The Loop



SCI-FI NOVEL

Jan Kaluža

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- Snail divider: Gottmi (https://www.instagram.com/_gottmi_/)

Chapter 1: Poet (Nox)



"Go fuck your..."

"... Self-importance. That's your real problem," she snapped at me, unknowingly finishing my insult for me. It was too good a line to let go to waste. I sat down on the couch, the skyscrapers sprawled out beyond the window. The neon signs lit the city so fiercely we didn't even need to turn on a light.

Lyra stood over me, but she wasn't waiting for my answer. She answered herself. I'd already stopped listening, though. I drifted off, building the scene in my head. Frame by frame, movement by movement. I added a title card, dramatic music. Flattered myself, and out of mercy, flattered her too. I knew this fragment would go viral. Nothing delights people quite like someone else's misfortune. And my misfortune delighted them twice as much. Especially with a pinch of violence, a joke, and a bit of chance thrown in.

"You're not listening to me again."

Her voice pulled me back into the room. I rubbed my eyes.

"I'm creating."

"You create when you have nothing, and you don't create when you have everything," she sighed.

“Guess I’m just a creature of habit.” I grabbed the Notebook off the small table.

“I really can’t take these moods of yours anymore. I mean it.”

She wasn’t shouting. Honestly, shouting would have calmed me down more than this. I wanted to answer her. But she was only one person, and millions were waiting for the next fragment.

I opened the Notebook and held it up to my eyes. I replayed the memory once more, and a flash like a giant camera shutter swept through the room. For a moment it even outshone the neon lights of the city below us.

At the same instant the door slammed shut behind me, and I was alone in the apartment. It wasn’t the first time she’d left, and I hoped it wouldn’t be the last. I tossed the Notebook onto the empty side of the couch and pictured our bodies there from the night before.

Up and down. That was how our relationship had been working lately, and I was mostly the one on the bottom — that much was just a fact.

I threw my feet up on the table and leaned back, comfortable. I pulled my phone from my pocket and checked the fragment. Over three hundred thousand views in the first minute. It had barely lasted thirty seconds. An argument, a slammed door, and silence timed just right. I’d hoped for more, but for something so improvised, it wasn’t bad. I’d squeeze three million out of this by midnight, and that would just have to be enough for Corven.

I touched the screen and swiped over to the view count. I watched the numbers climb. Three hundred and ten. Three hundred and twenty. Three hundred and thirty thousand. I'd never understood people who claimed they didn't care about the numbers. Of course they cared. Everyone did. Only the unsuccessful ones claimed otherwise.

I opened the comments and immediately started reading the top-rated ones:

Did she leave you over that nose?

This is staged.

Lyra deserves better.

I lingered on that last comment a moment longer than was healthy. Then I liked it. A few seconds later, its author sent me a heart, and it made me laugh. Millions of people felt like they knew me. They knew when I was happy, when I was drunk, when I was desperate. They recognized my apartments, my wife, my friends, and my excuses. And I knew them too. Not by name or face, but by those small doses of attention they sent me every day.

I locked the screen and set the phone down beside me. The silence in the apartment immediately grew louder. My eyes drifted to the city below. The screen covering fifteen floors of the skyscraper across from me flickered, and Lyra's anguished face appeared on it. Exactly as I'd imagined it a moment ago. She looked perfect. On screen, at least.

I knew Lyra wouldn't mind this fragment. We'd been married fifteen years, and she knew exactly what she'd signed up for. Poets don't have privacy. Not the ones who created for the Loop, anyway. When their words could shift the moods of millions, everyone wanted to know absolutely everything about them too. At least about the best ones, and I'd once been among them. Mining attention out of every emotion, good or bad. At least one fragment a day. And when they were good enough, they paid well too. Well enough for the view in front of me, and for every escape we made from it.

My eyes slid from the neon lights beyond the windows to the empty spot on the couch. Solitude, and Lyra. I hated them both and loved them both at once. I spun the phone between my fingers and went to check the bathroom. On the way, I dialed a number from my favorites list. One of the few still left there. It rang longer than I would have liked.

"Yeah?" a sleepy voice answered through the speaker. It sounded older than I remembered. Maybe only because I'd woken it in the middle of the night.

"Hey, I... need to talk," I finally managed, moving from the bathroom to the bar counter just behind the couch.

"Nox?"

"Yeah, it's me. Did you see my new fragment? It's already past three hundred thousand views."

"I don't watch the Loop anymore. It started feeling too tight."

I exhaled. Too tight. That was how Edrin talked about the place where we'd both gotten rich. The network that had turned human attention into the most valuable resource in the world.

For a moment I wished I could do what he'd done. Delete the account and vanish from the eyes of millions. Would it help me? Would it help Lyra? Us? I looked around. The couch cost more than Edrin's first apartment, the glass wall offered the best view in the city, and the bar behind me was full of bottles I'd gotten for posing with them once. I opened one and poured myself a glass. I had no idea what it was, but going by my own face on the label, I was supposed to drink it every evening.

No. This wasn't something I could give up. I couldn't live a different life. This was, after all, the only thing I really had left. The Loop was how Lyra and I had met, and it was probably the Loop that kept us together still.

"She left you, didn't she?" came through the phone speaker.

"No... No, that's not it. Her toothbrush is still in the bathroom."

Along with three pairs of shoes, a jacket, and most of her books. After fifteen years of marriage, I'd learned that women left in pieces. And came back in pieces too.

"A toothbrush?" Edrin laughed, and I laughed with him. Then his voice changed. "You should take this seriously, unless you want to lose her for good."

"And what exactly do you think I should do?"

"Quit the Loop. Like I did," he answered, and drew a breath to keep going.

“Nonsense,” I cut him off, but a new voice came through the speaker instead. A woman’s.

“Who’s calling this late?”

I knew that voice. It was Mirea, Edrin’s wife.

“Nox,” Edrin answered. “Lyra left him.”

“She didn’t leave me. Her toothbrush is still here,” I informed the phone lying on the table in front of me, though no one on the other end seemed to be listening.

“You should come see us, Nox,” Mirea’s voice came again. “Get yourself back together a little.”

Just then, a keycard beeped behind me, and the door locks began to turn. My heart started pounding.

“I have to go,” I blurted, and hung up.

At that same moment the door opened and Lyra walked into the apartment. I ran a hand through my messy hair, quickly finished off the rest of my glass, and started toward her. I wanted to hug her, the way I always did, but this time she wouldn’t let me.

“Sorry to bother you again,” she said, and I smiled at her.

“It’s fine. I’m glad you came back.”

At that, her expression shifted from surprise to a nervous smile.

“You know...” she began quietly, heading for the bathroom, “I’m just here for the toothbrush.”

Chapter 2: The Club (Vey)



New customers were always a problem.

They were unpredictable.

They knew exactly what they wanted, but had no idea how to get it, or what it would cost them. That often led to misunderstandings, and those misunderstandings hurt.

I was watching one just then. He was sitting a little way off from me, on the far side of the bar. Skinny, gold-rimmed glasses, jeans, a threadbare black sweater. The kind of outfit that screamed I'm trying to fit in.

He didn't fit in. And he knew it well. He'd ordered a drink but hadn't taken a single sip yet. He'd already scanned the club three times, as if he expected to spot someone waving Pulses around in a paper cone like popcorn at a football game.

He was either a cop or a rich idiot. Down here, those two categories tended to overlap. I was hoping for the rich idiot, because those were the ones willing to pay thousands for things other people fished out of dumpsters behind skyscrapers.

The bartender walked up to him and nodded at the untouched glass of whiskey. A few words passed between them, and then Mr. Suspicious asked his question. Over the music from the stage a few steps below the bar, I couldn't hear a thing. Even so, I knew exactly what they were talking about.

Pulses.

Everyone asked about them eventually, because the desire to live forever was stronger than fear.

The bartender pointed my way, and I tucked a strand of sweat-damp black hair behind my ear. I winked at him and he smiled. Though his eyes still held that frightened look of a man who didn't want to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. He took a sip from the thick-bottomed glass and made his way to the empty stool beside me.

I could have spoken first, but I liked making these types wait, watching their fear build. There was something thrilling about it. I used to dream that one of them would come over someday and be interested in me. Not the merchandise. Not the price. Just start hitting on me, and I'd pretend to be unavailable.

There it was again, that bashful smile. I gave it back, almost without meaning to, trying not to break character while also trying not to look like a desperate wreck.

"I hear you might have some Pulses," he asked, sounding confident, though the glass in his hand trembled slightly. Whatever warmth I'd felt evaporated. All that was left now was a question of supply and demand, and I started wondering how much this one was willing to pay, and whether he'd already tried his luck somewhere else.

"I hear you've got five thousand burning a hole in your pocket," I answered with a question of my own. Five thousand for an extra week of life wasn't a bad price. Not according to the people who were dying, anyway.

The smile fell off his face and his eyes started working. His lips searched for words.

"I don't have that much," he finally admitted, but kept going before I could respond. "I'll give you three."

"Now listen to me carefully," I began, leaning toward his ear so he'd hear me over the noise. He smelled surprisingly good, and that annoyed me more than it should have. Just then the crowd around the stage started shouting and clapping, the music swelled, and I snapped back to reality.

"Either you give me what I want, or you can try your luck down at the stage," I said, tilting my head toward the crush of bodies below.

The lights dimmed and the crowd was washed in garish purple neon. Faces vanished, leaving only silhouettes. Mr. Suspicious turned to look at the stage beneath us, where a snail had just been wheeled out on a transporter to the crowd's roar. Not the kind that crunches under a shoe. This one was over half a meter long, and it could have crunched Mr. Suspicious himself, if he were foolish enough to be in the wrong place for too long.

The shell sat quietly at the center of the stage, ignoring the crowd. The snail was asleep, waiting for someone to wake it. Most of the people in the club were here because of it.

Mr. Suspicious left me, and I let out a quiet sigh. He made his way down the light-lined stairs into the crowd. He didn't push forward, and I kept my eyes on him the whole time.

"That one'll be back," the bartender said behind me, finishing off the rest of our shared guest's whiskey.

"He'll be back," I nodded. "For now he still believes he has a choice."

One of the poets ran out from backstage. That's what they called themselves, but compared to the ones in the Loop, they were absolute nobodies. Still, compared to the Loop's poets, they were useful. They gave people hope. Ugly hope, reeking, sticky as tar, but the kind everyone could afford. Hope that kept this place packed every single night.

Some faces I saw every night. Thinner, more tired, each time a little closer to the stage. One guy had been coming for three months straight now. Judging by how he looked, he didn't have much time left.

Another man ran out from the other side of the stage, a black hood pulled over his head. The crowd greeted him with applause and chants of his name.

"Orion's going to wreck him," the bartender said, mostly to himself.

"Whether Orion wins or the new guy does, people are going to lose their minds, and we're going to line our pockets," I laughed.

"To eternal life, then," the bartender said, handing me a glass.

"Just to life," I answered, the way I always did. The glasses clinked and the show began.

The rhythm shifted, and the crowd swayed like a churning sea. The new poet grabbed the microphone. His pants hung looser than they should have, but that could just have been his image.

"Orion?" he started, mocking. "A star falls, make a wish! I wished for a rival and got you instead. Want to go back up to that shining sky? I'll grant it — bury you right here, next to myself!"

Not a bad opener, and the crowd agreed.

Beneath the snail's translucent skin, pale purple blood began to pulse.

The unknown poet kept going, but Orion just listened quietly, tapping his foot to the beat. As if he hadn't even noticed his rival flailing his arms in his direction. Every eye locked on the center of the stage. The neon blazed, and the snail's head slid out of its shell.

The poet worked his way through insults about Orion's mother and on to trashing his girlfriend. The crowd devoured every word, and the unknown poet started to believe he had them on his side.

Orion never once stopped smiling.

For a moment, I genuinely believed it would all be over before Orion even got a turn. But then the snail began retreating back into its shell, and the unknown poet had to hand the microphone over to Orion.

If the crowd had been cheering before, it was pure hysteria now. They knew what was coming.

And judging by the other poet's face, so did he.

"You bring up my girl, the crowd cheers for a beat. When I bring up your name, they all ask, 'who's that, even?'"

The front rows erupted in laughter.

I don't know how he did it. His rhymes weren't anywhere near perfect. There was just something more to it. Personal charisma. Something only poets had.

Orion could just pull people over to his side. Me included, of course.

I took another sip and started running my finger along the rim of my glass.

The snail reacted instantly. As Orion kept going, it stretched its head out and tilted it toward him. Orion had been waiting for exactly that, and turned straight to face the snail.

"Your mom? Yeah, that's rough, man... I look at this snail and I see her, real cute. Her life turned out fine, well... except one thing — kids. Those never worked out."

People in the front rows shrieked. The unknown poet forced a smile, though it looked more like a wince. The snail's head lit up in a purple glow, and its tentacles rose into the air.

"A snail carries its house on its back, about the size of yours, I'd guess. And your girl? She wanted a place with a view. Well, now she's got mine."

At that, Orion spread his arms wide and the snail moved. The bartender smiled and got to work lining up shots along the bar. A good poet made money for everyone standing on the right side of the counter.

The crowd went quiet, watching the snail move. The music kept playing, but the atmosphere in the club had shifted into something almost sacred.

It always fascinated me how the snails moved. As if they levitated a millimeter above the ground, without a single visible motion. And yet a snail could cross from the transporter to the stage in a single second.

Orion laid his palm on the pulsing tentacles and, with his other hand, waved the unknown poet forward to go first. It was an unspoken rule, and no one dared break it. The unknown poet pulled out a plastic case and scooped up a heaping helping of snail slime. It stretched like honey and dripped from the case's edge back down to the ground.

The crowd didn't wait even a second — they surged onto the stage and started fighting over the sticky trail the snail left behind.

Live forever. Or at least a little longer. Most people never got their hands on Pulses. They weren't part of the Loop, didn't know the right people, and no poet had ever picked them for a challenge. So this was what was left for them. This, or shots at the bar, which at least let them forget for a while.

I automatically checked the Pulse in my pocket. Concentrated, pure, safe, and many times more potent than anything people were licking off the stage right now, slime running down their fingers to their elbows.

I looked back at Mr. Suspicious. He stood over all of it, and I knew I'd be making money tonight. I started scanning the crowd with my eyes for others like him. People who'd come here with a clear goal, only to lose their nerve under the weight of it all.

And then I saw her. The only one not facing the snail — she was looking straight at me instead. Styled hair peeked out from under her hood, and her shoes were suspiciously clean. This one wasn't trying to fit in — she was trying to hide. It was Lyra. Nox's wife. My stomach clenched with fear. Everyone who'd ever opened the Loop once knew her face.

And yet here she was. Somewhere she didn't belong. Maybe she wanted some fun? Maybe she and Nox were cooking up a new fragment? Whatever it was, people like her didn't come to places like this without bodyguards and cops in tow. Getting caught with a single Pulse in my pocket, I could talk my way out of. My room was the problem. And so was Mr. Suspicious. Why the hell hadn't I just given him what he wanted for three grand? Either he'd have walked off with a Pulse, or he'd have flashed a badge. At least then I'd know where I stood.

"Go," the bartender said quietly. "If there's trouble, I'll hold them off."

I threw back the rest of my drink, slipped behind the bar, and swiped my card to unlock my room. I dove for the fake floorboard, beneath which sat a hidden iron box. I opened it, and light from a pulsing glow lit up the corner of the room. I tossed the Pulse from my pocket in with its companions, my hand brushing, out of habit, over the note stuck to the inside of the lid:

I hope they give you more time than they gave me.

The box vanished back into the floor, and I dragged the nightstand back over it. Then came a soft knock at the door. Right after it, a woman's voice:

"Vey? I know you're in there. I'm not here to hurt you."

That's how it always started.

And it was rarely true.

Chapter 3: Pulse (Vey)



HOW THIS CHAPTER WAS SHAPED

Patron brief - Markéta Kalánosová

- **Hlavní funkce kapitoly**

  Vytvořit napětí

- **Změna hlavní postavy**

  Něco ztratit, získat nového spojence

- **Emoce po kapitole**

  Samota

- **Symbol nebo obraz**

  Rozbitý fragment

- **Věta, dialog nebo myšlenka**

  Uvědomil jsem si, že vše, co jsem dosud měl, jsem považoval za samozřejmost, teď tu sedím a přemýšlím, zda mi to za to stálo. Přišel jsem o ni, o jedinou lásku mého života.

- **Co se nesmí stát**

  Nesmí to být sen hlavní postavy.

HOW THIS CHAPTER WAS SHAPED

Readers' voice

I didn't answer.

People have this strange idea that if you stay silent after a knock, the person on the other side will just turn around and go home. That works fine, unless the person standing outside is Lyra — wife of one of the most famous poets in the Loop — and you're a Pulse dealer who can't figure out why someone like her would come looking for you in a grimy club.

"I need to talk to you," came the muffled voice.

It didn't sound like it did in the fragments. Not confident, not hysterical. It sounded desperate. I knew voices like that. They belonged to people who didn't have much time left. People who'd give anything for one more week of life. I felt sorry for them, but often there was nothing I could do except open another deal and hope they had something to pay with.

Something in that voice told me she wasn't here because of me, or some new fragment. I grabbed the door handle. The chain above my head rattled, and the door opened just enough for me to see her eyes. No makeup, faint lines around her eyes, a hood pulled over her head. The complete opposite of the woman practically the whole world knew.

"What do you want?" I hissed at her under my breath.

"I know you through a friend. She comes to see you sometimes," she began carefully, and my mind started running through the faces of my regulars, trying to figure out which one it could be. I'd always been fairly sure none of them belonged to the people up top. Apparently I'd been wrong.

I checked the hallway. Empty. Her hands. Empty. I could have just shut the door on her frightened eyes and let her find her own way. But I needed the money to stay here. And I'd have bet she could buy anything right now except time.

"Fine," I sighed, unhooked the door chain, and let her in.

She slipped inside and quietly closed the door behind herself. She doesn't want to be here, I thought. She wants this over as fast as I do.

"Five thousand," I said, naming my price, then immediately bit my lip. I should have asked for more. She could afford it.

She just nodded, pulled a stack of crisp bills from her pocket, and I took them from her. I liked quick deals, no chit-chat. I started counting, but my thoughts were racing faster than the bills between my fingers. I looked at her again, and that small voice inside me spoke up out loud.

"You actually left him, didn't you?"

I shouldn't have asked, not that fast. But the famous Lyra was standing in the middle of my room, and it threw me completely off balance. Then again, maybe it wasn't such a bad idea. This could be a chance to gain an ally up top. And allies like that were priceless. Right now she had to be at rock bottom, but I knew she'd bounce back from it one day, and maybe then she'd remember me.

"I should've done it a long time ago. I just needed time."

I couldn't help but smile, and a hint of one appeared in her eyes too.

"Wait here." I winked at her and stepped into the next room. I locked the door behind me and felt around in the hidden box for a Pulse.

When I came back, Lyra was standing by the wall, looking at my sketches. A strange mix of shame and panic gripped me. I'd never had guests. Never. No friends, no men, nothing like that. Just me, four walls, and my fortune hidden under the floor.

"These are pretty good." She pointed at one of the snails.

"That's Lucky," I answered automatically, and for the second time in a few minutes, I bit my lip. Lyra shot me a surprised look.

"I don't know why I even told you that." I held the Pulse out to her, hoping this little outburst of mine would just blow over. Her eyes lit up for a moment. Then the question crept back into them.

"Do you think I could... here...?"

She nodded toward the couch facing the snail drawings. The question caught me off guard, and she must have noticed it. I tried to read her face. Was that fear?

"I... I don't want to go back to the bar for this."

There was something to that. People licking snail slime off their hands didn't exactly make for good company, and I had to admit most of the time they really weren't. Nothing would have happened to her at the bar, but there was no point arguing. I couldn't think of a single reason she couldn't take a dose on my couch.

"Fine," I agreed finally, doing my best impression of the world's best friend.

"But you're gone right after, okay? Next dose, you come to the bar like everybody else, deal?"

"Deal," Lyra nodded, and this time gave a faint smile.

Did she even have anywhere to go once it was over? Were the people up top just as lonely as the people down here, only in a different way? Did they have money and time, but were actually just as miserable as the rest of us underneath it all? Was I really going to just sit here while she went off somewhere else?

"Screw it, I'll go with you," I decided, swept up in the flood of questions filling my head, and slipped back into the other room for a moment.

A few moments later, we were sitting on opposite ends of the couch, glasses of water in hand, a neon-glowing tablet between our fingers.

"To eternal life," Lyra said, a little stiffly.

"Just to life," I answered, and placed the Pulse on the tip of my tongue. The electric tingle hit immediately, along with the smell of ozone. Like right after a storm passes and all that's left is that all-encompassing calm. Extra time, about to spread through every part of my body. I swallowed and smiled at Lyra. But she was already gone, no longer aware of anything around her. Her head was tilted back against the couch. Within a second, I followed her.

My body felt like it was inside a warm bubble, sealed off from everything around it. The room showed through it like it was seen through fogged shower glass. Drops of water ran down its walls and down my body. The water tickled against my goosebumped skin, carrying every worry away with it.

"Hey, Lucky," I greeted my old friend through the bubble and touched it. It burst with a soft pop, tiny droplets hitting my face. Or did my face hit them? My finger pointed upward, aiming at something. I looked in that direction, but there was nothing there except the ceiling.

"Why are you pointing at the ceiling?" I scolded him.

"Focus," Lucky answered my greeting, and I tried to do exactly what he told me.

I was walking down the hallway of an old house. Lucky lay inside a large glass container I called the Pickle Jar. His eyestalks tracked me, but I just walked past, as if I hadn't noticed him.

The next snail down the row of jars was asleep. Or at least I hoped it was asleep. I refused to accept that it might simply have died. I'd named him Dozer, and honestly, I'd never seen anything of him besides his shell.

I stopped by Dozer and pulled out a small notebook. I wrote something in it, but my eyes couldn't focus enough to read the text. I tried my hardest, but I couldn't make out anything beyond "Sample 143 — exhibits [corrupted glitching text], but in reality." I couldn't read any further than that.

Past Dozer, I turned into a study. On the desk beneath a blinds-covered window sat stacks of paper, leftover food, and mugs of old coffee. The worn carpet, covered in hundreds of stains, always reminded me of the marshes the snails had originally come from, and it gave the room a distinct, musty smell.

"How's one-forty-three doing?" said a young man with a neatly trimmed mustache, short hair, and round-framed glasses.

"Excellent," my mouth answered, but the voice wasn't mine.

"Want to try it?" Mr. Tidy asked again.

My body nodded, but the moment I stepped through the study door, I opened my eyes.

The ceiling of my apartment, the ache of moving my head, the couch, me — full of life, tingling fingertips, Lyra. My gaze stopped there. She was still dreaming, and I watched her. Her breathing was ragged, her head twitching side to side, her chest rising and falling in rhythm. I had no idea what she might be seeing.

I picked up paper and charcoal, about to sketch Mr. Tidy, when Lyra's eyes opened. She stared into space, and I watched her drift back into reality. I didn't say anything, waiting for her to ride it out. She focused on me, and I noticed the lines around her eyes had vanished. Then she stood up faster than I expected and walked over to the pictures on my wall.

I'd never watched anyone else come down from a dose before. And I'd certainly never shared one with anyone. This little adventure had stirred up a strange cocktail of excitement and anticipation in my stomach. Lyra's next question poured a healthy dose of curiosity into that mix.

"You see all this stuff after Pulses?" She pointed at the snail drawings, the notebook sketches from my dream, and the other devices I'd carried over from my dreams onto paper.

"So what? They're just Pulses." I shot her a confused look and kept going. "You see all kinds of things on them. Snails in giant mason jars, people taking care of them, stuff like that."

"But I saw them too," Lyra said, frowning at me, and for a moment darkness spread through my head. All I could manage to get out was one word:

"What?"

"Lucky. The incubation hallway. The fermenters. The record for sample one-forty-three. Corven." Lyra looked back at my sketches before I could react in any way. "Jesus, Vey. What you're selling isn't normal Pulses."

"Corven?" I managed to choke out.

"Yeah, the man with the round glasses. His name is Corven, but even with the Pulses you're taking, you're probably too young to know him. Do you even know how any of this actually works?"

"You see stuff and you feel younger. How else is it supposed to work?"

"They're not just 'stuff.' They're memory traces." She spoke sharply, hitting every word hard. Like she was quizzing me on something I should have known ages ago. "Regular Pulses contain fragments of memories from millions of Loop users. And what happens when you mix that many memories together?"

"I get a headache?" I shot back, irritated. I wasn't used to being lectured. Especially not in a tone people used on small children.

"No," she snapped, "they don't make sense. It's just a handful of images the Pulse dumps into your brain. That's why they're jumbled. But this..." She looked back at the wall. "This is a story, Vey. It's not random. Your Pulses were made by one person. One poet. Where did you get them?"

"I can't tell you that," I said, the automatic learned phrase coming out on its own, my anger building with every question. But another voice spoke up in my head. Quiet at first, but I found myself listening to it: She knows more, and she could help you. This is an opportunity.

"You have to tell me!" Lyra shouted, standing back up. "Pulses like these don't get sold in clubs."

I got scared. Things were starting to spiral out of control, and I didn't understand why this had hit her so hard. But then she seemed to notice her own inexplicable surge of emotion too, and sat back down. As if she'd just realized her name meant nothing down here.

"These sketches," she turned her head back to my wall, "this isn't just decoration. You're looking for answers. I can tell."

That was clever. And it was true. Someone had given me a box with enough Pulses to live off for centuries, and I had no idea who or why. The only clue to any of it was the visions, the box, and a short note some Mr. Somebody had scrawled on a scrap of paper and stuck to the inside of the lid. Could Lyra help me? Definitely. I already knew more because of her than I had before she showed up. She knew the right people, had access to information. Maybe she could even recognize the handwriting on the note in the box. Just thinking about it, I could feel my blood boiling.

But tell her the whole truth? If she found out how many Pulses I actually had, I'd never be safe again. Everyone believed I was small fry, someone who bought and sold a little here and there. How else, with a face that still looked like a teenager's?

That box was the secret of my entire life. Without it, I'd be licking snail trails off the floor like the poor souls down by the stage. It gave me independence, and in exchange it asked for nothing but perfect anonymity. But I had so many questions, and after all these decades, I'd finally run into someone who might have answers.

This whole time I'd been trying to protect myself, but I realized that everything I'd had until now, everything I'd taken for granted, was no longer enough. I looked around my apartment, a place I'd never actually felt at home in. Was it worth it? And so I decided:

"Fine, I'll show you the box," I said, and with those words I gave up my independence, the only love I'd had so far, and the one certainty of my life.

Lyra took a breath, as if about to say something, but in the end just nodded.

I led her into the other room and, out of a habit almost as old as I was, locked the door behind us. I dragged the nightstand aside, pried up the false floorboard, and pulled the box out of the floor. When I opened the lid, the room flooded with purple light. Thousands of Pulses lit up like tiny stars.

"That's not possible," Lyra breathed.

She knelt beside the box and lifted one of the Pulses up to the light. She wasn't looking at me anymore. Every question that had belonged to me a moment ago now belonged to the thing she held between her fingers.

I stayed standing behind her. Suddenly she felt farther away than she had before, back when a locked door had stood between us.

For a moment I'd forgotten why she'd actually come to find me.

Not because of me.

Because of the Pulses.

Just like everyone else.

Chapter 4: The Glass (Nox)



HOW THIS CHAPTER WAS SHAPED

Patron brief - YarnSpirit

- **Píseň / soundtrack**

  Pavel Čadek - Nikdy nevíš (oficiální video)

- **Emoce po kapitole**

  Mám mnohem jasnější představu o tom, jak funguje svět Smyčky.

- **Situace v kapitole**

  Někdo změní názor během jediného rozhovoru.

- **Drobný moment**

  Fyzický dotek.

- **Co kapitola odhalí**

  Něco z minulosti.

- **Věta, dialog nebo myšlenka**

  vrátit se k myšlence, že žena neodchází pokud si u tebe nechá zubní kartáček

- **Na co dát pozor**

  aby děj neztratil přehlednost

- **Co se nesmí stát**

  neměl by nikdo umřít

HOW THIS CHAPTER WAS SHAPED

Readers' voice

"Your last fragment went up more than 20 hours ago. Your audience is waiting. Hold their attention and post something new!"

The Loop reached out for the first time at nine in the morning. The second time, shortly after lunch. This was its third attempt to get me to cooperate. Evening was closing in, and my head was full of all kinds of things. None of them, though, led to a fragment I could actually finish.

The fourth glass was supposed to be the solution. I'd hoped it would steer me toward better thoughts than the last one had. But it seemed like all of them had conspired against me. Along with the release, the guilt, and the bitterness, my mind kept washing up the same image, over and over. Lyra.

I saw her the way the Loop saw her. Blue eyes, golden hair, red lips. Three colors that could always be assembled into the perfect fragment. I could have let myself get swept up in that wave of pathos and sent those few seconds of memory off into the Loop.

Instead, I stared at the champagne glass.

She'd set it down here yesterday, right before she left, a lipstick print still smudged on the rim. For a moment I considered drinking from it. But I was Nox. I was certainly no desperate wreck getting drunk off the glass of the woman who'd left him. So I just left it there and drank from my own instead.

A soft beep announced someone at the door, and I immediately pictured the fragment I'd send out in a few minutes. I could see it clearly in front of my eyes. I open the door, and there's Lyra standing outside it. Blue eyes, golden hair, red lips. Zoom in on a bottle of champagne in her hand. A gift, a peace offering. I let her in, of

course, act like nothing ever happened. Generosity itself. Then a quick cut, a selfie in the hot tub with the city sprawled beneath us. On the lit billboard behind it all, a simple line:

NO ONE LEAVES NOX.

Already thinking about how to end this little fragment miniseries, I walked slowly to the door and opened it.

The bottle was there. Lyra wasn't.

"Nox!" Corven spread his arms wide, as if surprised to find me in my own apartment. "You look exactly like the numbers suggested you would."

With a sigh, I watched him invite himself in and toss his coat clear across the apartment onto the couch. Bad news, good wine. That was pretty much the whole formula for how this man operated.

"This is a good vintage," Corven said, peeling the foil off the neck of the bottle. "Made the nice old-fashioned way, not that synthetic garbage."

He aimed the bottle out into the room and paused for a moment, thinking.

"You got anything expensive here?"

"Everything."

"Excellent."

The neck of the bottle spun around the room, the cork popped loose, hit the ceiling, and vanished somewhere behind the bar. I checked on the paintings of scantily-clad women on the wall, and before I could say a word, Corven had already filled Lyra's glass.

"Always a pleasure to see you," I lied, "but doesn't the great Corven have anything better to do of an evening than make the rounds of poets with a bottle in hand?"

"Oh come on, Nox, relax a little," Corven said theatrically, pouring champagne into my whiskey glass as well. Still exactly the same as ever. The Loop didn't seem to have changed him one bit. I remembered the days we used to sit around in his old house, dreaming about the day we'd be famous. We'd both managed it, just each in our own way. I made fragments, and he... he simply made sure nobody stood in our way. Corven talked, and people listened. He wasn't a poet, wasn't a politician, wasn't a leader. He was just Corven.

"To your wife," Corven raised his glass, then added, "and to whoever comes after her."

With that he pressed the glass to his lips and wiped away her last trace from my life. I didn't stop him. Honestly, I was glad someone else had done it for me.

I raised my glass with him. Not because I agreed with what he'd said. I was just starting to sense this would be a long evening, and I had no intention of turning down wine from an actual vineyard.

Corven finished his glass, handed me the empty one, and headed off down the hallway without any explanation.

"Second door on the left," I called after him, refilling the glass in the meantime.

"I know," he called back, already opening the closet. When he returned, he took the refilled glass from me, stopped by the window, and gazed out at the city.

"I'd kill for this view," Corven mused, even though he could have bought the whole building outright.

"It'll do," I nodded, feigning modesty. Transparent flattery was still flattery.

"Shame I don't see your face in today's top ten on the Loop's front page."

Ouch. That one stung. So that's why you're here, you bastard. You want to make sure with your own eyes that I'll keep creating. That this little episode with Lyra hasn't changed me enough to walk away like Edrin did. You still need me. After all these years. Just like before. The thought tickled my ego in exactly the right spot. The great Corven himself, descending to the top floor of this skyscraper, just to check that I was all right. I walked over slowly to join him and the view of the city.

"Don't worry, Corvy," I addressed him the way I used to when we were younger, and he flinched slightly at the nickname.

"I've got tons of ideas. Maybe a series, Nox Before Nox. Archive footage, my first apartment, my first girlfriend..."

"Sure," Corven cut me off, "young Nox was popular, but..."

"I'm still young."

"Your audience isn't. They're aging, Nox, and the young ones aren't replacing them. Look for yourself."

Then he set his glass down on the floor and pulled his phone from his pocket. He found the graphs way too fast for it to be a coincidence. From the moment I'd let him in, this whole evening must have been building toward exactly this moment.

A thin red line tracking my career appeared on the screen. Like a thread of my life, weaving through the years. Rising and falling. Corven talked about how a young brain held attention far longer, and how old viewers were dying off. About how I needed to diversify my audience base, or I could go under fast. I only half-listened, though. To me it was just marketing nonsense.

I watched the line. Every peak looked like a knot, and I tried to remember the specific fragment, the specific event behind it. Yearly summer vacations on beaches. Yacht parties. Movie and game reviews. Investigative pieces. Investment advice. I'd churned through so many formats in my life that even I was a little surprised looking back at it now.

But then the line of my success began to fade and drop. It wasn't a sharp decline. The whole thing had kicked off with one big fall, and I still remembered that date even now. Edrin's departure. I never made it back to the top after that. We'd been working on the Before the Loop series back then, essentially documenting how it had all begun. Snails, incubation tanks, fermenters, attention. The people who'd been tangled up in all of it. And above all, the story of the first poet. The person whose voice had woken the Loop, and who hadn't

even left a name behind. Over the years he'd become a legend. Every version of the story started with him, but none of them ever gave him an ending.

"...won't renew your contract unless you reach new people, Nox. It's that simple."

That sentence perfectly severed the thread of my thoughts and sent blood surging into my head. My contract with the Loop had, until now, been something I'd taken completely for granted. A piece of paper I just signed every year. I glanced at the date glowing on top of one of the buildings in the city below us, and my stomach clenched.

"But that's next month, Corven! You're just going to let me die off after all these years?"

"Oh, not at all," Corven laughed, throwing an arm around my shoulders, "dying doesn't get much viewership. You usually can't build a series out of it, and broadcasting your own death is tricky at best."

Then his smile vanished for a moment.

"Don't mistake my visit for a guarantee, Nox. If you don't get those numbers up, the contract's over. The Loop hasn't been a bunch of friends for a long time now."

"But without the contract, I'm out of Pulses." I shook his arm off and looked him in the eye. For the first time all evening.

"Right," Corven nodded to himself and started patting down his pockets, as if searching for a used tissue. "I've also got two pieces of good news... the first one is... damn, where did I put them... ah... here they are..."

He opened his palm, and his fingers glowed with a faint light.

"Pulses. Two for you, two for her, but if I were you, I'd keep all four and cut the girl loose. Might come in handy, in case our plan happens to... well... not pan out?"

"Our plan?" I didn't understand, but I quickly took another month of my life from his palm anyway. For a moment it occurred to me that Lyra's share might come in handy for me too. I shoved the thought away immediately. I was a bastard, sure, but I wasn't a killer.

Corven picked his glass up off the floor and settled onto the couch.

"Come on, sit down for this one. I did tell you I wasn't going to just let you die off, didn't I?"

I sat down beside him and set the Pulses on the table in front of me. Drinking was the last thing on my mind now.

"So this plan..." Corven grinned at me.

"What is it?"

"Bad, for now," Corven admitted, digging through his pockets again and shifting around on the couch. "Good plans... only come together once someone's desperate enough to say yes to them."

A black card appeared between his fingers, silver text and a barcode printed across it.

"No," I blurted the moment I saw it, "Nox works alone."

"Like Batman, I know," Corven nodded, "but Batman had plenty of time. Yours is sitting on the table in front of you right now. And I can't get you any more of it than that."

Four capsules, each pulsing flash counting down the seconds of my apparent immortality, and I was starting to suspect I wasn't going to come up with anything better on my own. I took the invitation from his hand and confirmed it was exactly what I thought it was:

Gala of the New Generation

An evening of faces, voices, and stories that will shape the Loop's next chapter.

9/21 — 8:00 PM, Loop Headquarters

"Tomorrow?" I turned to Corven, but he answered as if he wasn't even listening to me anymore. He was watching the bubbles rise in my wife's glass.

"Open bar, Nox. Wines just like this one. Plenty of food. Young poets. And young women too."

"And old Nox."

"That's exactly what I'm talking about, Nox," Corven laughed again, "you need someone to complete you. Like Edrin used to. Like Lyra."

For the first time all evening, he'd used her name. And in the same breath, he'd set her right next to Edrin, as if she weren't my wife anymore, just another missing piece of Nox. Just another person I supposedly wasn't whole without.

I set the invitation back down on the table.

"First of all," I began, more forcefully than I'd meant to, "Lyra's coming back, and second..."

"There's only one toothbrush in the cup," Corven chuckled, "but sorry, didn't mean to interrupt."

"And second," I clenched my fists, "I don't need some kid to save my career."

"Well, you're right about that much," Corven agreed, standing up over me the same way Lyra had the day before. "You don't need him. You need his audience."

He grabbed his coat and slung it over his shoulder.

"Good talking to you, Nox." Corven glanced once more at the lit billboard beyond the window. "I hope I see you there tomorrow. You never know what might happen."

I waited for another argument. Instead, Corven finished his drink, set the glass on the table, and headed for the door. He didn't look back once. As if my attendance wasn't even a question, just a line item on his agenda.

He left me in the room with the rest of the bottle, four Pulses, an invitation, and a question I couldn't say no to.

I ran a finger along the rim of Lyra's glass, topped it off, and watched the bubbles for a while as they made their carefree climb to the top, popping with a tiny burst and vanishing forever.

I pulled my phone from my pocket and tried calling her again. I needed her advice. If she came back, I was sure we'd figure something out together. She was younger than me. She'd know what to do to get the numbers climbing again. The ringing stopped without anyone answering on the other end. Annoyed, I tossed the phone onto the empty side of the couch and took a drink of wine.

I picked the Notebook up off the table, held it to my eyes, and focused on the evening's events.

Anyone could send a piece of their life into the Loop. Most people did. Hours of real memories, not worth even a few seconds of someone else's attention.

That didn't make them poets, though.

A poet knew where a memory needed to start, where it had to end, and what to cut from it so people would watch all the way through, and come back tomorrow for more.

Corven in the doorway, bottle in hand. His cheerful party smile. The two of us in a friendly embrace. Laughing in front of the Loop's glowing billboard. Handing over the invitation, glasses clinking together.

I left out the graphs, the contract, the fear of death. They didn't fit the rhythm. And they didn't fit me either.

A shot of the whiskey glass filled with champagne, because that was exactly the kind of thing Nox did.

"Young poets. Young women." A burst of laughter and my enthusiastic agreement. Of course I'd love to come.

"The story continues tomorrow night. Like and subscribe. Thanks. — Nox.

Chapter 5: The Street (Vey)



HOW THIS CHAPTER WAS SHAPED

Patron brief - Annabel

- **Píseň / soundtrack**

  Jack Black: Peaches

- **Hlavní úkol kapitoly**

  Posunout záhadu kolem původu Pulzů., Přimět postavu udělat něco, co by od sebe nečekala.

- **Situace v kapitole**

  Někdo odejde uprostřed rozhovoru.

- **Rozpor v kapitole**

  Pokusí se někoho ochránit, ale připraví ho tím o možnost rozhodnout se.

- **Rytmus kapitoly**

  Vybuduje napětí, nechá ho zdánlivě odeznít a udeří až potom.

- **Co je na Smyčce nejznepokojivější**

  Smyčka odmění člověka právě za to, za co by se měl stydět.

- **Symbol nebo obraz**

  Zařízení, které dál bezchybně pracuje, přestože kolem něj zavládl chaos.

HOW THIS CHAPTER WAS SHAPED

Readers' voice

Lyra pulled a Pulse out of the box and examined it between her fingers. For far too long.

I stayed quiet along with her, watching her every move. Would she grab the box and try to run? Take a handful of Pulses and leave me the rest? Or maybe tell me more about them?

I expected her to ask how many there were. That's what I would have done. Sometimes I'd wanted to count them myself. Mostly on nights I couldn't sleep. But that urge always faded somewhere around the first thousand.

Lyra finally took a breath, and I held mine.

"When did you get them? And who gave them to you?"

She tore her gaze away from the note dedicated on the underside of the box's lid and looked at me.

That question dragged me back years. For a moment I was standing outside the orphanage again. Five years old, cheeks sticky with tears, snot at my nose. I remembered my mother's curly hair, her dark eyes behind her glasses frames, her back. Walking away from me. Blue jeans and a leather jacket. Left foot, then right, in steady rhythm, giving my sobs a fixed beat to follow.

Then just the first night in a strange bed among other strange children, like me. My quiet crying against the loud screaming of the other kids. I spent another ten years in that orphanage. Long enough to start hating it even more than I hated my mother.

"Vey?"

Lyra's voice pulled me back into the room. From the way she was looking at me, I could tell my face had given away more than I wanted it to.

"Why should I tell you who gave them to me?" I asked, trying to steady my shaking voice.

"Because you don't even know yourself where they came from."

"I didn't say that, and besides, it's not true," I lied.

"You didn't need to say it." She nodded toward the open box and the note on the lid. "If you knew, you wouldn't have brought me here."

She was right, of course. She'd seen the same vision after her Pulse that I had, but unlike me, she hadn't had to guess at names for things. She knew their real names. And I wanted to know them too.

"Why do you want to help me?"

"Maybe you'll give me a discount." Lyra smiled and tossed the Pulse back into the box. It landed on the pile with a soft clink.

I didn't believe a word of it. In my world, there was no such thing as "maybe," and I doubted hers worked any differently. Help was just a transaction, priced in a currency people usually only discovered once it was too late.

She didn't want a cheaper Pulse. She wanted information, and she had to have her own reasons for it. Reasons that were none of my business, but that could still be traded on.

And trading was something I was good at.

"You tell me what you know about the vision, and I'll tell you when I got the Pulses," I answered, with much more confidence now.

"Just when?"

"For now."

Lyra pressed her lips together. "And why should I trust you'll tell me the rest afterward?"

"You shouldn't."

This time it wasn't a lie. I didn't even know myself who'd sent me the Pulses, though I had no intention of mentioning that.

"Same as I don't know you won't come back here with someone else and I'll have to run," I continued, and the thought sent a sharp pang through my chest. "So each of us only gets enough that betraying the other one isn't worth it."

Lyra smiled slowly.

It wasn't trust. I didn't need that. It was enough that betraying me would cost her just as much as betraying her would cost me.

"So when?" she asked.

"I was fifteen," I began, my eyes drifting somewhere past her, "thirty years ago. That's when they released me from the orphanage. It was a Friday afternoon. My lucky day."

"And I'm supposed to believe they just hand out hundreds of years of life as a parting gift there?"

I stopped short. She'd only wanted to know when, not how. But I'd been suppressing this story inside me for decades. With every word, some piece of that childhood grievance drained out of me, and I felt lighter than before. Screw it.

"A courier delivered them. Waiting for me right outside the exit."

"June eighth," Lyra read the date off the note on the box. "Is that the storage date?"

"Yeah." I nodded. "Someone sent it the same afternoon my mother abandoned me. That box had been waiting for me for ten whole years."

Lyra quickly pulled her phone from her purse, and it was only once she opened the Loop that I noticed her hands were shaking. I watched the screen over her shoulder. She scrolled through Nox's old fragments until she stopped on one of them.

The Loop's First Poet. What did he leave behind?

She started the video. For a moment she just searched for the right moment, and fragments of Nox's words drifted confusedly through the room. It seemed like she was doing this more for herself than for me. Finally she found the section she was looking for:

On June eighth, 2040, the last results of the resonant snail experiments were logged. A day later, the project had no members left. It was officially dissolved. All that remained were meeting notes and fragments belonging to a man who, according to Corven, never existed. The Loop's first poet.

"The first poet?" I whispered, surprised. My Pulses had always been a mystery to me, but it had never once occurred to me that they might connect to the Loop itself. I mean, sure, they came from it, but my theories about how they'd ended up with me had leaned more toward dealer parents, a rich uncle, or maybe an affair with consequences. Definitely not Loop engineers spending their afternoons in meetings.

"Nox went looking for him," Lyra answered, pausing the fragment. "But he never found out who he was, or where he disappeared to. Same as everyone else from the project — the one that, within a few months, turned into the Loop and let people live forever."

Just a select few people, like you, I wanted to correct her, but I swallowed that bitterness the same way I used to swallow my tears back at the orphanage.

"Why didn't he just ask Corven?"

Lyra set the phone down on the floor and crossed her legs.

"He did ask him. But Corven claimed he only joined the Loop after those experiments had already ended. Nox eventually gave up the search, because the trail just went cold. After all those years Nox spent practically obsessed with it, you're the first lead that actually goes somewhere."

"Me?" I didn't understand.

Right then, her phone rang, cutting our conversation short. I glanced quickly at the screen and saw the name. Nox. Lyra swiped to reject the call and gripped the phone tightly in her palm.

"I need to talk to him," she said, standing up. "But not now, and not here."

"Wait, hold on," I called after her, grabbing her wrist firmly. "You have to tell me more. And you can't tell anyone about the box. Anyone!"

She turned around, and the look on her face was more determined than before. She tried to hide it, but I could tell that whatever the reason she'd left Nox, she still wasn't indifferent to him.

"Don't worry, I'll come back," she said, slipping out of my grip. "I'll come see you tomorrow, and I'll know more, I promise."

Then she checked her phone again and shoved it into her purse. Her head had to be spinning from all this new information, just like mine was. I believed she'd come back, because there had been more than one vision, and she'd only seen a fraction of it. She'd be curious. And she'd pay. If not, the bouncers would deal with her. And if there was trouble, I'd have to disappear. It wouldn't be the first time.

The door clicked shut, and I was alone in the room. That feeling of emptiness was suddenly worse than it had ever been before.

My thoughts raced wildly. How was my mother connected to the Loop? Had she even known about the Pulses? Had she really sent them? I tried to recall every detail of that day again, but it had been so long ago...

Then I replayed the whole conversation with Lyra in my head. From her arrival, through the visions, through the moment I'd opened the box in front of her, all the way to the end of our brief meeting.

The mix of adrenaline and happy hormones slowly faded, and my feet started landing back on solid ground. Suddenly this whole thing started feeling like a really stupid idea. I'd learned something more about myself, but at what cost? Until today, I'd lived right at the edge, a line I'd never once crossed. I'd been reasonably safe in the bar with the Pulses hidden under the floor. No one else knew about them. But now everything was different. Lyra knew about them, and from the sound of it, she was about to tell Nox. One of her last sentences echoed in my head again:

"I need to talk to him, but not now, and not here."

Why? Why couldn't she talk to him in front of me? What was she hiding? Would she just call the cops, and I'd have to run?

I needed to find out more. Before it was too late. So I quickly hid the box back under the floor, pulled my hood over my head, and ran out after her. My shoes clicked down the narrow hallway leading from my apartment to the bar.

"What's going on?" the bartender shouted after me, but I left him behind without a glance. I pushed past the guests with their heads buried in their phone screens and shoved open the door leading out to the street. The fresh wind carried a salty scent of the sea, and streetlamps lit the road in soft white light. I felt sick to my stomach. I hated the street.

I looked around, trying to spot Lyra's brown coat. She couldn't have gotten far. Next to the club glowed the sign of a pawn shop, ONE MORE WEEK. In its window, tucked among phones and wedding rings, sat a single child's shoe. I jumped up onto the windowsill of the display. I needed a better view, and Lyra was getting farther away with every second.

My eyes darted over the people below me. Heads buried in phones I ignored first. Lyra had no reason to watch the Loop while walking — she hadn't haggled with me over the price of the Pulse, so she clearly had plenty of money, and relying on the Loop's lottery couldn't possibly make sense for her.

She couldn't have driven her own car here; it would have been far too conspicuous. The vast majority of the population didn't even know how to drive. Watching the Loop while driving required attention the Loop itself siphoned away. Instead of cars, people watching the Loop moved along in lanes. Like two flocks of sheep, screens where their shepherd's crook should have been. That shuffling gait always terrified me. The street's absolute silence, broken only by the clatter of hundreds of shoes. No scents, no smells. Just that sea wind.

Lyra had to live nearby. Otherwise she'd never have found her way to me. I was small fry — I didn't need to get rich off Pulses. I just wanted to survive as long as possible. Pay rent, get some food, but definitely not an apartment in one of the skyscrapers around here.

Where would the wife of one of the richest men in the city live? And where would she go, if she'd kicked him out? To a friend's place?

Then it hit me, and my eyes landed on the tip of the Aureola. The skyscraper whose slender lines were crossed by neon light pulsing from its base all the way up through every floor, converging at last at the tip of its antenna high in the clouds.

I broke into a run and merged into one of the lanes, weaving between the watchers and their fragments.

"Hey!" one of them shouted at me after I elbowed him in the ribs. He staggered and crumpled to the ground.

"Sorry," I yelled back at him. He'd been wearing a grease-stained white tank top. A cook or a laborer, I figured. Though his body looked a little too sculpted for a cook. I couldn't afford to waste more time on him and took off running again.

The screens lining the street displayed the latest trend. I passed them as fast as I could, but even so, I caught myself watching. A bearded man dressed in a bright green tuxedo, wearing a helmet with a red plume. Playing piano and singing something about peaches. It was bizarre. It was the Loop. And somehow it worked, or it never would have become a trend.

The raised entrance to the Aureola was already in sight. I glanced left and caught the lit lobby with its massive seating. A brown coat flickered past the lobby's glass windows.

Lyra.

I was about to break from the crowd and follow her when the Loop's chime sounded. Two deep, soft tones. They vibrated through the space around me, and through my chest as well.

The gazes around me lifted from phones to the screens. The world seemed to freeze for a moment, people started whispering to each other, and for an instant everything almost looked the way it must have, before the Loop.

The chime's last tone faded, and a woman's voice rang out from the screens.

"Our newest winner is Verina Fair. Congratulations, Verina. We're calling you right now. Please accept the call and share your joy at winning Pulses with us."

A long tone announced the ringing. Nothing happened for a moment, but then a melody rang out through the quiet street. Just a few steps away from me.

God.

Not now. Not here.

I checked the Aureola's lobby to my left. Lyra had walked past the main entrance, heading away from the skyscraper. The lottery result meant nothing to her.

People started clustering around the winner, raising their phones over their heads. Everyone wanted her in their own fragment. They believed it would help them win a Pulse too. I didn't believe that, though maybe that was only because I didn't need to win.

I tried to push my way out of the crowd, but the anonymous bodies around me pressed inward, toward the ringtone. They squeezed me, stepped on my feet, dug elbows into my ribs. I had no choice but to move with them.

The ringing stopped, and a blonde woman appeared on the screens around us, her face lit by the glow of her phone screen. The people behind her clapped and filmed her with the same fervor as if Nox himself were standing there.

"Excellent," the host's voice said from the screens. "Tell us a bit about yourself, Verina. What do you do?"

The woman smiled with the nervous laugh of someone hoping the people around her would be reasonable. She glanced behind herself, then back at her phone's camera.

"I'm a teacher," she whispered, and the people around her started clapping.

"But that's wonderful," the voice from the screens said, in a much higher tone than before. "Raising the next generation is one of the most important jobs there is. Please stay where you are."

Police sirens started sounding in the distance. It would be over soon, and then I'd run.

"Two thousand!" a shout rang out from the crowd. "I'll give you two thousand for that Pulse!"

I watched on one of the screens as Verina turned toward the voice. Someone in the crowd shoved her, and she flinched, crouching down. Fear mixed with helplessness spread across her face.

"What will you do with your extra time, Verina?" the friendly voice from the screens asked, then immediately added: "We ask everyone celebrating to please let the police vehicles through."

The sound of sirens grew louder, and I felt like the crowd around me had gotten so dense that I wouldn't be able to draw another breath after this one. Then, suddenly, the pressure eased. The sweaty man next to me collapsed to the ground, and within a second someone else filled his spot.

Something gripped my ankle.

I looked down and my heart clenched with horror. The sweaty man was lying beneath me. Bubbles of spit at his mouth, a pool of dark blood beneath his throat.

The grip loosened.

The man beside me was standing on his back, raising an arm, a blade flashing in his hand. He didn't wait. With a second strike he hit a woman with greasy black hair in the throat, and she collapsed onto the sweaty man. He stepped over her, and I watched his back.

Panic seized me, and I couldn't manage to breathe, let alone scream. Standing half a meter to the side, it could have been me lying in that pool of blood on the pavement. That closeness to death completely wrecked me.

I tried to force the old man beside me to move, to squeeze through the bodies in the crowd, but I was too weak to shove against dozens of bodies pressing in around me.

"Please," a voice whispered beneath my feet.

It belonged to the woman with the greasy hair. All it would take was kneeling beside her and pressing a palm to the wound.

A police unit stopped their cars just a few dozen meters away and began clearing a path from my right side. I looked in that direction and, holding my breath, watched more bodies fall and the attacker move toward the woman.

"Once again, we wish our winner today a wonderful rest of her day. Don't forget to celebrate properly," the host recommended, and the call ended.

“He’s got a knife!” a man shouted a few steps away from me.

The crowd reacted instantly, starting to part. Police officers moved toward me, clearing a path.

“I need that Pulse more than she does!” the man with the knife shouted, pushing forward.

“You can look forward to the Loop’s next lottery drawing next week. And now, back to today’s trends,” the voice from the screens announced flatly.

“Help,” the woman with the greasy hair whispered again. I bent my knee, about to help her. My eyes met hers. Desperate. The kind that would keep me from sleeping tonight. I lifted my head back toward the Aureola. Lyra was just vanishing around its corner.

I wanted to throw up. At myself. At what I was about to do. My eyes went damp. I had never let anyone die before. But my heart already knew that was exactly what I was about to do.

“I’m sorry,” I whispered, wiped my nose on my sleeve, took a breath, and screamed at the top of my lungs:

“He ran into the Aureola!”

“What did he look like?” one of the officers shouted at me, shoving his way past.

“White tank top, dark hair. Muscular.”

He was the first person my mind had conjured up in that moment. And right after, I wished it hadn’t been him. He’d seemed like a nice guy.

The officers pushed on toward the Aureola, and people cleared out of their way. I didn't wait around, and ran after them. A few heartbeats later I was standing at the corner of the neon skyscraper, carefully peering around it.

A narrow back alley, lined with AC units, dumpsters, and vents. At its entrance, Lyra stood leaning against the wall, right leg bent at the knee. Her phone was at her ear, and she was listening.

"Yes, the same date," she said into the phone. "And Corven was there."

She paused.

"No. First tell me who knew about the child back then."

Then she said nothing more. After a moment she slid the phone back into her purse, and I pulled my head back sharply behind the corner, hurrying toward the road to blend back into the crowd.

"I'm innocent!" a shout rang out from the street. It was the man in the white tank top. Hands behind his back, two officers flanking him. Paramedics were crouched over five bodies in the middle of the road. The woman with the greasy hair? Dead. Same as all the other bodies. The crowd once again dutifully flowed around them.

Verina was climbing into a black car with a flashing light on top. Far happier than she'd been a moment ago. Off to collect her prize.

I turned discreetly back toward the Aureola and spotted Lyra through the lobby's glass. Heading for the elevator.

On the screen above the Aureola, the evening's new trend lit up.

"Oh, shit," I breathed, pulling my hood down as low as it would go over my forehead.

My face stretched across four floors of the Aureola.

"White tank top, dark hair. Muscular," my enlarged mouth repeated.

Then came footage of officers wrestling the man in the white tank top to the ground.

ALERT WOMAN HELPS CATCH ATTACKER!

In the background of the shot, I caught a glimpse of the real attacker's back. Still holding the knife. He watched the innocent man's arrest for a few moments, then vanished from frame.

I knew it would only be a matter of time before someone else noticed him, and the alert woman turned into a liar.

Hood pulled low over my forehead, I made my way back to the bar. Only a few buildings now separated me from the Aureola. Close enough that I could still hear the police sirens.

I sat down on my bed and tried to think about what to do next.

I should run. Pack up the Pulses and vanish before anyone recognized my face. That's exactly what I'd done every time people started asking too many questions.

Except this time, for the first time, someone had actually offered me answers.

Lyra knew Corven, my visions meant something more to them than just dreams, and she'd just been asking Nox who could have known about me thirty years ago. Christ. She knew more about me than I knew about myself. And had she even really been calling Nox? Not a single name had come up in that conversation.

Whatever the truth of it was, I decided to stay.

Not because I trusted Lyra.

But because I couldn't run away again from the one lead that had finally found me on its own.

Chapter 6: Fermentors (Nox)



HOW THIS CHAPTER WAS SHAPED

Readers' voice

I looked around the hall, full of smooth faces, supple bodies, and even more supple principles.

By the standards of the Loop's headquarters, the ground floor didn't seem particularly extravagant. A glass staircase climbed to the next level, where producers leaned against the railing, looking down on us the way auction visitors eye the next painting up for sale. Bars stocked with food and drink waited along the sides, with a few alcoves tucked between them where you could disappear for a moment. The sight of them made me smile.

At the center of it all, on a circular floor of black glass, the perfect curves of new poets swayed, wrapped in colorful suits, alongside poetesses wrapped mostly in their own self-confidence. The music had no memorable melody. It was just a mixture of deep tones vibrating in the chest at a steady rhythm, further emphasized by fast sweeps of laser beams cutting across the hall.

Old age hit me harder than it ever had before. My body was indistinguishable from everyone else's around me — over these decades it had aged barely a few months. But in there, in the place where the anonymous shell became Nox, I felt old.

"Let's move along, Nox."

Corven wrapped an arm around my shoulders. His breath carried the scent of expensive alcohol, because he'd never touch anything cheap. With a snap of his fingers he summoned a girl carrying a tray of brightly colored drinks that were already giving me a headache just looking at them.

"Yes, Mr. Corven?" she approached with a stride that immediately reminded me of Lyra.

“Nox will have a Viral, Jessica,” Corven decided.

“You don’t have a whiskey?” I tried.

“Oh, nonsense,” Corven turned to me. “A Viral, Nox. Look around. People are watching you. You have to stay trendy.”

The slender stem of a glass filled with a pale blue drink ended up between my fingers.

“And bring some canapés too. What were they called again? Avocado toilettes?”

“Avant-garde tartlets, Mr. Corven,” Jessica nodded, and with the tray in her hands and my eyes on her swaying hips, she vanished off toward the nearest bar.

“So this is what the people I’m supposed to create with drink?” I asked Corven, taking a sip of the Viral. It tasted like a blended smurf.

“This is what people with young audiences drink.”

“That’s not what I asked.”

Corven’s grip around my shoulders loosened, and with a wave of his palm he steered me toward the dance floor.

“Come on, there’s someone here who might interest you.”

A single glance at the uniform crowd swaying on the floor exposed Corven’s lie. After a few steps, not just the music grew louder, but also the mixture of perfumes and dancing bodies.

"Over there," Corven shouted into my ear, his eyes flicking toward a cluster of poets a short distance ahead of us. Corven waved at them, and one broke off to walk toward us. The darkness of the dance floor seemed to part for him, and I realized this one was different from the rest.

Raven hair, deliberately messy, white teeth gleaming in the laser light, piercings at the corners of his mouth. A thin tattooed line ran from beneath one eye across the bridge of his nose to under the other. An oversized shirt, oversized pants. He was handsome in a way his entire team must have signed off on.

"He goes by Phoenix," Corven shouted over the music again.

"Avant-garde tartlets, Mr. Corven," Jessica tapped Corven's shoulder.

"What?" Corven shouted back at her, confused.

I watched Phoenix's easy stride, and for a moment I pictured him burning, only to rise from the ashes right beside me a moment later. Reborn through a collaboration with me. The opening fragment of whatever our partnership would turn out to be.

"Tartlets, Mr. Corven," Jessica's shrill voice cut in.

Nox and Phoenix. Something like that could work. I could teach him everything I knew.

"Here's my favorite!" Corven shouted at Phoenix, mouth full of canapé, and swallowed. "One of the most-watched creators of his generation."

Corven gestured toward the nearest bar, and Phoenix and I, with Jessica trailing behind, followed him.

"How do you picture this collaboration of ours?" I skipped the introductions.

Phoenix ran a long look over me as we walked toward the bar counter, from my dark hair down to the tips of my leather shoes.

"Corven filled me in on your situation, Nox," Phoenix began, far more carefully than I would have expected from him. "I think this could be the best comeback story out there."

"I never went anywhere."

I set the narrow glass with the blue drink down on the counter and waved at the bartender, while the gurgling at the end of Corven's straw announced it was time for another round.

"And that's exactly the problem," Phoenix continued. "You're still here. Exactly the way I remember you, from when I was still a kid."

Ouch.

"Phoenix does the From the Ashes series," Corven cut in, "helps poets climb back to the top. And he's damn good at it."

"Exactly." Phoenix ran a thumb over one of his piercings. "We'd start by removing everything that still reminds people of the old Nox."

Youth was more appealing when it kept its mouth shut.

It dawned on me that this would end up being Phoenix and Nox, not the other way around. I was supposed to be the one who burns and rises again. But in his version of the story, I wouldn't stay the main character for long. My comeback would turn into his success story, and a chunk of my viewers would become his audience.

"I'll have a whiskey, and take this crap away," I tapped a finger against the tip of the blue glass. The bartender nodded.

"You should be drinking Virals, Nox, that way you can kick off the partnership with—"

"Screw Virals."

Phoenix watched the blue drink disappear behind the bar, then looked back at me. The black line under his eyes stretched along with his smile. He'd just gotten the best shot of the night.

"That's exactly what we need," he said.

"Excuse us for a moment, Phoenix," Corven muttered, and Phoenix wordlessly headed back to the dance floor.

"I'm trying to help you here, Nox."

A whiskey with an ice cube appeared in my hand.

"Like you helped Edrin?" I looked Corven in the eye, took a sip, and weighed the glass in my hand.

"Edrin?" Corven laughed. "The traitor Edrin? He left on his own. You know that perfectly well."

"Yeah. That's what he says." I finally voiced the suspicion that had been simmering inside me for years. "You forced him out. The same way you're slowly forcing me out now."

"Bullshit," Corven snapped. "Edrin stopped believing in what we're trying to do. He fell victim to conspiracy theories, and I would genuinely hate to see the same thing happen to you."

"You mean conspiracies about snails suffering just a few floors beneath us so the rest of us can live longer?"

I lifted the glass to my lips and crushed the ice cube between my teeth.

"The Loop never disproved any of that."

"For God's sake, Nox. If we had to go around disproving every conspiracy theory out there, we'd never do anything else."

"So show me."

Corven's expression shifted.

"The fermenters," I continued. "Show me that Edrin was wrong."

Silence settled between us for a moment. Corven didn't have to take the bait. But we both knew he couldn't refuse.

"I don't want to lose you the way I lost him," he said finally. "You want to see the fermenters? Fine. But the moment we get back up here, you find yourself a partner within the hour. Otherwise, you're done."

The snails' fate meant nothing to me. Mine, though, was entirely in Corven's hands.

I used to trust him. Now he spent so much time with politicians he might as well have become one himself. But I didn't have a choice. I didn't want to age slowly like Edrin. Unlike him, though, I'd be aging completely alone. No Lyra, no friends, just comments under my Fragments and a follower count slowly ticking down.

If Corven really let me down to the fermenters, at least I'd know whether Edrin had been wrong. About the Loop's practices, and about Corven's.

"Fine. Let's go."

"Excellent, Nox." Corven clapped me on the shoulder and headed for the elevator.

Jessica offered him another tartlet. He took two at once and waved her off, signaling she didn't need to follow us.

The doors slid open with a soft hiss, and I stepped inside alongside Corven. A slow xylophone melody drifted down from vents in the ceiling of the cabin above us, a strange contrast to the party outside. Corven pressed his card to the reader, and purple buttons on the cabin wall lit up. His finger moved toward the well-worn number minus twelve, in the Fermenters section, but I caught his wrist before it touched the button.

"Can we go down to thirteen?" I asked him. I wanted to pick the floor myself. I had no interest in fermenters made for tourists, and I suspected that's exactly what he intended to show me.

"Sure thing," Corven said cheerfully, and touched minus thirteen instead.

The doors closed, Corven bit into his first tartlet and readied the next one. The elevator shuddered and began its descent. I watched the descending numbers above the doors with more tension than I'd ever watched the numbers on my own Loop profile.

"Here we are. Minus thirteen, the fermenters," Corven said, swallowing the last bite.

The doors opened, and I was blinded by light so bright I spent a few seconds just blinking hard.

"We control their light cycle," Corven began. His tone and the pace of his voice had changed. Down here, he wasn't a politician. He was a founder. "The resonance the followers pick up best comes under full light. They only need a short rest phase. A few hours of darkness, without any drop in yield."

The last time I'd seen fermenters had been decades ago, back in the Loop's early days, on one of the tours. That was back when the Loop was still a startup with zero security measures. Back then they were tanks twice the size of a person, a single enormous resonant snail behind thick glass, electrodes attached to various parts of its damp body. A multi-million-dollar prototype that some worker had to visit every morning to scrape the slime off the shower-wall glass with a squeegee from the nearest drugstore, into a yellow bucket.

It was the complete opposite of what I was now staring at, mouth half open.

"They're small," I finally managed, as I took in the enormous space in front of me, divided into aisles by narrow racks of resonant snail fermenters, stacked three rows high.

"Right. That's the other thing. You get more slime out of adults, but they don't react as often as juveniles. They also take up way more space, so..."

"...so it pays off better for you to raise a larger number of juveniles instead of fewer adults," I finished for him.

"Exactly," Corven agreed. "Come take a closer look."

I walked from the elevator to one of the fermenters and peered into a half-meter-tall tank of pale blue liquid, in which a stream of bubbles rose every few dozen seconds. On the base, readouts flickered with vital signs and a graph of current yield.

"What happens to them once they grow up?"

"They don't grow," Corven replied, pressing his head against the fermenter's glass. "The same way you don't age. All it takes is mixing a little of their own medicine into the nutrient solution, and they stay young forever."

"They're locked in here their entire lives," I thought aloud.

"We're a corporation, Nox. Not an animal rights group. And these are snails. They're not intelligent. Though I'll admit," Corven chuckled, tapping the glass in front of the snail, "there are a few people on the board I'd honestly rather see replaced by snails."

"What's stopping me from making a fragment about all this?"

"Ha," Corven raised his eyebrows, "now that's the Nox I need. But I'll disappoint you. There's nothing here people out there don't already suspect. Look around. A farm of happy, healthy snails producing Pulses. That's basically how people already picture it, isn't it? You won't shock anyone with this. Not for long, anyway."

I looked around at the aisles of snails again. He was right. I didn't see any torture. Nothing like what Edrin used to talk about. Just thousands of snails sentenced to eternal youth and a life in a jar. I'd known worse fates.

"We should head back up while most of your potential partners are still at least somewhat sober," Corven ended the tour, pressed the elevator button again, and the doors opened to take us back up.

The party had moved into its second phase during our brief detour. Producers had come down among the poets, and contract negotiations had begun. As soon as the elevator doors opened, Corven sent Jessica off after one of the producers and headed off himself to find someplace quieter for his next conversation.

I made my way toward the dance floor, past a cluster of poetesses preening with tablets in hand. They were trying to charm the producers with samples of their work and offers that many of the producers clearly had to turn down with a heavy heart. The thought of taking part in any of it again made my skin crawl.

I moved through the negotiating poets, looking for Phoenix. Every option I had was bad. Each in its own way, but Phoenix was the easiest of the bad options. And working with him specifically would flatter Corven's ego on top of it.

"Nox?" a woman's voice sounded beside me.

"Yes?" I turned toward it and looked at her face.

She was the only person in the entire hall who wasn't perfectly smooth. Fine lines had settled around her eyes, and a streak of silver ran through the dark hair at her temple. Time had touched her in places I remembered differently, but it certainly hadn't hurt her.

I recognized the silver pendant with the Loop's logo hanging around her neck too. She'd worn it thirty years ago as well, back when we'd stood on this same dance floor, both trying to worm our way into the attention of the producers above us.

"Arven?"

Her mouth hadn't changed. She still looked like she was about to say something that would hurt me, and already savoring it in advance.

"I expected you to remember me a little faster," she said.

"You'd be expecting too much of me."

"I don't expect anything from you anymore."

That much about her hadn't changed either. She could deliver an insult so calmly it made you want to earn yourself another one.

"What are you doing here?"

"Same thing as thirty years ago. Waiting for someone to notice me."

I looked around us. No one was paying her any attention, same as no one was paying attention to me. In a hall full of people doing everything they could for attention, she stood without a tablet, without a producer, without a single colorful drink in hand. Same as me.

"This time there's no one for me to steal from you," I observed.

Arven smiled.

"So you do remember."

I remembered. Just not the same way she did.

Back then she'd had a meeting with a producer who could have pushed one of us up to the higher floors. She'd brought me along because we'd been planning a joint fragment series. And because she hadn't yet realized what I was really like.

"He picked me," I said.

"You introduced me as your assistant."

"And you never corrected me," I answered.

"And you spent the whole evening talking with him and had me fetching drinks for the two of you."

"You got a seat at his table."

"And you walked away with a contract."

Someone on the dance floor shouted with joy. One of the producers had just pressed his chip to a young poet's tablet, sealing a contract. Their names lit up on the screen above the stairs, and the two of them headed off toward the upper floor together. The crowd around them applauded, as if something extraordinary had just happened, rather than just another business deal.

"Did you come here for an apology?" I asked.

"After thirty years, it wouldn't be worth much."

"Then why are you here?"

Arven pulled a thin tablet from her purse and unlocked the screen. A frozen Fragment appeared on it, one I'd seen so many times on the Loop's billboard outside my apartment window that its individual images had burned themselves into my memory.

The street beneath the Aureola. A crowd of confused people. And in the middle of it all, a girl playing hero.

"If you're trying to show me what half the Loop is watching right now, you're a little late."

She started the recording with her thumb. The image moved. The girl ran across the shot, turned her head toward the camera, and for a single instant her face landed in perfect focus. Bright yellow text appeared beneath her figure:

ALERT WOMAN HELPS CATCH ATTACKER!

Arven paused the fragment and zoomed in on the face at the center of the screen. A young face, greasy hair tucked behind her ears.

"Bad footage," I said. "Why are you showing me this?"

"So you realize Phoenix isn't your only option."

She glanced over my shoulder, and I followed her gaze. Phoenix stood on the far side of the floor, surrounded by a cluster of producers. When he noticed me, he raised his blue drink in a toast.

Damn Virals.

“Phoenix has tens of millions of followers and a plan,” I said. “I’d bet you have neither.”

“I have her,” Arven smiled and swiped across the screen.

A different recording opened. The image was grainier, the colors faded, the format belonging to an era when phones were bulky, footage was low quality, and life was simple.

In a small room sat a gaunt man with sunken cheeks and a shaved head. Behind him, shipping crates, cardboard boxes, and open sea containers were piled high. Arven’s voice, thirty years younger, was asking him a question off-screen. Over the music in the hall, I couldn’t hear either her or his answer.

A door opened in the background, and a girl walked in. Arven paused the recording and zoomed in on her face with two fingers.

The same eyes. The same mouth. Even the way she tilted her head, as if the world in front of her were a poorly worded question. It was the same girl from today’s trend.

“I still don’t see where you’re going with this. Or why this girl gets me something better than what a tattooed raven can offer.”

She smiled, and it pleased me.

“I was filming a series about illegal Pulse trafficking. It flopped, only earned me a few extra months of life. But it ended up turning into a long-term investment. That man on the video claimed a girl had lived with him for several months. A girl who had thousands of Pulses.”

“Thousands? No one has that many Pulses. The Loop releases them gradually. Handing an individual centuries of life would violate every regulation there is.”

Arven nodded.

“The girl in the video is barely fifteen, and I never managed to find her again. That’s why the fragment fizzled out and left nothing behind but a pathetic follower count buried in the Loop’s database. But here’s the best part,” she smiled. “I filmed that fragment thirty years ago... So?”

I didn’t need long to work out what she was getting at.

“So if she still looks exactly the same,” I finished her sentence, “she must have been taking Pulses this whole time, and the whole story must have been true.”

Arven nodded again and asked me a simple question. “What if one of the founders gave them to her?”

“You think she’s, what, Corven’s illegitimate kid?” I laughed, but somewhere in the back of my mind a series was already assembling itself, one that could pull in millions of followers. A girl with thousands of Pulses. Nox and Arven uncovering her secret. Piece by piece. Just imagining all those comments, all those red hearts flooding the screen, gave me goosebumps.

“Yeah, something like that,” Arven agreed. “And I have a lot more,” she added, tucking the tablet back into her purse.

I stepped closer. I caught the scent of her hair in the air between us. Not sweet like the young poetesses around us. Something dry and bitter. Something I recognized but couldn’t quite name.

“What do you want?” I asked.

“Attention.”

“Be specific.”

“You announce that we’re partners. You put me in your Fragments, introduce me to producers, and my name stands next to yours. Not beneath it. This time you play fair — I’ll make sure of that.”

“And in exchange, I get the footage?”

“Unedited fragments, raw interviews, and the name and last known address of the man she stayed with back then. Everything I have.”

“Why not publish it yourself?”

“Because you’ll do all the work for me, while I enjoy the privileges you stole from me thirty years ago — your audience, an apartment in the Aureola, eternal life, and maybe a few other things I haven’t even thought of yet.”

“Modesty never suited you.”

“That’s why I don’t wear it,” she answered, and the silver streak slid across her face. For a moment I felt the urge to tuck it back into place, to touch her temple without meaning to.

“You need my footage to get back in the game,” she said. “And I need your chip on my tablet to open my way back up. We don’t have to pretend we like anything else about each other.”

I glanced back at the dance floor. Phoenix stood beside one of the producers, showing him something on a tablet. Probably already planning how he'd let me burn out so he could build his own career on my ashes.

Arven didn't have his audience, his youth, or a team of people approving every strand of his hair. All she had was a handful of old recordings, thirty years of carefully cultivated resentment, and a face I couldn't quite manage to look away from.

It was a terrible choice.

A choice I liked.

"Fine," I said. "Let's do it so everyone believes it."

I took her hand and started walking toward the dance floor.

"Nox," she slowed down, "what are you doing?"

"Giving you my audience."

I pulled her through the crowd of guests, all the way to the center of the black circle. The music was much quieter than it had been at the start of the Gala, but it still thrummed in our chests, and lasers sliced through the air around us. The neon Loop logo glowed at the center of the floor.

"Your tablet," I prompted her, and she fished it out of her purse. The people around us slowly began to turn toward us.

I pulled my Loop chip from my pocket and lifted it toward her tablet.

"If you don't actually have that footage," I said, "I'll say I mistook you for someone else and cancel the link."

"And if you screw me over again, I'll sell the footage to Phoenix."

I pressed my chip to her tablet. A short beep sounded, the Loop's logo beneath us blazed to life, and our profiles merged.

Our names appeared on the screen above the stairs. A few surprised gasps rang out first, then applause spread across the hall.

The reflections of poets' and producers' phones flickered in Arven's eyes as they filmed our every movement from every direction. I imagined all the fragments that would be cut from this moment and sent out into the world before long. I wanted to give them something more. Something worth talking about for longer than a few seconds.

Arven must have been thinking the same thing, because she pressed against me and waved to the crowd. She played her new role surprisingly well. I wrapped my hand around her waist, and my stomach clenched again at the thought of Lyra, once she saw these fragments. She'd surely realize it was all just a show. I was doing it for my career, and by extension, for her too.

I smiled into the lenses of the devices around us when a promoter with blue makeup appeared beside me.

"A Viral, Mr. Nox?" she offered it to me as if it were something scandalous.

I took the glass and raised it across the floor toward Corven, who was watching the whole scene from the safety of the bar. He wasn't applauding. He just stared at our names on the screen above the stairs. His lips were pressed tight, same as his fingers around his glass.

Arven followed my gaze.

"Seems like your friend isn't thrilled," she whispered.

"Corven doesn't like surprises."

"Then he's not going to like the next one either."

"What next one?"

Arven rose onto her toes and brought her lips close to my ear.

"He's in one of those recordings too."

I looked back across the floor, but Corven was already gone.

Chapter 7: The Box (Vey)



HOW THIS CHAPTER WAS SHAPED

Readers' voice

Who sent me the box of Pulses thirty years ago?

I'd asked myself that question so many times it had eventually stopped sounding like a question at all. It had become part of the box itself, same as the dark wood, the metal corners, the lock I'd never been given a key for. I lay on the bed in my apartment, separated from the bar by a single wall. I stared at the crack in the ceiling above me, trying to recall, once more, the day I first laid eyes on that box.

It was June eighth, and I'd just been released from the orphanage.

The afternoon was hot, the street reeked of scorching asphalt, and I was walking toward the gate with a backpack holding my underwear, two pairs of pants, three shirts, and a toothbrush. In my hand I gripped a phone showing directions to the ReFab workshop, the one my orphanage had an arrangement with. That's where I was supposed to start my new life. Work there, and live above it too. I was fifteen, and I still didn't know that one day I'd call this my lucky day.

Besides a man resting on one of the benches, there wasn't a living soul in sight. His thinning blond hair was combed back, baring a wrinkled forehead, standing out against the color of his clothes. His face was buried in his phone screen, his left palm resting on a sports bag. Cars drove past on the street behind him.

"Continue straight for thirty meters," the navigation app announced from my hand. The gate doors opened, I took a deep breath, and stepped through them into the real world.

"Hello," I greeted the man, and he lifted his head toward me and blinked, as if trying to focus.

"They've got a room ready for you above the workshop at ReFab," he said instead of a greeting, patting the empty spot on the bench beside him. "Sit with me a moment, Vey."

That wasn't a question, and it wasn't an order either. It was just a statement of what was about to happen, capped off with my name.

"Continue straight," the navigation repeated, but I froze mid-step. This man had been waiting here for me, and I couldn't understand why. That familiar feeling spread across the back of my neck, the one I always got in moments like this. As if my entire brain was trying to hide itself deeper inside my skull.

A hint of a smile appeared on the man's face.

"Are you from ReFab?" I asked the first question that made even a little sense. Though it seemed unlikely they'd send someone from the workshop all the way out here for me.

"Unfortunately not, Vey," the man answered, the corners of his mouth stretching wider. "Please, sit."

So how did he know my name? I only asked myself that question silently, and then spent the next thirty years regretting that I hadn't asked it out loud. I didn't believe he would have answered me, but at least I would have known I'd done everything I could.

Instead, I sat down beside him. He didn't look like someone dangerous. The longer I studied his face, the more it seemed like he was working hard to appear calm, while something else entirely was going on underneath.

"You're going to listen carefully, Vey," the man lowered his voice and glanced around himself. I glanced around too, but there was nothing nearby except cars passing on the street across from the orphanage gate.

"There's a box of Pulses in that bag. First, it's absolutely vital that..."

"What Pulses?" I interrupted him, and he sighed. That question sounds just as absurd to me now as if someone had asked what the Loop even was.

"It's absolutely vital," the man continued, ignoring my question, "that you take one every two weeks. Repeat that back to me, Vey."

"Why the hell would I do that?"

Another sigh.

"Because as long as you keep taking them, you'll age far more slowly than everyone else. Second, you can't tell anyone about them."

I opened my mouth for another question, but this time the man was faster.

"Because if anyone finds out what's in that bag, they'll kill you first, and then me."

I scrunched up my face and shook my head. Back then, I thought it was some kind of drug trick, the kind of terrifying story we used to get told at bedtime. A motorcycle roared past on the road nearby, and the man glanced around again. For a moment it seemed like he was more frightened of the world outside the gate than I was.

"There's an old television in your room. Turn it on at ten and you'll believe me," he whispered.

"I don't want your pills. I just want to start working and live my life quietly outside that fence behind me," I repeated what they'd been drilling into my head at the orphanage this past year.

"Please, just do what I'm telling you. Watch the news, and then decide what to do with them. Please, don't leave them here."

That please sounded different. Urgent. Desperate.

"If you leave them here, I've failed."

Fine. I definitely didn't want this old man to get hurt because of me. That wasn't the feeling I wanted to start my new life with. I made up my mind. I'd take the damn Pulses, whatever they were, wait for the news, and then throw them into the nearest dumpster.

I nodded, and he nodded back. Then Mr. Mysterious pushed himself up off the bench with effort and shuffled off toward the crosswalk.

"Continue straight for thirty meters."

There was no reason to stay there any longer. I had to check in at ReFab, so I slung the bag over my shoulder and headed in the recommended direction. I glanced back one more time at the man who'd just changed my life, but he didn't even turn to look at me. As if we'd never spoken at all. I never saw him again after that.

At ten that night, I sat on the mattress in my new room above Re-Fab. A television older than I was stood on a metal cabinet across from the bed, its faulty pixels driving me half mad. One of them glowed red, right in the center of the news anchor's forehead.

The Loop's logo glowed behind her.

"As of today, each of us gets the same shot at a longer life," she announced with a smile. "The Loop is launching its first public Pulse lottery."

A small pale purple tablet appeared on screen, an eight embossed at its center. It looked exactly like the thousands I'd found in the box a few hours earlier.

The anchor kept talking about two extra weeks of life. About fairness. About how Pulses would no longer be a privilege reserved for the richest people and board members. From now on, every Loop user would get a chance to win.

At the orphanage, they'd never told us about Pulses. They taught us how to count a paycheck, operate machines, and spot someone trying to slip something into our drink. No one bothered explaining how the rich extended their lives. We were children, and no one imagined Pulses would ever reach kids like us.

I stared at the sports bag by the door and wondered how many lives could fit inside it.

I took my first Pulse before midnight that night. I saw Lucky for the first time, but back then he was just a big snail from a strange dream.

I blinked, and the old television screen vanished. I was staring at the crack in the ceiling above my bed again. I'd returned from the world in my head back to the reality of my room behind the bar.

Thanks to Lyra, I now knew the Pulses hadn't come from some dead relative, or a mystery benefactor. Someone from the Loop had sent them to me. Someone who'd been there from the very beginning.

The music that usually seeped through the wall from the bar into my room had gone quiet. My phone showed just past midnight. The bartender was closing early. He did that when he wasn't feeling well, or when he'd had too much to drink. It wasn't often, but it happened.

I rolled onto my side and pulled the folder of my drawings out from under the bed, flipping to the very first one I'd ever drawn. Corven sat in it, leaning back in an armchair. Everything besides his face was blurry. I'd been filling in those drawings, Pulse by Pulse, like a puzzle assembling itself over years. Each new sketch revealed a little more detail, a few more small things. An old desk, a corkboard covered in papers I couldn't read, a cabinet in the corner of the room behind him.

I ran a finger over Corven's blurred face.

The door shuddered in its frame.

Before I even realized I'd stood up, I was already in the main room, by my apartment's front door.

A second blow knocked a chunk of plaster loose from the frame. It hit the floor, chips of cement and sand scattering in every direction.

"She's in there," a man's voice said from the other side of the door.

"Oh, shit," I breathed, and panic and the instincts that had kept me alive this long began taking control of my body. Suddenly it was clear why the music at the club had stopped so early. The Pulses. I had to grab the Pulses and disappear, while there was still even the slightest chance of it.

With the next blow, the door panel buckled, and the end of a red crowbar appeared in the gap between the frame and the door. The wood began to crack, and I knew I had seconds at most. I lunged through the open doorway into the bedroom and scanned for my only escape route from the apartment — the fire escape beyond the open bedroom window, leading down into the courtyard between the skyscrapers.

I threw my weight against the nightstand, beneath which the box lay hidden in the floor. It scraped across the old floorboards with a screech. At the same moment, the door in the next room gave a final crack and crashed to the floor with a thud. The silence that followed was broken by a metallic clatter of something dropping to the floor right after. Thick gray smoke, reeking of burnt dust, spread through the next room of my apartment. It hissed as it rolled toward my feet. Footsteps sounded beyond the door, along with a loud electronic crackle.

"She's next door," the man's voice said again, and the crackling grew louder.

My stomach clenched, and the world around me slowed and narrowed to four fixed points. My eyes tracked them, my brain scrambling to assemble them into a plan.

The box. The folder of sketches. The phone. The window.

The box under the floor gave me freedom. It's what let me live, what meant I never had to work. I could have a room like this one. I lunged toward the floorboard hiding my fortune. My hands shook, nails digging into the narrow gap between the boards.

Why did Lyra betray me?

My frantic mind hurled that question straight into my face, but I ignored it. A shot rang out, and I yelped. A rubber projectile buried itself in the plaster just beside me. I gasped a breath, and the smoke flooded my lungs.

"Hands behind your head, face the wall," the man said again into the silence.

The phone would give me away. I couldn't pull the box loose. That left the folder and the window. Wrapped in smoke, breath held, I felt my way to the bed. My hand found the folder of sketches, and I ran for the window.

Another shot rang out, and a sharp pain shot through my shoulder. I only registered it for a fraction of a second, right as I dove through the window out onto the fire escape.

"After her," the voice ordered, and a sharp whistle cut through the air past my head. Footsteps of running men sounded behind me. I was about to bolt downward, but I spotted two more men in the open space below. So I started climbing higher instead, toward the next apartment.

I had exactly one advantage: speed. The men chasing me were weighed down by helmets, bulletproof vests, heavy pants. They weren't dressed for sprinting up narrow stairs, and even though I'd left my shoes somewhere by the bed, I didn't feel the cold iron beneath my toes at all. A floor up, I ran along the iron grating of the fire escape running along the apartments, all the way to a window into the hallway.

I tucked the palm of my uninjured arm into my sleeve and tried to ignore the grating swaying beneath my feet in rhythm with the men running up behind me. I threw all my weight into the window. The glass scattered into the hallway, and I squeezed past the shards jutting inward from the frame, trying not to land on any of the ones scattered on the floor. I turned left. As far as possible from my apartment, toward the building's second exit. It was an old building. Over the years it had stood there, it had been renovated so many times that its hallways now resembled an anthill, a tangle of passages, entrances, and exits.

At the first turn I went right, and at the end of the hallway I ran down a staircase leading to the building's old, unused garages. To my relief, the garage was as abandoned as always. Before long I felt warm, dust-covered asphalt beneath my feet. The city swallowed me whole, and I did everything I could to put distance between myself and what I'd left behind.

I ran. A stitch stabbed at my side and my lungs burned, but I didn't stop running. I knew I'd shaken them off long ago, that no one was chasing me anymore, but I couldn't help it. All that adrenaline needed somewhere to go, and I didn't know what else to do with it. I ran, with no idea where. I kept running until the blood on my torn-

up feet finally forced me to stop, and a single thought settled into my head, one that made me feel that same strange darkness spreading all the way down into my bones.

Without Pulses, I'll be dead in two weeks.

Chapter 8: Fermentors (Nox)



HOW THIS CHAPTER WAS SHAPED

Readers' voice

I opened the door, and Lyra was standing there. She hadn't slept all night — that was the first thing I noticed. Anyone else might have missed it, but I'd known her for years, and that faint frown and those tiny lines around her eyes gave her away.

The second thought raised the question of what exactly she'd been doing all night instead. That thought brought with it a mix of anxiety, anger, and tension that tightened my jaw.

Right after that, I remembered Arven was sitting inside our apartment, in her spot.

Lyra glanced past my shoulder through the half-open door into the room. It only took her a second. Two glasses on the table, leftover dinner, a stranger's coat on the rack. None of it actually proved anything had happened between us.

So I smiled.

"You came at a bit of a bad time," I said. "Arven and I have been working almost all night."

That much was true. One of those rare, pleasant truths a person doesn't even have to twist.

"I wanted to help you with your Loop problem," Lyra answered, turning her eyes back to me. "But I see you probably don't need my help anymore."

"You know how it goes," I began, closing the door a little further. "Corven insisted on a partner. I had to pick someone."

“Arven?” she hissed, taking a step closer, forcing my eyes down to the floor. “After what you did to her back then, she should be bringing you to your knees. What did she promise you for this little favor?”

She had no idea what deal I actually had with Arven, but she knew exactly what kind of person Arven was. She must have seen the footage from the Loop’s Gala, same as everyone else. I lifted my head and noticed how her face had changed. She was staring straight at me, lips pressed tight. Every second I didn’t answer was eating her alive from the inside.

I took my time answering, and eventually decided to ignore her question entirely.

“Corven gave me two Pulses for you. I figured you’d stop by for them. Or do you have some other source now?”

The chance to live a little longer. That changed minds faster than jealousy, anger, a sleepless night, or anything else. She exhaled, and the muscles in her face relaxed. She gave a brief shake of her head. She needed me, and that warmed something in my chest. This could be our new beginning.

“Well, come on in, then.”

I opened the door wide and watched Lyra step back into her own home. Arven stood by the table, looking at something on her tablet from our search. Beneath her, the table was covered with my notes and ideas for the fragment series. Arven didn’t even look up at us, but I knew she’d caught every word of my conversation with Lyra.

"Good morning, Lyra," Arven greeted her, and the corners of my mouth shot upward. I'd spent half the night trying to think of a fragment to kick off my new partnership with Arven, and I couldn't come up with anything controversial or outrageous enough to be worthy of it. And yet all it took was waiting until morning.

"The Pulses, Nox," Lyra reminded me, her eyes sweeping across the apartment, from the papers, to the glasses, to the open bar cabinet, all the way to the couch in front of the glass windows. Arven smiled faintly and kept pretending Lyra's presence didn't interest her in the slightest.

"Sure, they're where they always are," I answered, and Lyra headed toward the kitchen. I watched Arven discreetly size her up with every click of her heels against the floor, and I pictured her mentally scoring and comparing. Older face, bigger chest, firmer ass. It had to be burning her up inside, but she gave nothing away.

When they were a step apart, their gazes crossed and locked for a split second. They were like two cats that had unexpectedly run into each other at the edge of their territories. Tense, backs straight, ready to pounce on each other at the first opportunity.

I watched them both like a tomcat with an appetite for either one. Ideally both at once.

With another confident step, Lyra passed Arven and glanced over her shoulder at the tablet's screen. Her reaction surprised everyone in the room.

"That's Vey?" she blurted, stopping in her tracks, head turned toward the tablet.

"You know her?" Arven tilted the tablet toward her and zoomed in on the face.

"Maybe," Lyra said absently, eyes buried in the screen.

"From where?" Arven pressed.

Lyra straightened back up and clenched her jaw. "That's not important."

"It's the only thing," Arven continued, hitting every word, "that's important right now."

She needed sleep. She was starting to get impatient and irritable. That approach didn't work on Lyra, but Arven hadn't figured that out yet. I had no intention of staying out of it.

"So you do have another source of Pulses after all," I said.

Lyra's head snapped toward me.

"I can count, Lyra," I continued. "You needed another dose three days ago. The exact day you left. You've been taking them a long time, so without them you'd only last a few days, and you definitely wouldn't look as good as you do right now."

"Was that supposed to be a compliment?" Lyra sneered at me.

"Take it however you want."

"You never change... Did you know I was running out of time, had two Pulses waiting for me, and still didn't even call?" Lyra gave a slight shake of her head.

"I did call. You didn't pick up." I reminded her, savoring the way her lips pressed together again, searching for the right words to defend herself.

Arven sighed and set the tablet down on the table. "Did she give you those Pulses?"

"So this is your grand plan to save your career? Some girl selling Pulses and another girl who maybe knows something about her?" Lyra ignored Arven's question and headed off again toward the kitchen cabinet hiding the Pulses.

"Yeah," I called after her.

"What are you doing?" Arven hissed at me, nodding toward the kitchen.

I stepped closer and leaned toward her ear. If Lyra walked back in right now, she'd see exactly what I wanted her to see.

"She knows something about her. More than just thirty-year-old rumors everyone keeps denying."

The kitchen cabinet door clicked shut around the corner.

"What do you know about her?" Arven shouted toward the kitchen.

I shot her a look. She couldn't possibly have been any louder if she'd tried. She rolled her eyes.

"I'd bet more than the two of you," came the voice from the kitchen.

"And I'd bet," I said cheerfully, "that those two Pulses you're about to walk off with are suddenly worth one short story."

"You're such a bastard," Lyra answered, walking back around the corner from the kitchen with a plastic case in hand. A soft glow shone through its walls.

"I'm your husband."

Arven smiled faintly.

"Help us," I stepped toward Lyra, looking straight into her face, "and you save your husband, me, and yourself. If his contract gets renewed, you get your regular supply back too."

"And what about Vey?" Lyra objected. "I don't want to hurt her. That girl's spent her whole life just surviving and doesn't even know why. I want to publish this anonymously."

"No one's going to take an anonymous source seriously, we need..." Arven started to object.

"Show her what we have," I cut her off, and she shot me a look full of raised eyebrow. I gave it right back to her, and she unlocked the tablet. Her finger tapped the screen and started our still-unpublished fragment, the one we'd been working on all night. It showed everything relevant about Vey's life so far. And I had to admit, there was frustratingly little of it worth using.

A brown-eyed girl appeared on the screen, dressed in a blue work uniform with the ReFab logo stitched onto the right breast pocket. She grinned into the camera with a carefree smile revealing a gap between her front teeth, the footage recorded in miserable resolution.

“Alright, you’re going to be famous, Gloria,” Arven’s voice came through the tablet’s speaker. “Just tell me why Vey left ReFab and where she went after, okay?”

“What’s in it for me?” Gloria asked, touching her upper lip with the tip of her tongue and biting it lightly. “The guy before you gave me fifty bucks.”

“What was his name?” Arven asked, but Gloria just laughed, shook her head, and jutted out her chin.

The camera shook, and a hand emerged from the bottom right corner holding a wad of bills rolled into a tube. Gloria’s brown eyes lit up, her hand strung with string bracelets reaching toward Arven’s, and the bills disappeared into the warmth of Gloria’s cleavage.

“Corven,” she said. “Pretty cute, actually.”

She looked off somewhere above the camera and added, in a mock-sad voice:

“But he only cared about Vey.”

Lyra stopped watching the tablet for a moment and gave me a thoughtful look.

“You knew about this?”

“Not before the Gala.”

It wasn’t a complete answer, but technically it was true. I’d suspected Edrin knew about it, but he’d never told me the full truth.

“How did things go with her?” Arven asked in the recording, and both Lyra and I turned back to Gloria.

"Vey... she didn't want to..." Gloria began, her voice wavering for a moment. For a split second, her cocky expression vanished, but it came right back a moment later. She took a breath and started again.

"Girls from the orphanage aren't grateful, you know, for a job, hot food, a locker, four walls, and a bed that creaks under them a couple times a month."

Then she flashed her teeth again, tongue poking through the gap between them. "I told her it's not so bad if you just close your eyes, but she wasn't cut out for it. So after a few months, she bolted."

Gloria hadn't even finished speaking before the opening of a Fragment assembled itself in my head. Young, alone, abused, on the run, sitting on a fortune of Pulses people would kill for. I hated how well it worked.

"Where'd she go?" Arven's mechanical voice came through again, and I looked back at the tablet screen.

"That's the best part," Gloria laughed loudly. "She went to work at the docks. Among sailors. Can you believe it? A girl who didn't want to work at ReFab."

Then the screen flickered, and after a cut, footage from one of the warehouse's security cameras appeared. The exact same warehouse Arven had shown me at the Loop's Gala.

Arven was questioning one of the foremen sitting behind a desk about Vey. He claimed he'd never seen anyone like that. But then a door on the opposite side of the room opened, and Vey walked in. Arven didn't notice a thing, still trying to talk the foreman into co-

operating. Vey barely flickered past behind her and walked back out, as if nothing was happening. Arven had only gotten that footage a few days later, after bribing security.

Arven touched the tablet's screen and the video paused. It irritated me that she'd stopped it right there. I could have watched my own fragments for hours, and the closing line, the one launching the investigation, was, in my opinion, one of my best.

"That's enough for now," Arven said before I could object, and turned to Lyra. "Your turn. What do you know about her?"

Lyra lowered her eyes to the case of Pulses in her hands.

"This one's going to be a short story," she began.

I sat down in a chair, threw my feet up on the table among the notes, and watched Lyra walk toward the glass window overlooking the city.

"I needed Pulses, before I could find myself a replacement for Nox here."

"That'll be tough," I remarked, but Lyra didn't even turn around.

"A friend told me about the bar, and about Vey. I went there and bought some. But when I took the Pulse..."

"You saw more of the vision?" Arven cut her off, and I watched Lyra's every movement.

"Yeah," she answered after a moment, gaze fixed on the city below her. "She had a box, and there were thousands of them inside."

"She just showed it to you, like that?" I didn't understand.

"When I took that Pulse, I saw Corven's old house. The one you used to visit when we were starting out," Lyra turned to face me. "Vey's room was covered in pictures of fermenters, resonance detectors, and other things she absolutely shouldn't have seen in real life."

"We need to get to that bar right now," Arven blurted.

"It's not there anymore," Lyra sneered at her. "When I went back the next day, the bartender swore no Vey had ever lived there. The door was broken, and there was shattered glass all over the back alley. I think someone's after her. I waited there for her for three days."

That sounded like a police raid. Something about it didn't sit right with me, though. Lyra didn't need Pulses every single day, so why would she have gone back to see her again? There had to be something else behind it. Something she was hiding.

"Why did you go back to see her again?" I asked.

"Doesn't matter," Lyra answered, running her thumb across her ring finger, the one that, until a few days ago, had worn our wedding ring. She noticed me looking and pulled her hand away immediately.

"It matters," I said.

"If I tell you everything, you won't need me anymore. This is enough for now."

It wasn't enough for me, but Arven cut back in before I could push further. "She must have gone back to somewhere she used to live. That's what I'd do."

"We've already checked every address you have," I objected.

“But she was still living at the bar then,” Arven disagreed.

“That’s ridiculous,” Lyra rolled her eyes, “she’ll go to Corven’s house.”

“For God’s sake, why would she go there of all places?” Arven countered. “If she’s had these visions for years already, she must have already been there.”

“Because I’m the one who just told her it was Corven’s house. She’s drawn maybe a hundred pictures of that house without ever knowing what it was. She let me get that close to her only because she’s obsessed with her own past, the same way you two are obsessed with her. She’ll go looking for him, and she’ll find him.”

“How would she find a house that’s thirty years old?” Arven mused, setting the tablet down on the table. “She has to sleep somewhere, eat something. We need to go back through every place she’s been before. We have to find her before the Loop does. But no one’s going to believe an anonymous story, Lyra. Without her face, Corven will call it another lie, and by tonight there’ll be nothing left of us. The same thing he did to me thirty years ago.”

“No,” Lyra shouted, much louder than she’d meant to, “we need to find her, find out what’s behind her fate and why Corven cares about it. But then — and listen to me carefully, Arven — we cut her out of it completely and list her as an anonymous source.”

Arven looked at me, waiting to see what I’d do. But I was thinking about Vey. Sooner or later, someone would get to her one way or another. Whether we published her in fragments directly or not, she was going to end up locked away for a very long time. If I was the

one to publish her story, it would help at least three people — me, Lyra, and Arven. That was better than helping no one at all. It was a comfortable thought. So I held onto it.

Lyra was staring at me too. I knew that look well. She was waiting for me to take her side. It was the same look she gave me every time she'd already made up her mind and just wanted to hear that I'd arrived at the same conclusion.

"Arven's right about one thing. Without Vey, I have no proof. And without proof, I have nothing," I said, and watched the tension drain out of Lyra's face, taking the last of her trust in me along with it.

"First we go back to the places she used to live," I continued. "Depending on what we find, we call Edrin. That old bastard knows something, he just never says what. More leads might convince him to talk. And I'll find out who led the raid on the bar. I still have a few friends left in the Loop."

"That's exactly what scares me," Lyra said, heading for the front door.

"Come with us, Lyra," burst out of my mouth, and before I could even think about it, I added a quiet "please," which surprised me even more than it seemed to surprise her. She stopped at the open door of our apartment and lowered her head to the floor for a moment. When she turned again, her shoulder-length hair shifting, I caught the glint in her eyes.

"There is no us, Nox. Not while fragments matter more to you than a human life."

Lyra walked through the door, and the moment felt like an eternity to me. Her hair curled around her neck, her hip swaying as she stepped over the threshold with her right foot. Her palm wrapped around the glossy door and left a faint print of human warmth behind, the same warmth that had, until very recently, warmed me too. The woman I loved above everything else was walking out of my life for the second time, and I felt like Prometheus, his liver torn from his body by the eagle only so it could grow back by the next day, giving them the pleasure of tearing it out all over again. Over and over.

For a moment I cursed my entire existence. But what would even be left of me without my fragments? They were the only thing I really knew how to do. Or were they? A flash of my conversation with Corven crossed my mind, along with the falling graph of my viewership. Was Lyra right, maybe? I felt the light touch of Arven's palm on my left shoulder.

"Whiskey, Nox?"

"Make it a double."

Chapter 9: Harbor (Vey)



HOW THIS CHAPTER WAS SHAPED

Readers' voice

Chapter 10: Last Pulse (Nox)



HOW THIS CHAPTER WAS SHAPED

Readers' voice

Resonance after chapter 10

INFLUENCES CHAPTER 11

Chapter 10 is out — and now you can decide who Oren's shot hit and what Vey is willing to sacrifice. In a short form you choose details that will shape the direction of chapter 11.

The strongest votes really make it into the text. Open the link below, or scan the QR code — it takes about a minute.

Voting on the website · Fill in the voting form

Scan the QR code to open the voting form.