. She is alive.

The last thing he feels is not pain. Not triumph. Not victory—Just peace.

Memory Two Aftermath: Getting weaker

His body jerks once, sharp and sudden, then stills.

Camilla yells, startled. “He’s bleeding again,” she says, eyes wide. “Same place.”

Shantel moves quickly, dabbing at the wound. “It’s copying the memory again,” she mutters. “Just like the slashes of the lion claws.”

Fujiko's hands remain steady, one resting lightly on his forehead, the other pressed over his chest. She watches him with quiet intensity.

"He made sure I didn't see him fall," she whispers, almost too low to hear. "Even in that life."

Shantel glances at her, curious. "What was he to you then?"

Fujiko doesn't answer immediately. Her gaze never leaves his face. "He was everything," she says softly. "Even when he had nothing."

Camilla pours a cup of bitter red tonic. "How many times has he died for us" she murmurs.

Shantel takes it gently, lifting Iravayl's head and tipping the liquid into his mouth. "And we keep pulling him back."

Iravayl gasps sharply, like breaking the surface of water.

Camilla smiles. "There he is."

His eyes blink open, focus sharpening, then he winces and presses a hand against his ribs.

"Okay," he croaks, voice dry but faintly amused, "just once... could one of these memories end with me getting dessert?"

Camilla kneels beside him, mock-serious. "Very noble of you. Dying in the rain for a courtesan."

"She was not a courtesan," he replies firmly. "She was... excellent at tea ceremonies."

He exhales slowly, hand lingering near the wound where the memory stabbed him. Then, quieter: "Was she safe?" looking at Fujiko.

"She ran," Fujiko whispers. "She lived."

A pause follows. Long. Heavy with relief.

"Good," he murmurs. "Then it was worth it."

Camilla frowns slightly. "You've done that twice now."

"Done what?" he asks

"Thrown yourself to death." Camilla says.

He shrugs. "Old habits."

Shantel leans closer, voice soft but firm. "Ready for the next one?"

Iravayl closes his eyes. "Is it worse?"

"Yes," Fujiko replies, calm, certain.

He groans. "Fantastic."

His head tilts back. Breath slows, chest rising and falling in the rhythm the ritual has taught him.

Darkness folds around him again, carrying him into the next life.

The third memory begins.

Memory Three: The Girl in the Cart

(Eastern Russia, 1400s)

The wind howls low across a frozen yard. A tattered wooden fence clings to the edge of a burial field, bleached white by years of snow and silence.

A seventeen-year-old boy kneels by a grave. His fingers are blue, chipping at the frozen soil with a sharpened stone. His ears, damaged long ago by fever, hear only the vibrations in his chest. He doesn't speak. Doesn't need to. His world is quiet and small and entirely his.

No one visits the graveyard. Except the dead.

That morning, behind the tannery, while searching for kindling, he saw a cart—abandoned, reeking of butchered meat and rot. Bones lay scattered like broken prayers. Then something moved beneath a torn bit of cloth.

It was a baby.

Swaddled in bloodied rags, one leg curled unnaturally, an arm limp like rope. Alive. Her mouth opened, no sound. But her eyes—her eyes were open. And staring straight at him.

He didn't hesitate. He pulled her free and wrapped her in his coat. He didn't wonder who had thrown her away or why. He only knew this: she was breathing, and no one else had come.

He carried her to the graveyard shed, lit a fire, and gave her the crust he'd saved for dinner. That night, when she cried, he pressed her to his chest and sobbed into her hair.

But she lived.

The bonesetter told him the leg would never work. The arm might, if she was lucky. The priest said, "Not your child." The baker's daughter said, "Marry me, but leave her behind." He turned away from them all.

He never married.

Instead, he studied her face, taught her every twitch and wince. Taught her how to speak with her eyes. With time, she learned to read his hands. She walked, slowly, dragging one foot, holding his wrist like a branch in a storm.

When boys threw stones, he stepped between. When they spat, he wiped it from her cheek. When she bled, he kissed the cut clean and he worked. God, he worked. In rain, in frost, carving names into stone for copper coins, digging graves alone in silence. Every coin fed her.

She grew. Slowly. Wonderfully.

Fujiko, kneeling at Iravayl's side, speaks softly—just above a whisper. She tells Camilla and Shantel what she sees: the shed, the stone ring, the girl learning to walk. Her voice wavers when she describes the night he refused the baker's daughter.

The girl grew tall. Still limped but her hands were quick and she was clever. She learned to stitch all by herself. She cooked stew that warmed the spine. She laughed at things he couldn't hear but could feel in her body when she shook with joy.

She fell in love.

The stable boy. Soft voice, dirt under his fingernails. He never looked away from her crooked leg. She brought him to meet the grave keeper. The boy bowed low. Called him "father."

The old man wept that night. Didn't tell her. Just polished a coin he'd saved for thirteen winters. Carved it into a ring with her name scratched in code only she could read.

On her wedding day, he tied her shoes.

She moved to the next village. Promised to write and she did. The letters came less often as time went by and then stopped. He told himself she was busy. Happy. That was enough.

In the room—Iravayl's body convulses once. Camilla whispers something urgent—Fujiko raises a palm without looking. Her cheeks are wet. She continues narrating.

In the memory—Years passed. His back grew weak. Fingers stiff. Some days he didn't light the fire. Just sat in the shed and stared at the ring mold, empty now. Sometimes he carved imaginary names into wood—sometimes he carved his own.

One day, she came to him, the apples had just fallen.

She found him beneath the old tree. Wrapped in a blanket. His hand curled, as if still holding a chisel. His eyes were closed. His lips had frozen into a half-smile. Like he had just been waiting for her to come back before he finally let go.

She wept.

She buried him by the house. Dug the hole herself. She refused any help. Refused any word of condolence. Instead, she carved a stone—a smooth grey oval with no name, only a single symbol a hand, open.

"You gave me everything," she whispered, "and I never even once asked why."

Then she pressed the ring into the earth and walked away.

Memory three Aftermath: What the Body Keeps

Iravayl exhales suddenly. The room grows cold. A trace of grey appears in his hair. Fujiko cups his hand with both of hers. The fire dims as if bowing.

When Iravayl woke, it wasn't like before.

No gasp, no defiance. Just a slow blink—like the body wasn't sure it still had permission to move. The breath rattled in his throat, dry and cracked. His lips were pale. His skin had the dull color of someone long past fever, past injury. It was the color of decline.

He turned his head—barely. The movement took everything.

His lip's part.

He looks at Camilla. His voice is nearly gone.

“It was very cold that day, but your hands were warm when you buried me.”

Camilla doesn't answer. Her motions waver—eyes wet.

Shantel was at his side already, fingers under his jaw. She looked calm, but her voice betrayed her. “His heartbeat's shallow again. It's not bouncing back like it did before.”

Camilla came forward from the edge of the circle. Her eyes darted between Iravayl's curled fingers and his rising chest. “His hands,” she murmured. “They're like—” She stopped herself.

“They're like the fingers of an old man.” That's what Camilla wanted to say

The fingers were bonier now. Not just thinner, but warped with pain. They looked like the hands of the man from the last memory—dead of sickness, of cold, of fatigue. The hands that carved gravestones in the dark, held a girl through fever and frost. They had aged in this world too.

Camilla's jaw clenched. “This is permanent, isn't it? His body's copying the damage.”

Shantel looked through her kit of roots and oils, muttering half-sentences, unsure which blend might help. “Lion bites. Sword wounds. Now... whatever this is. It's not healing in cycles anymore. It's stacking. Layering.”

“He's dying,” Camilla said, not as panic but as fact. “Piece by piece.”

Fujiko is calm. She touched his temple with the back of her fingers. Her eyes filled, but she didn't wipe them. “He won't die,” she said softly. “He's becoming who he was. That always costs something.”

The heat under her hand frightened her. It wasn't fever anymore. It was collapse. Like his organs were giving up. Like he was burning his soul just to stay.

Fujiko bent forward and whispered, “You've been given enough pain, Iravayl. You've earned peace. Let the next ones be gentle. Let them hold you. Let them laugh with you.”

She looked up—toward something unseen—and spoke not to the room but to the gods themselves.

Camilla looked away. Her hands were clenched at her sides. Shantel lit another incense blend, more for her own nerves than his healing. The air was thick with oil, salt, and something raw—grief that hadn't become tears yet.

Iravayl stirred.

Not a groan—more like the twitch of someone falling deeper.

He didn't speak. He couldn't. His body was nearly still.

His eyes moved once, to Fujiko and she smiled through her tears. "You're still here. You stubborn thing, well done, keep holding on, just three more to go love"

He was falling again.

Fujiko didn't say goodbye this time. Just rested her hand on his chest and whispered:

"Go on, my love. This one will hold you, not break you, I promise."

Memory 4: Down Town Trouble

Iravayl slipped once more into memory.

The first few minutes go smoothly.

Iravayl lies motionless on the ritual bed, limbs relaxed, chest steady. The anchoring sigils along his torso shine gently. Camilla and Shantel watch the monitors quietly from the corner of the ritual chamber—tracking temperature, brain activity, and vitals across glowing blue glyphs projected in the air.

But then something shifts.

Beads of sweat gather at his brow. His breathing quickens. A flush blooms high on his cheeks.

Camilla leans closer to the monitor. "His core temperature just jumped three degrees."

Shantel frowns. "His heartbeat's gone erratic. It's pulsing hard—look." She points at the monitor. "This isn't trauma. This is... stimulation."

Camilla rushes to his side and gently places a hand on his sternum. "He's not seizing. He's—"

The blanket over his waist twitches.

Camilla and Shantel both freeze.

Camilla turns slowly to Fujiko, who's seated at Iravayl's head, one palm hovering just over his heart, the other pressed to a crystal talisman.

“Fujiko,” Camilla says carefully. “What’s happening?”

Shantel crosses her arms. “Why is he sweating like this? His vitals are off. He’s panting.”

Fujiko’s voice is calm, even. “I’m trying to pull him out.”

“Then why isn’t he coming back?” Camilla demands. “He’s supposed to witness. Not participate.”

“I know,” Fujiko mutters through gritted teeth. “Believe me when I say this, I’m trying.”

But neither Camilla nor Shantel misses the deepening red in Fujiko’s cheeks or the way her ears have flushed or how she keeps biting the inside of her lip.

Shantel squints. “Why are you—why do you look like you’re about to laugh?”

Fujiko blinks, startled. “I—I’m not.”

“You are,” Camilla says. “You’re enjoying this. Why are you enjoying this?!”

Fujiko tries to suppress the grin rising to her lips. Fails. Looks mortified.

They both turn back to the vitals on the monitor.

A glyph flashes red. Then another.

Camilla’s eyes widen. “What the hell—dopamine just spiked to triple than normal.

Oxytocin’s surging. Serotonin too. Look at the endorphin line—he’s peaking.”

Shantel claps a hand over her mouth and starts laughing. “Oh my god.”

Camilla gasps. “Wait. Is he—he’s not actually—no. No. No way.”

Fujiko covers her mouth. “He’s not! I mean—I didn’t—he’s not supposed to feel it, he’s just supposed to watch—”

“You liar,” Camilla cackles. “You knew! You felt it starting! Your ears are glowing like temple lanterns!”

Fujiko groans, hiding her face. “This is a sacred ritual...”

Shantel doubles over. “Sacred my ass. The man’s having a religious experience down there.”

She glances at the bed. "God. Look at his face. That's not pain. That's... that's blissful suffering."

Camilla snorts. "Oh, he's gone. You lost him, Fujiko. Our boy's in love. And lust. Probably both."

"Iravayl," Fujiko calls gently, placing a firm hand over his heart sigil. "Come back. You're not supposed to touch...I mean participate."

No response.

His lip's part. A low sound escapes him.

Shantel leans in. "Let him finish."

Fujiko gasps. "What?!"

"You can't pull him out now," Shantel says, a smile tugging at the corner of her mouth, teasing her. "That's dangerous. Psychospiritual shock mid-cycle? He could fragment, you know."

"He'll die," Camilla keeps up the teasing "But in more ways than one. Nobody deserves that."

"Poor Iravayl," Shantel croons. "Don't yank the memory mid... climax."

"Don't say climax!" Fujiko hisses, her entire face flushed.

Camilla steps back from the bed, arms crossed, watching Iravayl's body with a mixture of awe and mischief.

"Good for you, Iravayl. Honestly. Maybe more of these memories are exactly what you need."

Shantel stage-whispers, "Go Iravayl, go! Go you stud!"

Camilla joins in. "Heal yourself, king! Do it for your soul. Do it for all of us."

Fujiko slams his chest. "Stop it!"

Iravayl shudders on the bed, lost in pleasure, his breathing ragged, face contorted into something unspeakably satisfying.

Serotonin. Dopamine. Oxytocin, peak all at once

The monitors glitch from the overload.

Camilla laughs so hard she stumbles back into the wall. “Oh my god, the healing is going to be insane. His brain’s rebooting on love juice.”

“I want this kind of healing,” Shantel moans dramatically. “Over and over again. Sign me up.”

Camilla wipes her eyes, breathless. “This is torture and pleasure at the same time.”

“I feel like I should apologize to the god,” Shantel giggles.

“But also—thank you. Thank you, god.” Camilla says.

Fujiko has given up. She slumps beside the bed, half-laughing, half-exhausted. Her composure is gone. Her smile is wild, helpless.

Iravayl gasps softly.

And he is awake.

Memory Aftermath: The Stud Awakens

He wakes slowly.

A low hum in his chest, sweat cooling on his skin, His eyes flutter open. There's incense in the air, soft candlelight, and three women staring at him like they've just watched a volcano erupt in a nursery.

Silence.

Then Camilla loses it first.

“Oh my god,” she howls, collapsing against the wall. “The dopamine levels alone! I thought we were cooking meth in here!”

Shantel’s face is buried in a pillow. “I literally thought he was going to combust. I was this close to grabbing the fire extinguisher.”

Iravayl blinks. “What... what happened?”

“What happened?!” Camilla laughs so hard she snorts. “You tell us, Casanova! Your vitals were climbing like a teenage boy watching his first kiss scene!

Shantel says dramatically, wiping her eyes. “Fujiko was absolutely no help. We were panicking, trying to stabilize your heart, and she’s over there biting her lip like a schoolgirl watching her crush dance at prom.”

Fujiko, seated gracefully at the edge of the mattress, brushes hair behind her ear. Her cheeks are pink, ears a deeper red, but her face is calm—*too* calm.

Iravayl turns to Fujiko, acting like he is being genuine. “Doctor. Am I... healed?”

Camilla lets out a wheeze. “Healed?! You were more than healed, darling, you ascended. I think one of the glyphs fainted.”

“I’m sorry,” Iravayl says, stretching, utterly unbothered. “I thought I was just supposed to witness the memory.”

“YOU WERE!” all three women shout at once.

“Right, right,” he nods gravely. “But she... she was just too convincing.”

Fujiko gives him a withering look, but the corners of her mouth betray her. She’s still glowing.

Shantel flops onto the foot of the bed. “We’ve been trained to handle blood loss, nerve collapse, soul fractures—but this?! What do we even write in the log?”

“I’d like to formally apologize,” Iravayl says, raising a hand, “to the equipment I may have emotionally scarred.”

“You bent the vital monitor, Iravayl,” Camilla says, laughing. “It still hasn’t recovered. Look at it—it’s pulsing in Morse code, asking for therapy.”

Fujiko shakes her head, but her smile has fully bloomed now.

Iravayl sits up slowly, hair tousled, voice still husky. “In my defense... I didn’t mean to participate.”

Camilla places a hand on her chest. “No no, please do. Participate more. We’ve got many more cycles to go and I’m ready to set up popcorn and a scoreboard.”

Iravayl looks at Fujiko, eyes twinkling. “You didn’t pull me out.”

“I tried,” she says, eyes narrowing playfully.

“You didn’t try very hard.” Iravayl says.

Her expression softens into a smirk. “You weren’t exactly... pullable.”

That earns a howl from Camilla,

“Oh god, someone write that down. ‘Not exactly pullable.’ Put it on a T-shirt. Give it to Shantel on her birthday.”

“I just—” Shantel’s laughing so hard she can’t breathe. “—I just want to thank Iravayl for his service. Truly. His... sacrifice.”

Iravayl bows his head slightly. “I do what I can.”

Camilla’s wiping her eyes. “You know what the worst part is? I was actually emotional at the start. You were glowing, she was glowing, the gods were probably holding their breath—and then your vitals shot up like a rocket.”

Fujiko finally stands, brushing down her robe. “We need to get serious again.”

“Nope,” Shantel grins. “Too late. The room has been spiritually deflowered.”

Iravayl glances at Fujiko. “You, okay?”

She’s quiet for a moment, the heat still glowing behind her eyes. Then she looks at him, voice soft and even: “I’m fine.”

Shantel whispers loudly, “She’s not fine.”

Camilla leans in conspiratorially, “She’s ruined.”

Fujiko turns toward them with a regal arch of her brow. “Do you two have any dignity left?”

“No, None” Camilla and Shantel answer together.

Iravayl lies back on the mattress again, sighing with a satisfied grin.

“Well, if we’re voting, I’m in favor of more memories like that.”

“Careful,” Fujiko warns. “You almost died.”

“Worth it,” he says immediately.

Everyone groans.

But under it all—the laughter, the banter, the teasing—something sacred blooms quietly beneath the surface.

They know it’s time for the next memory

Iravayl’s eyes close

Memory 5: The Great Plain REVISITED

The grass stands waist-high, brittle under the sun, whispering against the hides of the herd. Twenty buffalo—no more—move at a grazing pace, heads low, calves pressed tight to their mothers, bulls loose in their protective ring.

Then—

The wind shifts.

Birds explode from the trees all at once, black silhouettes scattering against the pale sky.

Three heartbeats later, the first roar comes—low, stretched, a sound dragged up from the earth's core. Another follows. Then another. Four lions emerge from the tall grass, shoulders rolling, tails twitching, cutting angles across the herd's escape paths.

Fujiko frowns, she speaks "This is the same memory, the first one, in the planes, with the lions"

The calves bawl, adults shove against one another, hooves tear the dirt. The predators fan out, coordinated and cold, each step tightening the noose.

One bull turns and separates from the crowd

He dies not run away

He lowers his head and charges towards the lions.

Fujiko murmurs, "It's the same, moment to moment."

Shantel asks. "But why would it repeat?"

Fujiko doesn't answer. She's still—eyes focused on the memory.

The bull barrels forward like a living battering ram, each hoofbeat a dull earthquake. The bull slams into a young lion, knocking it sideways. Another leaps but misses. He circles, roaring, stamping the earth. He is not fighting; he wants to be seen. He just wants to draw the attention of the lions so that the rest of the herd can get away.

The first lion strikes like a whip of muscle and claws, slamming into his flank with enough force to make the ground vanish beneath him. His ribs sing with pain, air burning out of his lungs.

Before he can rise, the second hit comes—low and fast—teeth grazing his leg, dragging him down into the dust.

“He charges,” Fujiko continues, watching. “He hits the lion. Dust. Blood. Collapse, it’s like déjà vu.”

The scene below plays exactly as they’ve seen before—every beat, every strike, every breath. The lion’s swarm. The ground shakes. His body hits the dust.

The bull kicks, twists, shoves himself free, but each move costs blood. His hide is raked raw, one horn chipped, his breath loud and ragged in the hot air. The lions circle—patient, merciless—darting in to slash and retreat, each attack another notch carved into his strength.

A paw catches his face. The world flashes white. Warm blood drips into his eye, copper filling his mouth. He staggers, barely upright, heart hammering like a war drum. Instinct screams at him to fall, to let the earth take him—but something older, deeper, and far more stubborn roars louder.

Fujiko’s looks confused. “It’s exact.”

Shantel glances at her. “Exact-exact?”

Fujiko nods once. “Memories aren’t supposed to repeat in resurrection. Why is this happening”

He lowers his head and bellows into the sky—a sound torn from the core of him, shaking dust from the air. One lion backs up a little in confusion. It’s all he needs.

His legs surge forward, every tendon straining, each stride an act of defiance against the pain splitting his body. The claws don’t stop. The bites still come. But step by step, he forces the gap wider.

Shantel asks. “Are we standing on the ridge? Like before?”

Fujiko nods slowly. “Same place. Same posture. Same timeline.”

Two lions rush him in perfect sync—one leaping high, the other low. He dips under the first, hooks his horn into her ribs, flinging her away in a spin of dust and limbs. The second clamps onto his side; he pivots hard, slamming her into the ground with all his weight until her grip tears loose.

Fujiko's palms press to his chest. "I know it's strange and confusing Iravayl, but please just witness," she says, trying to keep her voice steady. "Don't interfere, don't participate. You're just watching."

The last lion lunges for his throat—he twists, she misses but her teeth scraping horn, pain sparking through his skull.

The lions regroup, pacing, snarling, eyes locked on him. But the wounded one hangs back, ribs heaving. They circle once ... twice ... then melt back into the grass.

The bull stands panting, each breath ragged, ribs shifting under torn flesh. His legs wobble but do not fold. Slowly, he turns and limps toward the ridge.

Three buffalos stop just past the ridge. One stamps her hooves repeatedly. Another stands frozen just staring at him. The third moving side to side with her tail wagging in excitement like awaiting the bull to come and join them.

"Okay... he's coming to us," Fujiko says, watching him with narrowed eyes. "So, just like before. This makes no sense—memories aren't supposed to repeat in resurrection. Let's figure that out later."

Camilla exhales sharply, the corner of her mouth twitching. "I'm just glad he's coming back. Though I still don't like the fact he got nearly mauled by lions again."

She glances over his body with a quick assessment. "He's holding up, but seriously—we need to start getting him into better memories."

Shantel's palm stays pressed to his chest, her focus unbroken. "Almost back love... keep breathing."

In the memory—the wind dies without warning, and it is as though the very world itself pauses in anticipation of something unspeakable. There is no rustle in the grass, no whisper of leaves, no distant call of birds. The air hangs heavy, still, as if it has braced itself for impact. Even the buffalo herd, vast and restless only moments ago, freezes in perfect unison—heads lifting sharply, tails stiff as poles. Some ancient instinct moves through them like a ghostly shiver, an old knowledge buried in bone and blood that warns of the thing now drawing near.

In the room—Camilla's eyes dart toward Fujiko, her voice tight, edged with unease.

"What's wrong?" she asks.

Fujiko does not answer right away. Her gaze locks on the far ridge, pupils narrowing to sharp points, her body still as stone. The silence stretches, pressing on both of them, until at last she speaks. Her voice is thin, almost breaking apart in the air.

"There's something... different," she mutters. "The grass—it's wrong. It wasn't like this last time. There's... something there."

In the memory—The tall grass parts, slow, as though whatever moves within has no need to hurry. The grass blades sway and bow beneath an unseen weight until the shape behind them swells larger, the shadow spilling into the light. Fujiko stumbles back, nearly losing her balance, the word escaping her throat like a dying breath.

"No."

Her voice is suddenly small, stripped of its usual steadiness. She stares, locked in horror at the form emerging.

"It's an Atlas lion," she whispers, the syllables heavy with disbelief. "What is an Atlas lion—a North African apex predator—doing in the grassy plains? They do not migrate this far south. How is this possible? This is very strange."

The Atlas lion is massive—at least double the size of an African lion. Its very presence, a wall of moving muscle and menace, carrying the scent of death. A thick black mane spills around its neck like a shroud, framing a head carved for dominance and violence. Its huge shoulders rise and fall with each measured step, slow and easy. The ground seems smaller under its paws, as though the earth itself feels the weight of each step. Its eyes big and its iris golden. The air grows thinner, tighter, as if the beast carries its own storm around its body. It is not just an animal—it is a killing machine perfected by nature over thousands of years of evolution.

In the room— "*It's bigger than it should be,*" Fujiko says quickly, her words stumbling out. "The mane—it's too large, black like coal, covering its whole neck. The claws... those aren't claws, they're hooks."

Shantel's voice cuts in, sharper still.

"What do we do?!"

Fujiko doesn't answer—her gaze stays fixed, trapped on the beast.

In the memory—The lion's muscles tighten, its whole body drawing in like a spring wound too far. For a breath it holds, then it explodes forward—a blur of fury.

A living hammer that slams into the earth so hard the ground itself shudders. Its massive weight crashes down on Iravayl's buffalo form before he can even turn. The lion's jaws stretch wider than nature should allow, teeth closing like iron around his throat with a finality that feels not only physical but absolute, as if the world itself has decided the outcome.

In the room—Iravayl's human body arches violently, the table beneath him rattling under the force. His chest jerks in spasm. Shantel rushes forward, but her foot slides in something slick. She catches herself on the edge of the table near Iravayl's shoulder, then looks down at her palm—wet, smeared in a vivid red. Her eyes widen, the truth cutting into her voice as she shouts,

"This isn't a psychic bleed—this is a bleed through! This is real! This is real, It's real!". Shantel screams.

Then the pool of blood comes—blooming in a deep, slicing line across his neck, too sharp, too deep to be anything but catastrophic.

Camilla screams, stumbling back with her hands flying to her mouth. "Oh my god—oh my god."

Fujiko moves without thinking, pressing both hands hard to Iravayl's neck, her voice splintering as she pleads. "Fight Iravayl!"

But the blood sprays in heavy, arterial bursts, the wound at his neck deepening with every heartbeat.

"Bandages. My vials bag. Now!" Shantel's voice cuts through the chaos.

Camilla moves with surprising steadiness, fetching the vials, her hands sure despite the horror strangling her face. "This wasn't supposed to happen," she says, pressing the soaked gauze against the wound. "If he's ripped there—he's ripped here."

In the memory—Iravayl will not fall, because he knows with surety that the moment his legs give way, the Atlas lion's jaw will close with finality around his windpipe, crushing it beyond repair. He thrashes violently, pouring every last shred of strength into the attempt to heave off the great beast off his body. The atlas lion's massive frame is an immovable anchor of muscle, he clings tighter. Then from the edges of the chaos—the other lions begin charging back in.

In the room—Fujiko shouts, "No, no—they'll kill him!" she cries, voice breaking before hardening in the space of a heartbeat. "This isn't a memory."

She spins, fury igniting in her expression. “We’re inside this memory—or whatever the hell it is—and none of us remembers it. How is this even possible?”

Camilla answers with clipped precision. “What is happening, you think someone’s merged it?”

“No, somebody knows what we are doing out here, that we are bringing him back” Fujiko fires back, “Someone’s entered this memory, while he is still in his body here and there in the memory. Whoever it is, they are trying to reshape the memory in real time. Somebody doesn’t want him to come back.”

“Iravayl is not witnessing anymore—he must be as confused as us—he thinks this is happening for real and if he dies there, he dies here. I have to save him. I will enter the memory and save him”

Camilla steps forward, her words steady but edged with warning. “We’re not ready. You haven’t done the prep. No oils, no pastes, no chants, no markings. You’re completely exposed. If you go in now, your body will take every hit. Even if you two survive this, no one even knows how you two will come back.”

Fujiko speaks, the blaze in her eyes makes the sound thunder. “I will not let him die in front of me.”

Fujiko strides toward the preparation section, picks up a dagger and slashes her palm. Blood wells immediately, hot and bright. Without pause, she lifts the singularity oil—silver, slick, thrumming with energy. She pours it on the wound on her palm. This oil could pierce time itself, unravel lifetimes, open doorways to buried memories. She lets it mingle with her blood, letting the mixture seep into her veins.

“No! That’s too dangerous!” Shantel shouts, “You’re supposed to apply it on skin. The body absorbs it slowly. Directly into your bloodstream—too fast, too much!”

Blood and singularity oil drip freely from her hand, crimson and silver streaking her skin. She smears it across her face, like a warrior preparing for battle. Her face painted red and silver, her eyes are fire, burning with undeterred determination. Her aura radiates certainty—no doubt, no fear, only the unwavering conviction of absolute victory.

She approaches Iravayl. With a swift motion, she swipes the blood from his neck, mixing it with her own blood and the singularity oil. The silver on her hand begins

to glow, the combination comes alive, as if acknowledging its purpose. She makes her sigil on his forehead. It flares into a glowing red light.

“Fujiko—don’t do this! You’re supposed to witness, not intervene. You know I’m right,” Camilla pleads, her voice breaking. “God dammit... I don’t want to lose you too.” Tears swell, threatening to spill.

Fujiko’s reply cuts through the chaos, firm and commanding, leaving no room for argument. “You two will be blind. You will not be able to see what happens once I’m inside. Just keep him alive. That’s all I ask.”

Fujiko closes her eyes, exhaling slowly, “I’ll handle what’s in there. You handle what’s out here.”

Her lips move in a silent chant, internalising every syllable, every vibration. She presses her palm to the glowing red sigil. The singularity oil, her blood, and the sigil’s light all surge in unison—an unbreakable chain linking her mortal form to her transcendent will. That very instant, her body slumps to the floor, unconscious yet breathing. She has crossed the threshold. She is in.

In the memory—The third buffalo, the same one seen earlier pacing and moving side to side with her tail flicking in anticipation, suddenly freezes mid-motion. Then she takes a single step forward—except it isn’t a step at all, it’s an explosion of force in motion. Her hooves strike the earth like rolling thunder. She drives forward with terrifying speed, her body a haze of muscle and fury.

Iravayl is weakening now. He’s still on his feet, but the Atlas lion’s jaws are locked deep into him, and the others have surrounded him. One lion rakes its claws up his hind, other bites into his front leg, their combined weight and savagery pulling him down from all sides. He fights back—hind legs lashing out with bone-breaking force—but his strikes are slower now, less precise, the immense power that once flowed through him bleeding away with each second.

In the room—Blood pours from his wounds in steady, relentless streams, far more than before.

Camilla’s hands are already soaked to the wrists in Iravayl’s blood. Her movements mechanical in their precision, her face unreadable as she works with speed born of desperation. “Shantel! Fujiko’s heart rate is spiking.”

Shantel turns sharply toward the floor, where Fujiko's body is thrashing, every muscle locked in violent motion. Sweat spills down her temples, her chest rising and falling in rapid, desperate pulls. Her heartbeat hammers against her ribs like a war drum.

"She's galloping," Shantel mutters under her breath, eyes wide. "Her body's galloping."

Camilla doesn't look up. "I'll stay on Iravayl. You handle Fujiko. Crystals. Ointments. Now."

Shantel bolts to the supply table, hands already moving before she's fully reached it.

In the memory—The lions are tearing into Iravayl, snarls mixing with the deep painful wails of Iravayl on the edge of death. The sound of life and death colliding in the rawest form imaginable. Then all of a sudden— a force born of rage, devotion and power of love—a buffalo slams into the Atlas lion from the side with such devastating power that the impact alone seems to shake the ground.

It's Fujiko.

She drives her left horn into the beast's ribs with crushing force, the crack of breaking bone lost beneath the lion's groaning roar that rips through the savannah. The Atlas lion's grip on Iravayl shatters—claws and teeth slipping free—as Fujiko charges on, dragging the predator with her horn still lodged in its flesh. With a final surge of strength, she leaps, hurling her massive body down to drive the horn even deeper.

The Atlas lion thrashes beneath her, choking for breath, its head in a frantic bid to reach her throat, to return death for death. But she tears the horn free in one swift motion, and blood bursts out. She does not pause. She does not glance back.

Her sight is already fixed on the next lion, and she is running again—relentless, unbreakable, unwilling to lose him.

Iravayl sees her—truly sees her—and in that instant he knows. It is Fujiko. Seeing her floods him with courage that detonates in his veins. The body that hung suspended in that fragile limbo between life and death surges into motion. Not the frantic flailing of prey, but a controlled eruption of force. As if each movement is more than survival, each strike a sentence etched into the 'book of battles', each blow

a vow spoken in the oldest language he remembers—the language of warriors—the language of inflicting pure violence.”

Fujiko is already beside him and when her eyes lock with his for the briefest instant, their understanding is complete; they do not nod, they do not try to communicate—this pact they carry is older than any life they’ve ever worn. It is the bond of two warriors who have fought in every shape, in every century, in every body, and still return to the field as one. No signal is needed, no command spoken. The agreement is written into their blood: they will strike together, break whatever stands before them, and remind the world—again—who they are.

The lions surge again, muscles coiled, claws raking the earth, but Iravayl meets them with experience born of battle. His limbs cut through the air in arcs so deliberate, so exact, it feels less like chaos and more like a dance, a dance of death. A foreleg sweeps sideways with brutal certainty, catching a lion’s jaw—bone snaps in a sound sharp and merciless. In the same breath, Fujiko strikes—her horn hooks beneath another’s ribs, lifting the beast clean off the ground before she hurls it down with the finality of a falling star. No wasted motion, no hesitation. They do not fight as if survival hangs in the balance; they fight as if they already own the field.

Pain erupts—sudden, scorching—as jaws clamp around Iravayl’s flank, teeth driving deep. His body refuses to treat it as defeat. It is not a wound, it is fuel, and the blood streaming down his side in warm, sticky sheets only sharpens his resolve. Fujiko takes a bite to her shoulder, flesh tearing with a wet rip, but she does not falter. She does not even break her rhythm; instead, she pivots on her hind legs in a fluid arc and drives both horns into the lion’s spine. The force of the impact shuddering through the predator’s body.

They do not fight like animals driven only to survive; they fight like beings who have outgrown the bodies they wear, as if they borrowed these forms only for this battle. This is not prey defending itself—this is devotion burning into wrath, loss sharpened into a weapon, their movements sanctified by a fire greater than either of them alone. Each strike falls in perfect rhythm: her charge drives a lion into his horns, his blow hurls another into her path. He spins—not to escape, but to open a new line for his horns to strike. She stomps, hooves crushing ribs, the impact rolling through the earth like the drumbeat of a war no living thing remembers.

The lions begin to falter—not from broken bones or spilled blood, though both stain the dust, but from doubt. Predators live by patterns, by the simple grammar of

fear and violence, attack and surrender, yet what stands before them refuses every rule they know. These are not prey. These shapes that stand, bleeding yet unbroken, do not move like buffalo or bull. They move and fight, like something else—something that does not belong in the order of hunter and hunted.

Another lion peels away from the fight, then another, the dust swirling in the space they leave behind. The air is thick with the smell of blood and the churn of disturbed earth, but beneath it all runs something stronger, something steady and vast, an energy that belongs to neither of them alone yet moves through both as if they share the same heart. This is what love looks like when it wears armor, when it draws blood, when it plants itself in the path of death and dares it to come closer.

One lion hesitates, its body twitching backward, retreat stealing into his muscles. Iravayl and Fujiko turn on him together, horns dipping as one, breath ragged but unwavering, steps falling in perfect symmetry. They surge forward—bitten, torn, bloodied—but their bodies no longer recognize the meaning of pain. Pain has been transfigured into the will to strike, to end.

Their horns plunge. Iravayl drives into the lion's shoulder, the force lifting the predator half from the earth, while Fujiko's horn rakes across its rib cage. The lion howls, the roar breaking into a scream, legs thrashing as its chest collapses inward. Together they drive it back, pinning it in the dust, their combined weight and fury grinding into its body with a grave impact. When they tear free, the lion staggers sideways, its flank split, blood pouring in sheets down its golden fur. The lion barely gets up, he is on its last breaths, stumbles, knees buckling, eyes wide with fear—as though it has just discovered that what it fights is not prey at all, but something it has no word for.

When the last lion retreats, clearly stating they do not want to fight. It is not victory that fills them—it is the feeling of vindication. Vindication that together, there is no force in the wild, no teeth, no claws, no hunger, that can take them apart. Vindication that their bond is not chance or luck, but a law.

They stand a few meters apart, bodies staggering, blood streaked down their hides, lungs burning with each ragged pull of air. The ground between them is torn and dark with the signs of battle, yet in that stretch of distance nothing exists but a look binding their eyes together. Iravayl lowers his head just slightly, and Fujiko mirrors him. The silence between heartbeats is deafening, charged with something greater

than survival, greater than winning. They do not need words. The look they share says everything: I'm you, you're me, and we are forever—One.

Then—

The Atlas lion erupts from nowhere; a blur of muscle and rage leaps the air with great speed. It slams into Iravayl, and before breath can be drawn, before thought can rise, its jaws lock around his neck. The crack is loud, final—One merciless twist, and Iravayl's body gives way. In that very instant—Iravayl is dead.

In the room—Iravayl's human body arches violently on the table, the motion so sudden it seems as though some unseen giant has yanked an invisible sword from inside him through his neck, and Camilla sees the exact moment his neck snaps—a jolt so wrong that her own neck aches in visceral sympathy. Blood bursts from the base of his neck in a hot and splatters across her hands, streaks her cheeks, paints her mouth red. She watches Iravayl's human body—neck cracked, tendons twitching in spasms that should not still exist. Her breath comes in violent sobs, her chest heaving as though her own ribs might splinter under the force.

Shantel is on her knees before she even knows she has moved, her hands clawing at her own hair as if she could rip the vision from her skull, the words “No—no—no—” falling from her lips in a relentless chant that will not let her stop, will not let her breathe, will not let her believe.

In the memory—the Atlas lion's jaws tighten around Iravayl's neck and with a single monstrous pull, it rips Iravayl's head clean from his body. Blood spurts out in a violent spray, bright against the golden grass. For a fleeting, uncanny instant, the body remains upright, swaying as though uncertain it has been abandoned, before collapsing into a grotesque heap, legs twitching with stubborn, unnatural persistence. The lion's black mane is now soaked, streams of warm blood threading through the coarse hair and dripping in thick ropes down its chest. The head, still warm, is flung by the Atlas lion across the space between it and Fujiko.

Everything slows.

Fujiko sees the head slowly float toward her. It does not tumble, does not roll—it floats, suspended in a cruel, elongated rhythm, turning slowly as though the world itself cannot bear to hurry this final insult. Blood unwinds behind it in long, delicate strands, drifting and shimmering in the air. The head lands in front of Fujiko—not with a thud, but with a quiet, almost reverent finality, as if the earth itself is attempting to cradle what remains of him.

It lies there, and the vindication of moments ago—the fight, the blood, the lions, the victory—has already been swallowed by the void. Every fragment of the battle vanishes into a ringing nothingness, leaving only the silent, unbearable weight of what has just been lost.

Her eyes widen and remain that way, unblinking. The rest of her refuses to move; her breath abandons her chest, her limbs forget they were ever hers. She stands as she is—motionless, emptied of every function except staring—and her gaze is so still, it is beyond shock, beyond grief. It is the look of someone unmade in an instant, yet left cruelly standing in the shell of herself.

In the room—Iravayl's human head is ripped away, flung across the room like the discarded spoil of a slaughterhouse kill, the sound of tearing muscle and snapping bone echoing in the ears of Camila and Shantel. Camilla stumbles forward hopelessly, as though she could somehow catch his head before it hits the ground. Shantel's hands clutch at the table, her nails scraping wood until they split, as if she could hold reality itself in place. Then she shakes so violently her knees give way beneath her. They both watch as Iravayl's human body lies before them, his head torn apart, the room thick with the reek of fresh blood.

In the memory—the other lions begin to circle, drawn by the scent of blood and Iravayl's dead body. Their eyes are hungry, but their steps are careful, testing the limits of their courage. The Atlas lion turns toward them with a deep, guttural snarl—a warning carrying the weight of absolute dominion. In that sound is an unspoken law: no one touches his kill, no one should even dare to breathe too close.

One young lion, ribs visible beneath its skin, steps forward. Hunger outweighs caution. It creeps closer, ears pinned back, a faint whimper in his throat. The Atlas lion watches without moving at first—then, in a blur of muscle and rage, he lashes out. His paw, massive as a man's chest, smashes into the young lion's skull. The bone gives way instantly. The lion crumples, eyes glassy, but the Atlas lion is not finished.

He clamps his jaws around the shattered head, teeth grinding against fractured bone, pressing hard until the young lion's skull explodes in his mouth itself. Muscles along his jaw ripple, his eyes glint with a savage satisfaction as shards and brain matter are forced inward. He spits out a string of gore, his muzzle slick and face covered in fresh blood.

The Atlas lion does not stalk now; it does not prowl. It simply walks slowly towards Fujiko, as though it already knows what must happen and is bored by the

inevitability. Fujiko stands there, her body still upright, her face turned toward Iravayl's head. Her eyes emptied of life, dead in every way that matters though her body still breathes.

The Atlas lion stops before her, close enough for its hot breath to brush her skin, and for a long moment it does nothing, merely studying her with a grim, almost puzzled fascination—why there is no fear, no cowering, no trace of will left in her to fight or flee.

Then, without warning, its head sadistically moves forward, jaws clamping down on her throat with such sudden, crushing violence that the air itself seems to recoil. There is no struggle, no sound—only the sheer, merciless force that crushes through flesh and muscle and shatters the columns of her neck in a single instant. She collapses not like prey but like a doll whose strings have been cut, folding under herself, lifeless before her body even meets the ground. The lion stays with her, its teeth still locked in the ruin of her throat, pulling her down completely, pressing her into the dust as though it must own every last inch of her. Then it shifts, finding her windpipe with its jaws and tearing it open in a slow, deliberate wrench that releases a wet, rattling gasp—her breath clawing its way through a passage no longer meant for life. It is grotesque in its precision, a killing meant not for hunger but for the execution of dominance.

In the room—On the floor, Fujiko's human body convulses, the seizure starting small, just a ripple beneath her skin, before overtaking her in violent waves that lock and release her muscles with unnatural force. Her neck arches upward so sharply it seems she will break in two, and then—it does. Blood seeps from the base of her neck, winding in dark, glistening threads along her collarbone, blooming against the pale silk of her robe until the fabric hangs heavy and wet. Shantel moves without thought, cradling Fujiko's shoulders, trying to still her, but the convulsions are stronger than her arms; a sudden gush of blood spatters across Shantel's face, painting her crimson, she does not react, does not blink—her eyes locked on Fujiko's half-open mouth, watching each breath as though it might be her last.

In the memory—The Atlas lion gets up and circles around Fujiko's body with an arrogance that knows it cannot be challenged. The other two lions break instantly, fleeing in opposite directions. The wound in his chest—deep, ugly, torn open—should have slowed him, but instead it looks like a badge of authority. The blood runs down his forelegs in sticky rivulets, turning the earth beneath him into a dark,

clotted swamp. His framing eyes glint not with hunger, but with a knowing cruelty—as if he understands exactly how much fear he has sown, and is pleased by it.

The Atlas lion turns back to Fujiko. She is still alive, though her body is broken, her breathing shallow and erratic. He sits beside her, his presence heavy, unhurried, like a king presiding over an execution. Then he begins to eat her alive.

Fujiko does not scream. She only stares—eyes wide, gaze locked on some horizon no one else can see. The Atlas lion takes another bite, then another. By the fourth, her heartbeat stops. What remains on the ground is no longer Fujiko, no longer the woman who once carried the weight of gods, but a broken, bloodied carcass beneath the long shadow of the setting sun.

In the room—there is no room anymore. The walls are slick with blood and body parts, The floor is more blood than floor, a red mirror that drinks the light and gives nothing back.

Camilla lies collapsed unconscious in the center of it all, her body completely with blood, her hair matted. Her chest rises shallowly.

Shantel kneeling near her, frozen in that posture of someone who has forgotten how to move. She tries to think—anything, a single coherent thought—but nothing.

Shantel crawls through the warm sludge toward Camilla, her knees slipping in the blood. She forces herself to lift Camilla's head from the wet floor. She shakes her once, then again. Camilla's eyes snap open. She looks. She sees and then she remembers what she has seen.

The scream that leaves her is not even sound—it is airless, the hollow exhalation of a lung that refuses to take the world back in.

Shantel opens her mouth to speak—to say something, to say anything at all—but her voice does not follow. She opens her mouth but nothing comes out.

Her hand touches her own throat, her nails pressing into her skin, as if some pressure there could make sound return but the silence holds her like a fist around the neck. It is then she knows that she has *lost her voice*.

Her mind cracks under the weight of it—this wasn't killing. Killing is quick, even when it's ugly. It has an end, a finality. This was different. This was something that knew killing wasn't enough. It wanted more. It wanted to erase, to destroy until nothing was left to remember what had been.

Lions don't do this. Not for hunger. Not for rage. Not even for madness. Whatever had worn that lion's skin ... it wasn't a lion. It was another soul, an evil behind the teeth and claws, steering them like weapons. Its purpose was not to eat, not to survive—its purpose was demonic.

A slow, cold dread coils inside her chest. The thought comes uninvited, whispering in the cracks of her mind: *Was it him?* No ... it can't be. It *can't* be. She shakes her head, forcing it away, refusing to let the name form.

But the more she pushes it down, the clearer it becomes. Like a shadow stepping forward into the light. The name slips through anyway, silent but deafening. Her stomach turns to ice. She knows it was him. Every part of her knows.

That it was—*Dravayl*.

Morning came cold and gray. The forest was wet, the ground soaked, the air heavy with damp soil and rotting leaves. Everything smelled of decay. They moved slowly, carefully, in silence. They had come for a specific kind of wood, dense and slow-burning, meant for the dead. A body takes from the earth, and the earth takes it back in equal measure. That was the rule, the way things had to be done.

Shantel didn't speak. Her voice had left her somewhere between the lion's jaws and Fujiko's last breath. There was nothing left to say, and nothing wanted to be said. Camilla didn't speak either. Both of them were silent, their faces pale, hollowed, drained. Grief had consumed everything: anger, words, hope. They were young, their suffering was here, in their bodies, on earth and they will have to wait until a natural death comes to them.

They built a pyre without ceremony. There were no prayers, no chants. Just the body and the wood. The fire burned slowly, reluctant at first, and then hotter, consuming both of them together. Smoke rose into the gray sky, taking pieces of them with it.

When the fire burned down, they gathered the ashes. The river moved slowly, sad, thick with silt, as if it didn't want them either. They let the ashes go. They drifted, breaking apart in the current, carried away, disappearing.

They just stood. Two empty bodies beside the river, hollow and quiet. There was no comfort, no relief, no sense of closure. Only the absence, heavy and permanent. The forest remained damp. The river continued to slowly move. The world carried on, and Camilla and Shantel were left with nothing but sorrow and grief.

Tell me your Name



The Pitbull fills the street, massive muscles coiling beneath thick skin, teeth bared, the spiked collar gleaming like iron in the dim light. Yet the girl's gaze never wavers. Her face is calm, unreadable, a quiet mirror to the dog's raw aggression.

Step by careful step, she moves as he moves, shifting just enough to avoid being cornered, matching his rhythm without fear. Always leaving enough space to stay free, never trapped. The dog prowls, circling, restless and sharp. She steps lightly, precise, meeting his movements with the smallest gestures of defiance—a careful dance of courage.

Then—impatience. The Pitbull lunges, teeth flashing. Instinct makes her raise her tiny arm—charred black, with a thin silver lining tracing its length—but she is only five. A sudden, thunderous thud explodes through the air, a kick powerful enough to shift the world itself. The dog is hurled through the air, its head smashes against the lamp post and explodes like a watermelon. Sparks fly all over and the lamp post shudders, bending nearly parallel to the ground. The Pitbull's headless body tumbles, bounces, and slides across the asphalt, leaving a streak of red before curling into stillness.

The girl blinks, steadying herself. Her gaze drifts to the side.

A small boy, no older than six, stands there with a horribly runny nose and mud streaks across his face. He licks a heart-shaped lollipop as if savouring a treat after a win.

He pulls out another lollipop from his shirt pocket and holds it toward her, his little fingers sticky with sugar.

His aura far too big for someone so small.

His wet eyes look at her—clear, unguarded, glowing with a light that makes the world seem safe. He shifts on his feet, nervous but stubborn, then utters, “From now on, you don’t have to worry. I’ll keep you safe—Forever.”

The little girl looks at him with her beautiful big deep eyes.

A smile spreads slowly across her face, glowing, unstoppable.

A single tear slides down her cheek.

She asks, soft and gleefully with a cracked voice,

“Tell me your name!!”