The Wreckers "The Dream Factory" | Book #13

by Brent Clark Palmer

The Wreckers, Book 13

Chapter 1

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Chapter One: The Visit — Part One

The flight from Tokyo to New York took fourteen hours and twenty minutes, which was enough time to finish the paper she had been avoiding, read three competing papers that disagreed with it, eat two of the three meals the flight attendant brought with the particular unhurried grace that was the signature of ANA's long-haul cabin crew, and arrive at no conclusions she hadn't already arrived at eight months ago.

Aiko had a window seat, which she always chose on long flights and never looked out of, preferring to work. But somewhere over the Pacific — the vast, black, indifferent Pacific, seven miles below and entirely invisible — she closed the laptop and looked out the window anyway.

There was nothing to see. Cloud cover all the way. The plane's wingtip light blinking its patient red pulse into the dark.

She had been sitting with this for eight months.

Eight months of watching the Morpheus data accumulate from a distance, through channels she was not supposed to have access to and had access to anyway, because Aiko's particular skill set included the ability to be in places digitally that she had no official business being. Eight months of reading Abraham Veil's internal notes — the man kept meticulous records, which was both the thing that made him a serious artist and the thing that made him easy to surveil — and watching the Third Weave take shape from raw neural material into something that was, she had to admit, genuinely extraordinary.

Eight months of knowing whose material he was using.

The flight attendant appeared beside her — a young woman with the precise, warm

professionalism that ANA trained into its cabin crew from the beginning, the small bow of acknowledgment before speaking, the careful reading of whether the passenger wanted to be engaged or left alone. Aiko had been watching her work the cabin for three hours with the same focused attention she brought to everything, and had noted the specific quality of it — not servile, nothing so reductive, but a genuine orientation toward the comfort of others that was cultural as much as professional, the expression of a society that had decided collective consideration was a value worth training into people who worked with the public. "Can I bring you anything?" the attendant asked, in English that was precise and unaccented. "Tea," Aiko said. "Please."

The tea arrived in a proper cup, not a paper vessel, with a small piece of dark chocolate on the saucer. This was the kind of small considered gesture that made long flights on Asian carriers different from their Western equivalents — a collective, ambient, professionally calibrated care for the passenger's wellbeing that operated largely below the threshold of explicit request, present whether or not you noticed it, which was perhaps the point. Aiko drank the tea and looked at the cloud cover and thought about Soo-Yeon.

Soo-Yeon Park, twenty-eight years old, a composer of genuine and emerging talent who had walked into a research programme at Morpheus Studios eight months ago because she was interested in the neuroscience of musical creativity and had seen the study advertised through a university contact and had filled out the consent form carefully and thoroughly and had understood, reading it, that her neural data would be used for research purposes.

She had not understood — could not have understood, because the form did not say — that Abraham Veil would reach into the pre-conscious material of her dreaming mind and find the thing she had not yet made. The music she was moving toward. The compositional territory she had been approaching for two years, circling it in her waking work, feeling the edges of it without yet finding the form. The thing underneath the music she had already written, more fundamental than style or technique, the unknown desire that generated the work rather than the work itself.

And Abraham had taken it.

And made it into art.

And was going to show it to forty people in six weeks.

Aiko looked at the darkness outside the window for a long moment. Then she picked up her phone and composed a message.

Sending you something. Read it before I arrive. I'm on my way.

She sent it to both of them — Vanessa first, then Jordan, which was the order she always used and which reflected something true about the specific gravity of each relationship without requiring articulation.

Then she put the phone away, opened the laptop, and went back to work.

Outside, the Pacific continued its enormous indifference. The plane moved through the dark at six hundred miles an hour, carrying its cargo of sleeping passengers and their accumulated unknowns eastward toward a continent that would, in approximately nine more hours, offer up its own particular variety of dream material.

Aiko worked until the descent began.

-She had a connection through Vancouver, which gave her two hours to clear customs, eat something from a terminal café that was adequate without being interesting, and read the first responses to her message.

Jordan had replied within four minutes of receiving it, which told her he had been awake, which was not surprising. Jordan was often awake at hours that suggested he either slept less than average or found sleep less reliable than average, and she had never asked which. Read it. Getting Vanessa.

Then, three minutes later, from Vanessa:

I've been awake since three. Come straight here when you land.

Aiko looked at Vanessa's message for a moment. I've been awake since three was not a complaint. It was information, offered without context, in the way that Vanessa offered certain things — as a data point rather than a disclosure, trusting the recipient to understand its weight without needing it explained. Aiko understood its weight. She had known Vanessa for five years and had learned to read the specific vocabulary of what she chose to say versus what she left out.

The fact that Vanessa had been awake since three meant something had been sitting with her. The fact that she didn't say what meant she was waiting to understand it before she named it. Aiko filed this and boarded the connection to New York.

JFK received her at seven in the morning in the specific way that JFK received everyone — with the barely managed chaos of one of the world's busiest airports operating at full capacity before most of its staff had finished their first coffee, the particular energy of a place that processed an incomprehensible volume of human traffic and had decided the only way to manage that was to stop pretending it was manageable and simply keep moving.

She took a car into the city.

The drive from JFK into Manhattan in early morning was its own specific experience — the expressway, then the bridge, then the city announcing itself across the water in the way it always did, as if it couldn't quite help it, the skyline doing the thing it had been doing for a hundred years which was simply being there and being enormous and being entirely itself without apology or explanation. February had stripped the trees along the parkway to their bones and the light was the flat, honest light of a winter morning that intended to be cold and clear and nothing more complicated than that.

Aiko watched it through the car window and felt, as she always felt arriving in New York from Tokyo, the specific disorientation of a 9body that had crossed too many time zones too quickly and was now being asked to function in a city that ran on its own particular frequency, louder and faster and more demanding of

immediate presence than the city she had left.

She messaged from the car. Thirty minutes.

Vanessa replied immediately. Door's open.

The apartment was on the Upper West Side, in a building that didn't appear in any real estate listings and hadn't for years, accessible by an elevator that required a key and opened onto a hallway that was quiet in the specific way of spaces that had been designed to be quiet rather than simply happening to be so. Aiko had been here twice before. Both times it had felt, in the way that certain spaces felt, like an extension of the people who lived in it — the apartment that had become genuinely theirs over four years, carrying in its accumulated details the evidence of two lives that had become, through the work and through everything surrounding the work, inseparable.

The door was, as Vanessa had said, open.

Aiko pushed it and came in.

They were both in the kitchen. Jordan at the counter with coffee, still in the dark henley and sweatpants of someone who had been awake for a while but hadn't gotten dressed yet, his dark hair slightly disordered, the silver at his temples catching the kitchen light. Vanessa at the island in one of his shirts, her dark auburn hair loose around her shoulders, a coffee cup held in both hands. They looked like people who had been awake since three reading something difficult and had been sitting with it together in the particular quiet of a shared concern not yet spoken.

They looked, Aiko thought, like home. Not her home. But a home. The specific,

accumulated, chosen home of two people who had decided on each other in a way that required no further deciding.

She set her bag on the floor by the door.

Vanessa looked at her face for exactly two seconds.

"You've been carrying this for a while," she said.

"Eight months," Aiko said.

Jordan poured her a coffee without speaking and set it on the counter. She came in and sat on the stool across from them and wrapped her hands around the cup and let the warmth of it do what the fourteen hours of flight had not fully managed.

"Start from the beginning," Vanessa said.

-Aiko opened the laptop.

She pulled up the photograph of the building first. Let them look at it.

"Morpheus Studios," she said. "East end of Toronto. Formerly a film production facility — three soundstages, production offices, a backlot. Acquired five years ago by a technology consortium called Noctilux Capital. The acquisition was reported as a real estate investment." "It wasn't," Jordan said.

"No." She moved to the next image — the laboratory interior, the neural imaging screens with their coloured topographies of brain activity rendered in real time. "Morpheus R&D has been running what they call the Somnium Project for four years. The technology records and synthesises dream material. It enters the pre-conscious state during REM sleep, captures the neural patterns of dreaming, and renders them into experiential content."

She paused to let that land properly.

"Not video," she said. "Not audio. Experiential. You don't watch it. You are inside it. You don't see what they dreamed. You dream what they dreamed."

Vanessa was very still.

Jordan set down his coffee cup.

"How," he said.

"The mechanism is proprietary and I won't pretend I understand all of it," Aiko said, which was the most alarming sentence she could have offered because Jordan and Vanessa both knew that Aiko understood most things. "It works at the level of neural pattern. It reproduces the dreaming itself, not a recording of it, in another nervous system." A brief pause. "When you experience a Weave — which is what they're called, the composite works the technology produces — you are not watching. You are participating. In something built partly from someone else's most unguarded interior life."

The apartment was quiet around them.

Outside the tall windows Manhattan was doing what it always did — persisting, indifferent, lit against the February morning in the specific way of a city that had decided a long time ago that it didn't need to explain itself to anyone.

Vanessa said, very quietly: "And someone is making art with this."

"Yes," Aiko said. "His name is Abraham Veil."

She moved to the photograph she had of him — the candid, the dark theatre, the man looking at something above him that wasn't physically there. She watched them look at it. "Former RSC director," she said. "Then film, then television. He joined Morpheus five years ago not for the commercial application — the studio is primarily interested in personalised entertainment, content generated from individual neural profiles. He has no interest in that. He calls what he makes Weaves. Composite experiences built from multiple subjects' dream material,

synthesised into — he would say art. The most honest mirror ever held up to human nature."

"He's not wrong," Vanessa said.

Jordan looked at her.

"About what it does," she said carefully. "He may be wrong about what it costs." Aiko looked at her steadily. "Yes," she said. "That's exactly it."

A brief silence.

Jordan, who had been standing quietly through most of this in the way he stood quietly through things that required him to process rather than respond, shifted his posture slightly. He leaned against the counter and crossed his arms and looked at Aiko with the dark, assessing eyes.

Aiko looked back at him.

She was using, she knew, the precise and measured register that she used when she was explaining technical things — the calm, careful, instructional tone she had spent eight months

deploying entirely without incident because the incident she had created was currently only activatable in proximity to Jordan, which she had been careful to avoid for the duration of the Paris aftermath.

She was not in Paris anymore.

She was in his kitchen.

She watched, with the same focused attention she brought to everything, the very slight shift in Jordan's posture that preceded what she suspected was happening.

She did not smile. She was a professional.

Vanessa, who was watching Aiko with the comprehensive attention she brought to

everything, noticed Aiko not smiling. She looked at Jordan. She looked back at Aiko. Something passed between the two women that was entirely silent and entirely complete. Aiko continued.

"The subjects are research volunteers," she said, keeping her voice in precisely the same register, because she was after all also conducting a small and entirely unannounced experiment. "They consent to the recording process as part of Morpheus's clinical research programme. They are told their neural data will be used for research purposes. They are not told it will be synthesised into an artwork and experienced by an audience."

Jordan recrossed his arms.

This time Vanessa made a sound. Very small. Very controlled. A sound that could, to anyone not paying close attention, have been simply an acknowledgment of what Aiko had just said. Aiko pressed on.

"Three Weaves have been completed and shown to private audiences of twenty to fifty people under non-disclosure. The response has been — by every account I have accessed — unlike anything conventional art produces. Because it bypasses the usual cognitive processing. It arrives directly."

"Because it's built from the audience's own material as well," Jordan said. His voice was completely steady. He was very good, Aiko thought. He had always been very good. "Yes," she said. "Compatible dream material — multiple subjects whose unknown desires resonate at a similar frequency. The audience doesn't experience someone else's dream. They experience a composite that contains elements of their own." A pause. "They recognise themselves. Without knowing why."

Jordan looked at the window.

Vanessa looked at Jordan.

Then she looked at Aiko.

Stop, her eyes said. Not unkindly. With the specific warmth of someone who was finding this extremely funny and was also trying to conduct a serious meeting.

Aiko moved on.

"The Third Weave," she said, and she allowed her register to drop out of the instructional and into something more personal, which was also a kind of mercy. "This is why I came." The room changed. Jordan's posture settled. Vanessa's attention sharpened.

"Her name is Soo-Yeon Park," Aiko said. "She's twenty-eight. A composer. She volunteered for the Morpheus research programme eight months ago because she was interested in the neuroscience of musical creativity. She thought she was participating in a study." A pause. "She was my student. In Seoul, three years ago. We stayed in contact."

Vanessa was very still.

"What did he take from her?" she asked.

Aiko looked at the laptop screen for a moment. At the neural imaging data with its coloured topographies of activity.

"Not her music," she said. "Not her conscious work. The material underneath that. The unknown desire that generates the music. The thing she's been moving toward for two years without having found the form for it yet." She paused. "He has taken the thing she hasn't made yet. And made it into something else.

Something that will be experienced by forty people in six weeks, and then — if Abraham has his way — by an unlimited number after that."

The silence that followed had the specific quality of something that had been named that could not now be unnamed.

Jordan was the first to speak.

"Six weeks," he said.

"Yes."

Vanessa looked at him. He looked back. The look that had been developing between them for four years — the one that required no words because the words were already known to both of them.

The look that said: this is the thing.

"Tell us about the building," Vanessa said.

Aiko opened a new window.

Outside, Manhattan kept its noise and its February light and its absolute indifference to the conversations happening in the apartments above its streets. The city that had been the backdrop of their life between jobs — the tall windows, the elevator that required a key, the coffee that was always there when it was needed — went about its morning without comment.

Inside, three people sat around a laptop in a kitchen that smelled of coffee and the particular accumulated warmth of a space that had been genuinely lived in, and began to understand the shape of what they had come to do.

And underneath the professional attention of the meeting, in the register of things that were present but not spoken, two things coexisted without contradiction: the serious ethical weight of what Abraham Veil had taken from Soo-Yeon Park, and the small, private, warm hilarity of the fact that Aiko had just spent four minutes explaining it in her most precise instructional voice while Jordan Harlan stood across the kitchen counter from her and was, by the available evidence, extremely professionally handling the consequences.

Chapter 2

Chapter Two: The Decision — Part One

They talked for three hours.

Aiko walked them through everything she had — the Morpheus acquisition documents, the Somnium Project research files, the internal communications she had accessed through channels she described only as reliable and which neither Vanessa nor Jordan asked her to elaborate on. She showed them the neural imaging data with its coloured topographies of activity, the technical specifications of the recording process, the consent forms the research subjects had signed, and beside them, in a separate window, the internal notes in which Abraham Veil described what he intended to do with the material those forms had authorised him to collect.

Jordan read both documents in full without speaking. Vanessa read them once quickly and then again slowly, which was how she read things that required both the immediate impression and the considered one. The apartment was quiet around them except for the February sounds of the city fourteen floors below.

When they had both finished, Vanessa sat back and looked at the ceiling for a moment. Then she said: "Show me the audience response data."

Aiko had it ready. Three documents — accounts from attendees of the first two Weaves, gathered through the same reliable channels, written in the private language of people who had experienced something they were struggling to describe accurately. She watched Vanessa and Jordan read them.

The accounts were not effusive in the way of people describing something merely impressive. They were careful, slightly stunned, written by people who were clearly intelligent and accustomed to articulating their experiences and who had found, in this case, that their usual vocabulary was not quite adequate to the task. Several used the word true in ways that were grammatically unusual — not it felt true or it seemed true but simply it was true, as if the Weave had bypassed the conditional entirely. One attendee, a novelist, had written three pages and then crossed most of them out and written at the bottom: I saw something I had not permitted myself to want. I don't know what to do with that. Jordan set his copy down.

He was quiet for a moment.

Then he said: "He actually did it."

Vanessa looked at him.

"The thing we've been doing manually for years," Jordan said. "Reading people. Finding the gap between the version and the truth. Getting underneath the

presentation to what's actually there." He paused. "He built a machine that does it directly. Without the approach, without the seduction, without any of the work." He looked at Aiko. "And it works."

"It works," Aiko confirmed.

"That's — " Jordan stopped. He looked at the audience response documents again. At the novelist's crossed-out pages. "That's extraordinary."

Vanessa was looking at him with the expression she wore when he said something she had been thinking and hadn't yet said. She looked back at the documents.

"The novelist," she said. "I saw something I had not permitted myself to want." She turned the phrase over. "That's the unknown desire. Not the hidden one. The one that hasn't been

named yet." She paused. "We've been trying to find that for years. In targets. In rooms. Through weeks of careful work." She looked at Aiko. "He finds it in one session. While they're asleep."

"Yes," Aiko said.

"I want to see one," Vanessa said.

The room was quiet for a moment.

"I thought you might," Aiko said.

Jordan looked between them. "Is that possible?"

"The private showing for the Third Weave is in six weeks," Aiko said. "The audience is curated. Forty people, carefully selected by Abraham himself." She paused. "But there are two earlier Weaves. The first two. Abraham has shown them multiple times to different audiences. There is a showing of the First Weave in Toronto in ten days. A small group — twelve people. A private collector who has been hosting these evenings for the last year." "Can we get in?" Jordan asked.

"I believe so," Aiko said. "With the right introduction."

Vanessa looked at Jordan. He looked back. Something passed between them that was not the rules exactly but was in that territory — the recognition of something genuinely interesting, the quality of attention that preceded full engagement.

"Tell me about Abraham Veil," Vanessa said. "Not the career. Him."

The photograph Aiko showed them first was not the candid from the theatre.

It was a portrait — formal, the kind that appeared in cultural organisation programmes or university faculty pages. Abraham Veil looked directly at the camera with the expression of someone who had decided, some years ago, what

their face said to the world and had been consistently saying it ever since. Serious. Assured. The particular assurance of someone who believed in the importance of their work and had sufficient evidence for that belief that it had long since stopped requiring external validation.

He was, Vanessa thought, genuinely handsome in the way of certain men in their fifties — not the handsome of youth preserved but the handsome of a face that had become more itself over time, the bone structure settling into clarity, the eyes carrying something that younger faces couldn't achieve. He looked like someone who had thought carefully about a great many things and had arrived at positions he was prepared to defend.

He looked like someone who would be interesting to argue with.

"Born in Manchester," Aiko said. "1977. His father was a secondary school English teacher. His mother worked for the city council — housing administration. He was the first in his family to go to university." She paused. "Scholarship to RADA at nineteen. First professional production at twenty-three. RSC by thirty. Two Olivier Awards by thirty-five." She moved through the photographs — production stills, press images, the visual record of a career that had been serious from the beginning. "Then film. Then television. The television work made him rich but he spoke about it in interviews with a specific kind of dissatisfaction. He said he wanted to make things that changed people's relationship with themselves. Not things people consumed and forgot."

"And he found the technology," Jordan said.

"He found the technology," Aiko agreed. "And he believes — genuinely, completely — that he has found what he was looking for." She pulled up a series of internal notes, Abraham's own writing, the meticulous records of someone who processed his work through language. "He compares what he's doing to Shakespeare. Not immodestly — he's not claiming equal talent. He's claiming equal ambition. Shakespeare's project was to hold the mirror up to

nature. To show people themselves in a form they could bear to look at." She paused. "Abraham believes the Weaves are the most complete version of that project ever attempted. Because the mirror isn't made of language or performance or even image. It's made of the audience themselves."

Vanessa was looking at the portrait.

"He's not wrong about the ambition," she said.

"No," Aiko agreed. "He's not."

"Is he married?" Vanessa asked.

"Divorced. Twelve years ago. One daughter in London, twenty-two. Two significant relationships since. Both ended without apparent drama." Aiko

paused. "He lives alone in the Annex neighbourhood in Toronto. Near the University of Toronto. The apartment is primarily books."

"Friends?"

"A small circle. Academics, artists. He has dinner with them regularly and argues about everything. His daughter speaks warmly about him publicly. He is by most accounts genuinely good company when he's not thinking about work." Aiko paused. "Which is rarely."

"What does he want?" Jordan asked. "Underneath the Shakespeare ambition. What does Abraham Veil actually want?"

Aiko considered the question seriously, which was how she considered all questions. "To be understood," she said finally. "Not celebrated. Understood. He has spent his entire career making things that he believes contain important truths about human experience and he has spent that same career watching those things be consumed and discussed and reviewed and fundamentally missed." She paused. "I think he believes the Weaves are the first thing he's made that cannot be missed. That bypasses the distance between the work and the audience. That lands directly." Another pause. "He wants someone to experience one and understand what he's actually done."

Vanessa looked at the portrait for another long moment.

"He's going to be interesting," she said.

"Yes," Aiko said.

"Not a straightforward target," Jordan said. "He's convinced. Convinced people take longer because you can't find the crack in the usual places." He was quiet for a moment. "The crack is Soo-Yeon. But we'll come back to that." He looked at Aiko. "Tell us about her." -Soo-Yeon Park had grown up in Busan, the second of two daughters of a civil engineer and a piano teacher.

The piano teacher detail was in Abraham's research notes, which Aiko had accessed along with everything else, and it had stayed with her in the way that certain details stayed — not because it was dramatic but because it was the kind of biographical fact that explained something. A child who grew up in a household where music was both livelihood and daily practice, where the instrument in the front room was simultaneously the family's income and the texture of ordinary life, developed a specific relationship with composition. Not reverent. Not distant. Intimate in the way of things that had always simply been there.

She had studied at the Korea National University of Arts and then at the Royal Conservatory of Music in Toronto, which was how she had ended up in the city where Morpheus Studios had its research programme. She was twenty-eight.

Her work was beginning to be noticed —

two pieces performed by small but serious ensembles, a commission from a contemporary music festival in Berlin that she had recently completed.

"She came to a seminar I gave in Seoul three years ago," Aiko said. "At the intersection of neuroscience and creative process. I was looking at how the brain generates novelty — the neural architecture of the moment when something genuinely new arrives. Not executed skill. Actual newness." She paused. "It was a small group. Twelve people. Mostly researchers and technologists. Soo-Yeon was the only musician."

"Why was she there?" Vanessa asked.

"Because she was trying to understand something about her own process," Aiko said. "She had been experiencing what she described as a creative threshold — the sense of approaching something she hadn't yet been able to make. A kind of music she could feel the edges of but couldn't fully enter." She paused. "She thought understanding the neuroscience might help her find it."

Jordan was watching Aiko carefully.

"And you stayed in contact," he said.

"We did. She was — " Aiko stopped briefly. "She was the most interesting person in the room. She asked the right questions. The kind of questions that come from someone who is genuinely trying to solve something rather than someone who wants to appear to be trying." Another pause. "We had coffee after the seminar. Then we exchanged messages occasionally. She sent me recordings of new work sometimes. I sent her papers that seemed relevant to what she was working on."

"She trusted you," Vanessa said.

"Yes," Aiko said simply.

"And she went into the Morpheus programme."

"Eight months ago. She contacted me before she enrolled — sent me the study description, asked what I thought. The neuroscience of musical creativity during sleep. It was — " Aiko paused. "It was a legitimate area of inquiry. The consent form was thorough. I had no reason to tell her not to." She looked at the table. "I didn't know what Morpheus was doing with the data at that point. I found out two weeks after she enrolled."

The apartment was quiet.

"You've been watching it for eight months and saying nothing," Jordan said. Not accusatory. Observational.

"I needed to understand what I was looking at before I acted," Aiko said. "And I needed to be certain." She paused. "And I needed to decide whether to come to you at all."

"What decided it?" Vanessa asked.

"The Third Weave," Aiko said. "When I understood whose material it was built from. And what he'd taken." She looked at Vanessa directly. "He found the threshold she described to me. The music she's been approaching. The thing she hasn't made yet. He found it in her dream data and he used it as the foundation of his most ambitious work." A pause. "He took the thing she came to me trying to find. And made it into something that belongs to him." The room held that for a moment.

Vanessa was looking at her hands.

Jordan was looking at Aiko.

"You want us to get close to Abraham," he said. "And you want us to get Soo-Yeon into a room with him before the showing."

"Yes," Aiko said.

"Not to destroy him," Vanessa said. It wasn't a question. She was thinking out loud, finding the shape of it. "Not the marriage — there's no marriage. Not the career. Not the Weaves

themselves." She paused. "You want him to see her. Specifically. The actual person." "I want him to know what he took," Aiko said. "And from whom. I want the argument he's been making to himself to have to survive contact with the reality of it." She paused. "I don't know what happens after that. Maybe nothing changes. Maybe he stops the showing. Maybe he finds a way to include her. Maybe he goes ahead anyway and lives with it differently." She looked between them. "I just want him to have to look."

Vanessa thought about a bench in Djurgården and four folded pages and the specific quality of a woman reading her own testimony back to herself.

She thought about what it meant to show someone something true about themselves that they had been avoiding.

She thought about how much she had enjoyed it.

"We want to see the First Weave," she said.

"I know," Aiko said.

"That's the real reason we're going," Vanessa continued. "Not for Soo-Yeon. Not for Abraham. We want to see what he built." She looked at Jordan. "We want to know if it actually does what the audience response data says it does."

Jordan looked back at her steadily. "Yes," he said. "That's accurate."

Aiko looked between them. Something in her expression settled — the specific quality of someone who had been carrying something alone for a long time and had just felt the weight redistribute.

"Then I'll arrange the introduction," she said.

"How?" Jordan asked.

"Morpheus's commercial division is looking for strategic partners," Aiko said. "Entertainment industry relationships, investment intelligence, someone who understands how to bring a technology like this to market without losing control of it." She paused. "I have a contact at the consortium level. She has been waiting to repay a significant professional favour. I'll call her this afternoon."

"The legend," Jordan said.

Jordan has operational legends from previous jobs that can be adapted," Aiko said. "Systems architect. Venture advisor. The documentation holds up under moderate scrutiny." She looked at Vanessa. "You spent three years as a creative consultant for a major production company before your divorce. The documentation exists."

Vanessa looked at her.

"You've been building this," she said.

"I've been thinking about it," Aiko said. "Building implies more certainty than I had. I didn't know if you'd come."

"But you prepared as if we would."

"Yes," Aiko admitted.

Jordan picked up his coffee. He looked at the portrait of Abraham Veil still open on the laptop — the assured, serious face, the eyes that had arrived at positions they were prepared to defend. A man who had built something genuinely extraordinary from material that wasn't his to take. A man who had never had to look at the specific person the material came from. "Same rules," he said.

Vanessa looked at him. Then at Aiko. Then back at the portrait.

"Same rules," she said. "And we want in on the First Weave."

Outside, Manhattan went about its February business, indifferent and enormous and entirely itself. Inside the apartment, three people finished their coffee and began the work of preparation — the slow, methodical assembly of a cover, a plan, a shape for what they were

walking into.

Not crusaders.

Not hunters exactly.

Something harder to name. People who had spent years learning to read the gap between what was presented and what was true, who had found something that claimed to do the same thing by entirely different means, and who were curious in the specific, slightly dangerous way of people for whom curiosity had always been the most compelling reason to do anything.

Aiko called her contact at Noctilux.

Jordan opened his laptop and began rebuilding the Book Seven legend.

Vanessa looked at the portrait of Abraham Veil for a long moment.

I want to see what you built, she thought. And then I want to argue with you about it. The city moved outside the windows.

The work began.

Chapter 3

Chapter Three: Toronto — Part One

They flew up on a Thursday.

The flight from LaGuardia to Toronto City Airport took one hour and eight minutes, which was barely enough time to finish a coffee and read the Morpheus commercial prospectus that Aiko had forwarded the previous evening — a document that described, in the careful, slightly breathless language of technology investment, a product that would revolutionise the relationship between content and audience and deliver experiential entertainment at the neural level and create a billion-dollar category that does not yet exist. The language was the language of people who understood that what they had was extraordinary and had not yet found the right words for it, so they were using the available words and hoping the numbers would do the rest.

Jordan read it once and put it away.

Vanessa read it twice and made three small notes in the margin of the printed copy she had asked for specifically, because she thought better on paper than on screens for certain kinds of reading, the kind that required her to argue with what she was reading rather than simply absorb it.

The city appeared below them as they descended — not the dramatic skyline approach of Manhattan, which announced itself from thirty miles out with the specific arrogance of a place that had decided its own importance was the first thing you needed to know about it, but something quieter and more horizontal, a city spread across a flat lakeshore in the grey February morning, Lake Ontario vast and steel-coloured to the south, the downtown towers visible but not insistent, the residential neighbourhoods extending northward in their orderly grids with the patient, slightly ironic self-possession of a place that had learned not to compete with the cities it had spent decades impersonating.

Vanessa looked at it through the oval window.

"It knows something," she said.

Jordan looked up from his phone.

"About what?"

"About being looked through," she said. "About having people arrive and see somewhere else." She looked at the city below. "It's developed a very specific relationship with its own invisibility."

Jordan looked out his own window for a moment.

"That's either a useful quality in a city," he said, "or a melancholy one."

"Both," Vanessa said. "That's usually how it works."

Toronto City Airport sat on a small island in the harbour, connected to the mainland by a short ferry crossing that took three minutes and felt, in the February cold, like a deliberate imposition of threshold — a small enforced pause between arrival and the city proper, the water grey and choppy on both sides, the downtown towers close enough to see in detail but not yet reachable. Aiko stood on the mainland side of the ferry terminal when they came across, her dark coat and her bag and the specific quality of her stillness making her immediately visible among the small crowd of people waiting.

She had arrived the previous day. She had already walked most of the relevant

neighbourhoods, which was how she processed new environments — on foot, systematically,

building the physical reality of a place into her understanding before she needed to operate in it.

"How is it?" Jordan asked, when they reached her.

"Interesting," Aiko said. "The east end where Morpheus is feels different from the rest of the city. There's a quality to it — the old industrial buildings, the residential streets immediately adjacent. It doesn't feel like a place where the future is being built. It feels like a place where something is being hidden in plain sight."

"Show us," Vanessa said.

They took a car east.

The city unfolded around them in its February way — the downtown core giving way to older neighbourhoods, the architecture shifting from glass towers to brick mid-rises to the particular Victorian and Edwardian streetscapes of a city that had built itself in the late nineteenth century and preserved enough of that building to remember what it had been. The streets were wide and the trees that lined them were bare and enormous, their upper branches making a loose grey lattice against the sky. The cold was the Toronto cold — serious, workmanlike, the cold of a city that didn't perform its winters but simply had them. Vanessa watched the neighbourhoods change through the car window with the same attention she brought to all new cities — reading the character of each block, the relationship between the buildings and the people moving between them, the specific texture of ordinary life that every city wore differently. Toronto wore it with a particular quality she was still calibrating. Not the performative diversity of cities that had decided their multiculturalism was a brand — something more genuinely accidental than that, the natural result of a city that had received successive waves of people from everywhere and had never quite finished

absorbing any of them and had stopped trying and had simply become what that produced. Vietnamese restaurants beside Jamaican bakeries beside Portuguese social clubs beside the glass-fronted condominiums of the most recent arrivals. Every block a different chapter of the same ongoing story that nobody had written down.

"It's honest," she said, mostly to herself.

Jordan looked at her.

"The city," she said. "It doesn't have a mythology about itself the way New York does. Or the way Paris does. It just — is. It just keeps being what it is and adding things and letting them sit beside each other without requiring them to resolve into a single story."

"Is that useful for us?" Jordan asked.

Vanessa considered it.

"It means nobody is performing here," she said. "Not the city, not the people in it. Which means the gap between the version and the truth is smaller than usual." She paused. "Which means we'll need to be more careful."

Jordan looked at her for a moment.

"Or more honest," he said.

Vanessa turned from the window to look at him.

He was looking back with the expression he wore when he had said something that meant more than one thing and was leaving the second meaning for her to find.

She found it.

She looked back out the window.

Chapter Three: Toronto — Part Two

Morpheus Studios occupied a large industrial building on a street in the east end that had been, at various points in its history, a furniture manufacturer, a bottling plant, and a film

equipment storage facility. The building had the bones of serious industrial purpose — wide footprint, high roofline, the particular blankness of a structure designed to contain processes rather than to be seen. But the surrounding streets were residential, the kind of neighbourhood where working people had lived for a hundred years and still did, the houses modest and well-maintained, the corner stores still functioning as corner stores rather than having been converted into boutiques.

The building sat in this neighbourhood with the slightly incongruous quality of something that didn't entirely belong to its surroundings and had decided not to apologise for it. The signage was minimal — MORPHEUS STUDIOS in plain letters above the entrance, no logo, no tagline, nothing that suggested the building contained anything other than what it had always contained, which was the point. The entrance was a large industrial door that required a card to open. There were cameras, discreet and well-positioned. The windows on the ground floor were high and frosted.

They drove past it slowly without stopping.

Vanessa looked at it from the car window with the focused, quiet attention of someone memorising a face.

"It looks exactly like what it used to be," she said.

"Yes," Aiko said.

"That's deliberate."

"Everything about it is deliberate," Aiko said. "The location, the appearance, the minimal signage. Noctilux bought it because it was already invisible. A film production facility in a working neighbourhood — nobody looks twice. Nobody asks questions. The people on this street have been watching trucks come and go from that building for forty years. A few more trucks doesn't register."

Jordan was looking at the building as they passed.

"How many people work there?" he asked.

"Forty-three in the R&D division," Aiko said. "Eleven in the commercial division. Plus Abraham and his small production team — six people, all of whom have signed nondisclosures so comprehensive that they cannot discuss their work with their own families." A pause. "And the research subjects. Rotating pool of approximately thirty active participants at any given time."

"Where do they do the recordings?" Vanessa asked.

"Soundstage Two," Aiko said. "It's been converted into a clinical research environment. The recording process requires REM sleep, so the subjects come in for overnight sessions. They're told it's a sleep study with neural monitoring. The equipment is presented as standard sleep research technology." She paused. "It looks, to anyone who doesn't know what they're looking at, exactly like a sleep lab."

Vanessa looked at the building until the car turned the corner and it disappeared from view. She had a specific feeling she sometimes got in the early stage of a job — a feeling she had never found the precise word for, that was not quite excitement and not quite apprehension but somewhere between the two, the

feeling of having identified something that was going to require everything she had and was worth the requiring. She had felt it in Stockholm when she first heard about Britta and the cream blazer and the nodding. She had felt it in Punta Mita when she understood what Harlequin Rose had become. She had felt it, years ago, standing at the edge of a ballroom watching a couple who believed in fairy tales. She felt it now.

"Tell me about the Annex," she said to Aiko. "Abraham's neighbourhood."

The Annex was what happened when a Victorian residential neighbourhood adjacent to a

major university spent a hundred years absorbing academics, artists, students, and the specific class of person who chose to live near ideas rather than near money. The streets were lined with large, slightly worn houses that had been subdivided and restored and subdivided again, their front porches deep and their trees enormous, the whole neighbourhood carrying the particular quality of a place where people came to think rather than to display. Bookshops still functioned as bookshops. Cafes had the working atmosphere of places where people spent three hours over a single coffee and nobody minded. The university itself was visible at the southern edge, its gothic stone buildings sitting in their grounds with the calm authority of institutions that had been important for long enough to stop announcing it.

Abraham Veil's building was on a side street one block from a park — a converted Victorian house divided into three apartments, his on the top floor. The building was undistinguished from the outside, its red brick and white trim identical to the buildings on either side. The only detail that distinguished it was the light in the top floor windows, which was on when they drove past at eight in the evening, warm and steady, the light of someone at work. "He's there most evenings," Aiko said. "He walks to the studio in the morning — it's forty minutes on foot, which he does regardless of weather. He stops at the same café on Bloor Street. He works until eight or nine. He walks home. He reads until late."

"Alone?" Vanessa asked.

"Almost always."

She looked at the lit windows as they passed. Behind them, somewhere in the accumulated warmth of a top floor apartment that was primarily books, a man was working on something he believed was the most important artistic project of his generation. A man who had reached into the sleeping minds of thirty people and found what was forming there and made it into something that made audiences sit in stunned silence and write three pages and then cross them out and write: I saw something I had not permitted myself to want.

A man who had never had to look at any of them afterward.

Vanessa thought about that for a moment.

Then she thought about what it would mean to be the first person who made him look. Not because it was right. Not because it was wrong. Because it was the most interesting conversation available in this city, and because Abraham Veil had built something that she genuinely wanted to understand from the inside, and because Aiko had asked, and because the favour bank had a balance that mattered.

All of those things were true simultaneously. That was usually how it worked.

"The introduction is arranged?" she asked Aiko.

"Tomorrow afternoon," Aiko said. "Two o'clock. The Noctilux offices downtown. My contact will introduce you as potential strategic partners for the commercial division." A pause. "Abraham will be there. He attends these meetings under sufferance. He will be polite and present and thinking about something else entirely."

"Until someone talks to him about the work," Jordan said.

"Yes," Aiko said. "Then he will be entirely present."

Vanessa looked at the lit windows one more time as the car turned away.

"Good," she said.

Their hotel was in the Distillery District.

The area had been a Victorian-era whisky distillery for a hundred years — the largest in the British Empire at its peak, a vast complex of red brick buildings and cobblestone lanes that had produced an incomprehensible volume of alcohol and employed several generations of working people and had closed in the 1990s and been converted at the turn of the century into

a pedestrian village of restaurants and galleries and boutique hotels, the old industrial architecture preserved with the careful reverence of a city that knew it didn't have enough history to waste any of it.

The hotel occupied one of the former cooperage buildings — the barrel-making facility, which had the particular bones of a space designed around the logic of craft rather than the logic of display. High ceilings. Wide floors. The brick warm under the evening light. Their room was on the upper floor, its windows looking out over the cobblestone lane below and the other former distillery buildings beyond, their red brick faces lit against the February dark with the amber warmth of a neighbourhood that understood its own atmosphere and worked with it.

Vanessa stood at the window after Aiko left for her own room.

Jordan came to stand beside her.

Below, the lane was quiet — a few people moving through it, their breath clouding in the cold, the cobblestones carrying the particular quality of surfaces that had been walked on for a very long time by people doing necessary work and remembered it. A couple stopped near the base of an old chimney stack that had been preserved standing alone in the middle of the lane, its industrial purpose long gone, its presence now purely historical — a thing that had meant something once and was kept because the keeping was a form of honesty about what this place had been.

"I want to tell you something," Vanessa said.

Jordan looked at her.

"I'm not entirely sure what we're doing here is what we usually do," she said. "I want to be clear about that going in." She looked at the chimney stack below. "We're not here to destroy Abraham. We're not here to fix him. We're here because Aiko asked and because the technology is the most interesting thing I've encountered since — " She paused. "Since the Ozmix. And because I want to walk into a Weave and find out if it actually does what the audience response data says it does." She paused again. "And because if it does — if it actually finds the thing you haven't permitted yourself to want — then I want to know what that means. For us. For what we've been doing."

Jordan was quiet.

"You're afraid of what it might show you," he said.

Vanessa looked at the lit windows of the buildings across the lane.

"I'm interested in what it might show me," she said carefully. "That's different from afraid." Jordan looked at her for a long moment.

She was thirty-two years old — or had been thirty-two for several years and saw no particular reason to revisit the question. She had dark auburn hair that was loose tonight and the specific quality of a face that had been doing serious things for long enough that the seriousness had become structural rather than performed. She stood at the window in the amber light of the Distillery District and looked at a Victorian chimney stack and was entirely herself — the version that only appeared in private, the version that didn't perform anything for anyone, the version he had been the only witness to for the length of their work together. He loved her in the way that required no announcement. The way that had been true for long enough that it had stopped needing to be said and had simply become the atmosphere of their life together — present in every room they shared, in every look across a table, in the specific quality of silence that existed between them that had no equivalent with anyone else. "Same rules," he

said quietly.

She turned from the window to look at him.

Not the rules as professional protocol. Not the rules as a boundary between them and the

work. The rules as what they had always been, underneath the professional shorthand — the floor beneath everything else, the thing that didn't change regardless of what the work asked of them or what a city asked of them or what a machine built from sleeping minds might ask of them.

We don't fall in love with them. We don't keep them. And when it's over—

"Same rules," she said.

She leaned in and kissed him — not the urgent, triumphant kiss of jobs completed and worlds ended, but the slow, deliberate, fully present kiss of two people who were about to walk into something genuinely unknown and were taking a moment to acknowledge what they were walking in from.

When she pulled back the amber light was still on the brick and the lane below was still quiet and the chimney stack still stood in the cobblestones exactly as it had stood for a hundred and fifty years, indifferent and honest and entirely itself.

"Tomorrow," she said.

"Tomorrow," he agreed.

Outside, Toronto held its February patience — the enormous lake invisible in the dark to the south, the bare trees in the residential streets to the north, the old industrial neighbourhood to the east where a building that looked exactly like what it used to be contained something that had never existed before.

And somewhere in the Annex, in a top floor apartment full of books, a light was still on. Abraham Veil was still working.

He didn't know yet that two people had arrived in his city.

Two people who had spent years learning to find the gap between what was presented and what was true.

Who had just been told that he had built a machine that did the same thing.

And who were, in the specific way that genuinely curious people were dangerous, very interested in meeting him.

Chapter 4

Chapter Four: Abraham — Part One

The Noctilux offices were on the thirty-fourth floor of a tower on Bay Street, which was Toronto's version of a financial district — serious, vertical, the architecture of money presenting itself with the straightforward confidence of a city that had decided finance was a legitimate identity rather than something to be embarrassed about. The offices themselves were the offices of people who understood that the technology they were sitting on was worth more than anything else in the building and were in the process of figuring out how to convert that understanding into a number.

The lobby was designed to suggest arrival at something significant. Dark stone floors. A reception desk staffed by a young woman with the precise, warm efficiency of someone who had been hired as much for the quality of the first impression she created as for any administrative skill. A single large screen on the far wall showing, on a slow loop, a visualisation of neural activity during REM sleep — the coloured topographies blooming and shifting like weather systems seen from space, beautiful in the way that data became beautiful when rendered at sufficient scale.

Vanessa looked at the screen for a moment as they crossed the lobby.

The colours moved. Blues becoming greens becoming the deep amber of high activity, spreading across the cortical map in patterns that were not random — that had, even rendered as pure data, the quality of intention. Of something happening rather than something merely occurring.

She looked away before the receptionist noticed her looking.

--Their contact at Noctilux was a woman named Patricia Wen — mid-fifties, Hong Kong-born, with the specific combination of warmth and precision that came from someone who had spent thirty years building relationships across multiple industries and understood that the relationship was always the actual product. She met them in the lobby personally, which was the signal that Aiko's favour had been significant, and she greeted Aiko with the particular warmth of someone who owed a debt they were glad to have the opportunity to repay. She shook Vanessa's hand and held it a fraction longer than a standard handshake. "Aiko has told me very little about you," Patricia said, which in the vocabulary of her world was a significant compliment. "Which means I've been looking forward to this."

"Likewise," Vanessa said.

Patricia looked at Jordan with the assessing eyes of someone who read people quickly and accurately. Whatever she found seemed to satisfy her. She gestured

toward the elevator.

"We have about forty minutes before the full group arrives," she said as they rose. "I wanted to give you context first. So you understand what you're walking into."

"Please," Jordan said.

Patricia looked at the elevator doors as she spoke, which Vanessa recognised as the posture of someone saying something they had thought carefully about and wanted to say precisely. "Morpheus has two problems," she said. "The first is Abraham. The second is everything else." She paused. "The technology is real. What it does is real. The audience response data you've presumably seen is accurate and if anything understates the effect. What Abraham has built with it is — " She paused again, choosing. "Unprecedented. That's not marketing language. I don't use marketing language when I'm trying to make a serious case." A beat. "But Abraham is not interested in the commercial application. He tolerates these conversations because Noctilux's funding keeps the research division operational and the research division is where his subjects come from. Without the clinical programme he has no material. So he comes to meetings. He is present. He says the right things." She looked at Vanessa. "He is not, however, persuadable. In years of these conversations nobody has said anything to him that he found worth engaging with."

"Because they've been talking about the product," Vanessa said.

Patricia looked at her.

"Yes," she said. "Exactly that."

The elevator opened.

--The meeting room was large and well-appointed with the particular quality of corporate spaces that had been designed to impress without appearing to try. Floor-to-ceiling windows looking out over the city and the lake beyond, the February grey of both merging at the horizon into a single tone. A long table. Water and coffee already arranged. The neural activity visualisation playing on a screen at the far end, the same looping display as the lobby, the coloured topographies blooming and shifting.

Three people were already in the room.

Two of them were Noctilux executives — a man and a woman in their forties, the specific well-dressed, well-prepared presentation of people who understood the value of what they had and were accustomed to making that case. They stood when Vanessa and Jordan entered and introduced themselves with the names and titles of people for whom names and titles were important.

The third person was sitting at the far end of the table looking out the window. He didn't stand immediately.

He was taller than the photograph had suggested — the photograph had been a head and shoulders portrait and hadn't conveyed the full extent of him, the particular physical economy of someone who moved deliberately and inhabited his own dimensions without apology. He was wearing a dark grey jacket over a black shirt, no tie, the clothes of someone who had decided a long time ago what they wore and had stopped reconsidering. His grey hair was cut short. His hands were on the table in front of him, still, and when he finally turned from the window and stood the movement had the quality of someone returning from somewhere rather than simply standing up.

His eyes were the first thing.

Dark, deeply set, carrying the specific quality of someone who had spent decades watching things rather than performing things. Not cold — attentive. The eyes of someone for whom the world was primarily material rather than primarily social, who looked at people the way he would look at anything else that interested him — with full, unhurried, slightly clinical focus.

He looked at Vanessa.

She looked back.

Hello, she thought. *There you are.*

"Abraham Veil," Patricia said. "Vanessa Smart. Jordan Harlan."

Abraham extended his hand to Jordan first, which Vanessa noted — not rudeness, she thought, but the instinct of someone who had learned to approach the less immediately complicated thing first while he continued to process the more complicated one. His handshake was brief and firm and entirely without performance.

Then he turned to Vanessa.

His hand was warm. Dry. The hand of someone who worked with his mind rather than his body but was not entirely sedentary — the hand of someone who walked forty minutes to work every morning regardless of the weather and had been doing so long enough that it had become structural.

"Ms. Smart," he said. His voice was Manchester still, the accent not erased by decades of international work but worn smooth, its edges softened into something that retained its origin without being defined by it.

"Mr. Veil," she said.

He held her gaze for one beat longer than the social standard.

She held it back.

Then they both sat down.

Chapter Four: Abraham — Part Two

The first thirty minutes of the meeting were about the commercial application.

The Noctilux executives presented it well — the market opportunity, the competitive landscape, the specific advantages of the Somnium technology over existing immersive entertainment formats, the roadmap from research to product to scale. They used good slides and clear language and made a genuinely compelling case for why this was worth the investment conversation.

Vanessa listened with the quality of attention that looked like polite engagement and was actually comprehensive retention. She asked two questions — both about the consumer experience rather than the investment mechanics, both phrased in the specific language of someone who had spent years thinking about how audiences related to content rather than how investors related to assets. The questions landed correctly. Patricia nodded slightly. The executives responded with more detail than they had offered anyone else in this room, she suspected, because the questions suggested someone who understood what they were actually talking about.

Jordan listened and occasionally spoke, his questions in the precise register of technical and strategic due diligence — the questions of a systems architect who understood both the infrastructure requirements and the operational risks. The executives liked him immediately, which was always how it went with Jordan. He had the quality of making people feel that their expertise was being genuinely engaged with, which it was, which made the engagement feel different from flattery even though its effect was similar.

Abraham said nothing.

He sat at his end of the table with his hands still and his attention distributed in the particular way of someone who was present in a room while simultaneously thinking about something else — not rudely, not visibly, but in the way of someone whose inner life was always running in parallel with whatever was happening around them. He drank his coffee. He looked at the slides when they required looking at. He did not look at his phone. He was, Vanessa thought, extremely patient for someone who found this tedious.

She waited.

The executives finished the formal presentation. Patricia moved smoothly into the discussion phase — the open conversation, the questions and answers, the negotiation of next steps. This was the part where most meetings either accelerated or stalled, and Patricia was skilled at managing the acceleration.

Vanessa let it run for another ten minutes.

Then she said, not loudly, not directed at the group but at a specific angle toward the end of the table where Abraham was sitting:

"Mr. Veil. The First Weave. What was it about?"

The room shifted slightly.

Not dramatically — nobody moved, nobody spoke, the shift was only in the quality of the attention, the specific reorientation of several people toward the question and toward Abraham in the same moment.

Abraham looked at her.

She was looking back with the full, unhurried, slightly clinical quality of attention that she had recognised in his eyes when they met — the same quality, directed at him. The look of someone for whom the world was primarily material, who looked at things with full focus because they found them genuinely worth looking at.

He was quiet for a moment.

Not the quiet of someone deciding whether to engage. The quiet of someone deciding how. "Loss," he said finally.

Vanessa waited.

"The First Weave is built from material that circles a single centre," he said. "Not the experience of loss — the desire. The unknown desire to lose something. To be relieved of it." He paused. "Most people don't know they want to lose things. They know they grieve them. They know they fear losing them. But underneath that, in the material the technology reaches — there is frequently a desire to be free of the weight of certain attachments. Of certain versions of themselves." His voice was even, unhurried, the voice of someone who had thought about this for a long time and could speak about it without needing to perform the thinking. "The Weave finds that desire in multiple subjects. Weaves them together. And what the audience experiences is — a kind of permission. To want what they have been afraid to want."

The room was quiet.

Jordan was looking at Abraham with the focused, still attention he brought to things that were genuinely new.

Vanessa was looking at him too.

"How do you know what you found?" she asked. "In the subjects. How do you know it's real and not an artifact of the technology — not something the recording process generates rather than discovers?"

Abraham looked at her with something that was not quite surprise but was adjacent to it — the expression of someone who had been asked, for the first time, the right question. "Because it holds under repetition," he said. "The same material, shown to different audiences, produces the same recognition. Not the same reaction — people respond differently. But the recognition is consistent. They know they are seeing something true even when they cannot locate what it is or where the truth is coming from." He paused. "You can't manufacture that consistency. It has to come from the material itself."

"But you chose what to include," Vanessa said. "In the composition. The Weave isn't the raw data — it's what you made from the data. You selected. You arranged."

"Yes," Abraham said.

"So the truth of it is partly yours."

A beat.

"All art is partly the artist's," he said. "That's not a problem. That's a definition." "It's a definition that assumes the material was available to you," Vanessa said. "That it was yours to select and arrange."

The room was very quiet now.

Abraham looked at her steadily.

"The subjects consented to the research," he said.

"They consented to a sleep study," Vanessa said. "With neural monitoring."

Something moved in Abraham's eyes — brief, almost imperceptible, the microexpression of someone whose argument has been touched at a point they have been careful not to touch themselves.

"The consent form covers the use of neural data for research purposes," he said. His voice was still even. Still unhurried. But something underneath it had shifted by a fraction. "Does it cover art?" Vanessa asked.

The silence that followed was the specific silence of a question that had arrived at its destination.

Abraham looked at her across the long table with the dark, attentive eyes.

He did not answer immediately.

And in the not-answering, Vanessa understood something she had suspected since reading the audience response data in the Manhattan apartment two days ago — that Abraham Veil had been asking himself this question for some time. That it lived in him somewhere, in the same place that the Third Weave's subjects' unknown desires lived in them. Not fully formed. Not yet permitted to

become what it was.

The crack.

She had found it in the first real conversation.

She didn't widen it. Not here, not now, not in a room full of people with financial interests in the outcome. She simply noted its location with the careful, internal precision of someone

who would return to it later, in a different room, with more time.

She looked away from Abraham and back toward Patricia.

"The content question is interesting," she said, in a slightly different register — the register of someone returning to the professional conversation from a brief digression. "From a commercial standpoint, how you characterise the experience to consumers will determine what regulatory framework applies. That's worth thinking through carefully before the product launch."

Patricia looked at her with the expression of someone who had watched something happen and was deciding what it meant.

"Absolutely," she said, after a beat.

The meeting continued.

-**Chapter Four: Abraham — Part Three**

The formal meeting ended at four o'clock.

The Noctilux executives gathered their materials with the satisfied efficiency of people who felt the conversation had gone well, which it had, in the specific way that mattered to them — Vanessa and Jordan had asked the right questions and expressed the right kinds of interest and left enough ambiguity about the investment decision to warrant a follow-up meeting, which was exactly what a first meeting was supposed to produce.

Patricia walked them to the elevator. She shook Vanessa's hand again, and this time the fraction-longer hold was accompanied by a look that said she had seen what had happened at the end of the table and was reserving her assessment for later.

"I'll be in touch," she said.

"I look forward to it," Vanessa said.

Abraham had left the room quietly during the final minutes of logistics discussion, the exit of someone who considered that part of the meeting to have concluded when the conversation of interest concluded and saw no reason to remain for the administrative residue.

He was in the lobby when they came down.

Not waiting — he had his coat on and was moving toward the exit with the purposeful directness of someone with a destination. But he slowed when he saw them, which was a choice rather than an accident, and he fell into step beside them as they crossed the lobby toward the doors.

"Ms. Smart," he said.

"Mr. Veil."

They walked three steps in silence.

"The consent question," he said. "You raised it as a commercial consideration."

"It is a commercial consideration," Vanessa said.

"Yes," he said. "But that's not why you raised it."

She looked at him.

He was looking ahead at the lobby doors, his profile carrying the particular quality of someone who was thinking about something and had decided to think about it out loud. "No," she said. "It's not."

"Why then?" he asked.

They reached the doors. Outside, the February afternoon was doing its grey, serious work on Bay Street — the towers and the cold and the pedestrian traffic of a city going about its business with purposeful efficiency.

Vanessa stopped just inside the doors. Jordan stopped beside her. Abraham stopped too, and turned to face her, and waited with the patience of someone who was accustomed to waiting for things that were worth waiting for.

She looked at him.

He looked back.

The dark, attentive eyes. The face that had arrived at positions it was prepared to defend. The man who had built something genuinely extraordinary from material that wasn't entirely his to take, and who had been asking himself a question he hadn't yet permitted to fully form. "Because I think you already know the answer," she said. "And I think you've been avoiding it. And I think the work is important enough that it deserves the honest version of its own foundation." She paused. "Not the version that fits inside a consent form."

Abraham looked at her for a long moment.

Outside, the city moved in its grey February way.

Inside, the lobby held them in its dark stone quiet.

"How long are you in Toronto?" he asked.

"As long as it takes," she said.

He looked at her for one more beat. Then he nodded — not agreement exactly.

Acknowledgment. The nod of someone who has registered something and is deciding where

to put it.

"There's a café on Bloor Street," he said. "I'm there most mornings at eight. The coffee is adequate and the light is good." He paused. "If you wanted to continue the conversation." "I would," Vanessa said.

He nodded once more. Then he pushed through the lobby doors and was gone into the February street, his dark figure moving with the particular purposeful ease of someone who had somewhere to be and was going there directly.

Vanessa watched him go.

Jordan stood beside her.

"You found it," he said quietly.

"Yes," she said.

"In the first conversation."

"He's been sitting with it for a while," she said. "He just needed someone to say it out loud." She watched Abraham's figure until it turned the corner and was gone. "He's going to be difficult."

"You said that in the apartment," Jordan said. "Convinced people are harder."

"I know," she said. "I said it about him. I didn't know him yet." She paused. "He's not just convinced. He's genuinely right about most of it. The work is real. The ambition is real. The thing he's made is — " She stopped. "I want to see the First Weave," she said.

"Two days," Jordan said. "The private showing at the collector's house."

"Two days," she agreed.

She turned from the lobby doors and walked toward the elevator to retrieve their coats, and Jordan walked beside her, and the lobby held them briefly in its dark stone quiet before releasing them back into the city.

Outside, Toronto was doing what it always did — being itself, patiently and without

Chapter 5

Chapter Five: The First Weave — Part One

The collector's house was in Rosedale.

Rosedale was the kind of neighbourhood that didn't need to announce itself — it had the particular quality of old Toronto money, which was different from new Toronto money in the specific way that old money everywhere was different from new money, which was that it had stopped trying to demonstrate anything and had settled into the comfortable authority of a place that had been significant for long enough that significance had become simply the texture of ordinary life there. The streets were winding rather than grid — an anomaly in Toronto's otherwise relentlessly rational urban plan, the result of the neighbourhood having developed along the ravines that cut through it, following the logic of the landscape rather than the logic of the city planner. The houses were large and set back from the street behind mature trees that in February stood in their bare, enormous patience, their upper branches making a loose grey architecture against the sky.

The house itself was Victorian — not the modest Victorian of the Annex but the Victorian of people who had built at a scale that communicated permanence rather than comfort. Three storeys of red brick with stone detailing, a wide front porch, bay windows on the ground floor that let the interior light spill warmly onto the snow-dusted front garden. It was the house of someone who had inherited money and had the taste to use it carefully — nothing

ostentatious, nothing that required admiration, simply a house that had been maintained and furnished and lived in with the quiet, unhurried attention of someone for whom these things mattered and always had.

Their host was a man named Oliver Strand — late sixties, silver-haired, with the particular physical ease of someone who had been comfortable in his own skin for so long that comfort had become indistinguishable from grace. He was a collector in the serious sense — not the acquisitive sense of someone who accumulated things to demonstrate their value, but the curatorial sense of someone who spent their life in the presence of things they believed were important and had developed, through that proximity, a specific and trustworthy eye. He met them at the door himself.

"Aiko," he said warmly, taking her hands briefly. Then he turned to Vanessa and Jordan with the assessing but genuinely open attention of someone who was interested in new people rather than simply polite about them. "Ms. Smart. Mr. Harlan. I'm glad you could come." He looked at them for a moment — not intrusively, but with the quality of someone reading something quickly and accurately. "Aiko tells me you encountered the audience response data before

coming tonight."

"We did," Vanessa said.

"Good," Oliver said. "I always prefer that people come in knowing something rather than nothing. The Weave doesn't require preparation — it works regardless. But knowing

something about what you're walking into seems to me a form of respect for the experience." He stood back and gestured them inside. "Come in. There are drinks first, and a few other guests. We'll begin in about half an hour."

--The ground floor of the house was warm and particular in the way of spaces that had been lived in carefully for a long time — books on every available surface, not decoratively arranged but actually read, their spines worn and their pages marked, the books of someone for whom reading was as ordinary as breathing and as necessary. Art on the walls that was chosen rather than collected — not the institutional groupings of someone building a portfolio but the personal accumulation of someone who had put things on their walls because they needed to look at them.

Eight other guests were already there.

They ranged from their late thirties to their early seventies — a composer Vanessa didn't recognise, two academics of some kind, a filmmaker whose name Jordan murmured to her quietly when they entered, a gallery owner from Montreal who had apparently been to two previous Weave evenings and was back for a third, and two people whose connection to the room wasn't immediately legible but who carried the specific quality of people who took experiences seriously.

Nobody was talking about the Weave directly.

They were talking around it — in the specific way of people who had arrived at the same threshold and were filling the time before crossing it with conversation that was genuinely interesting but was also, underneath, a form of preparation. The gallery owner from Montreal was talking about a recent exhibition. The filmmaker was talking about the relationship between sound design and emotional state. The composer was talking about something Vanessa couldn't quite hear from where she stood.

She accepted a glass of wine from a quiet young man who was moving through the room with it and stood near the bookcase and watched the room and felt the specific quality of the evening assembling itself around her.

Jordan was talking to one of the academics — easily, with genuine interest, the way he talked to people when the talking was real rather than operational. She watched him for a moment. His dark hair and the silver at his temples and the

quality of his attention directed at someone who was saying something he found worth listening to. The man she had been working and living beside for the length of their partnership together — however many years that was now, she had stopped counting in the specific way she had stopped counting her own age, not because the number didn't exist but because it had stopped being the most interesting thing about the fact.

She looked away before he noticed her looking.

Oliver appeared beside her.

"Your first time," he said. Not a question.

"Yes," she said.

"Are you nervous?" he asked. Direct, but not unkindly.

Vanessa considered it honestly.

"I'm interested," she said. "That's different from nervous."

Oliver smiled. It was the smile of someone who had heard that answer before and found it consistently interesting. "Several people have said something like that," he said. "Before the first time." He looked at his wine glass. "Afterward they usually say something different." "What do they say?" she asked.

He was quiet for a moment.

"They say they're not sure what they expected," he said. "But it wasn't that." He looked at her. "Which I find, having now seen the First Weave eleven times, to be the most accurate description available."

Vanessa looked at him.

"You've seen it eleven times," she said.

"Yes."

"Why?"

Oliver looked across the room at nothing in particular.

"Because it's different every time," he said. "Not the Weave — the Weave is the same. But I'm not the same. And what it finds in me is not the same." He paused. "The first time it found something I had been carrying for thirty years that I had entirely stopped being aware of. The second time it found something adjacent to that but not the same thing. By the fifth time I began to understand that what it was mapping was not a fixed territory but a moving one." He looked back at her. "Which is either the most profound thing I've ever encountered or a very sophisticated illusion. I haven't decided which. But I keep coming back to find out." Vanessa held his gaze.

"What did it find the first time?" she asked. "The thing you'd been carrying for thirty years." Oliver smiled again. This time the smile was smaller and more private.

"You'll understand why I won't answer that," he said, "after tonight."

--**Chapter Five: The First Weave — Part Two**

The room where it happened was on the ground floor at the back of the house.

Oliver had converted what had been a formal dining room into something else entirely — the furniture removed, the walls painted a deep, dark colour that absorbed light rather than reflecting it, the ceiling the same, the floor covered in a material that was neither carpet nor wood but something between the two, soft underfoot and completely silent. Along one wall, a low shelf held the equipment — compact, unobtrusive, nothing that looked like what it was. The room held twelve chairs arranged in a loose arc, facing nothing in particular. No screen. No stage. No obvious direction of attention.

The chairs were simple and well-made, with a quality of support that suggested someone had thought carefully about how a body needed to be held for an extended period — not rigid, not so comfortable as to induce sleep, but sufficient for a kind of sustained, open, receptive stillness.

Oliver's assistant — a young woman who moved through the room with the quiet efficiency of someone who had done this many times — placed on each chair a small device. It looked, Vanessa thought, like nothing so much as a pair of very thin reading glasses without the lenses — a delicate curved frame that rested over the ears and across the forehead, carrying its technology so lightly that when she picked it up she was not entirely sure which parts of it were structural and which were functional.

"The device reads and also delivers," Oliver said, when the twelve of them had taken their seats. He was standing near the door, speaking in the quiet, even tone of someone who had given this introduction before and had refined it down to what was actually necessary. "It reads your current neural state — your baseline, tonight, in this room, in this chair. And it delivers the Weave, calibrated to that baseline. Which is why no two experiences of the same Weave are identical." He paused. "There is no narrative. There is no story in the conventional sense. There are no characters. What there is — " He stopped. Started again. "What there is is something that arrives. That's the best description I have. Something that arrives, and that you recognise, and that you may or may not have a word for afterward." He looked around the room. "The experience lasts approximately forty minutes. You may feel at various points that time is moving differently than usual. That's normal. You may feel at various points that you are on the edge of something — a threshold of some kind. If that

happens, the instruction, if instruction is the right word, is simply to stay." He paused once more. "Don't try to name it while it's happening. There will be time for that afterward."

He nodded to his assistant.

She moved through the room and placed the device on each person's head with the careful, practiced efficiency of someone doing something that required both precision and gentleness. When she reached Vanessa, her hands were warm and her touch was light — the frame settled over Vanessa's ears and forehead with a fit that was so exact it was almost impossible to feel, the way certain things that were correctly made became indistinguishable from the body they were made for.

Vanessa sat with her hands in her lap and her eyes open.

Jordan was two chairs to her left. She didn't look at him. She was aware of him in the peripheral way she was always aware of him in rooms — the specific quality of his presence, the particular frequency of it, the thing that had been part of her sensory environment for long enough that its absence would have been more noticeable than its presence.

She was aware of the room. The twelve chairs and the twelve people in them, each arriving at this threshold from their own direction, carrying whatever they were carrying, in whatever state tonight had found them in.

She was aware of the device on her head, its barely-perceptible contact with her skin. She was aware of the Debussy quality of the moment — the hypnopompic threshold, the membrane between the managed self and the unmanaged one, the few seconds before the waking mind fully assembles its defenses and the dreaming mind releases its hold. The room went dark.

Not completely — a residual quality of light remained, sourceless, that prevented the darkness from being absolute. Just enough to know you were still somewhere.

And then something arrived.

--It did not arrive the way Vanessa had expected.

She had expected something immersive in the way that immersive experiences were

immersive — surrounding, enveloping, a replacement of the external world with another one. A technology of substitution.

It was not that.

It arrived the way a memory arrived — not from outside but from inside, assembling itself out of something that was already present rather than

something being introduced. The way a piece of music sometimes surfaced from nowhere and you couldn't locate where you had heard it except that you clearly had, because there it was, complete and specific and carrying with it the full weight of whatever it was associated with, which you also couldn't locate but which was unmistakably real.

What arrived was not a place. Not a narrative. Not a person.

What arrived was a quality.

A quality of attention — of being seen. Fully, without the usual limits. Without the social contract that governed how much of a person could be seen in ordinary life, the constant mutual agreement to leave certain things unseen, to present the version rather than the truth, to maintain the gap as a form of courtesy and protection and ordinary human dignity. This was different.

This was the experience of being seen past the gap.

And it was — Vanessa understood, in the hypnopompic state that the device had found and was holding her in, in the forty minutes that felt like neither forty minutes nor a different duration but simply the duration it was — it was the thing she had been looking for. Not the thing she had known she was looking for. The thing underneath that. The thing she hadn't permitted herself to want.

Not to see. To be seen.

All this time. All these years and all these rooms and all these people whose gaps she had entered and mapped and used — and the thing she had been carrying underneath all of it, the unknown desire the technology had found in her in the first twenty seconds, was the desire to be the one who was looked at rather than the one who looked.

To be the subject rather than the instrument.

To have someone find the gap in her and not use it but simply — witness it.

She sat with it.

She did not try to name it while it was happening.

She stayed, the way Oliver had said to stay.

The quality of being seen held her in its unhurried, patient light for the duration of whatever duration it was.

And when it ended — when the room came back gently, the sourceless light returning to its residual presence, the device lifting itself almost imperceptibly from calibration — she sat in the dark for a long moment with her hands in her lap and her eyes open and did not speak. Around her, the room was doing the same.

Twelve people sitting with something they had not expected.

The first thing she heard was the sound of someone exhaling. Long, slow, the exhale of someone who had been holding something and had finally, after forty minutes or forty years, let it go.

It was not her.

But she understood it completely.

--**Chapter Five: The First Weave — Part Three**

Oliver turned the lights up slowly — not to full brightness but to a warm, low level that gave the room back its dimensions without requiring anyone to immediately assemble their faces. Nobody spoke for a while.

This was, Vanessa understood, the correct response. The room had the quality of a space in which language was not yet available — not because the experience was beyond language, exactly, but because the usual language arrived pre-loaded with its usual framings and categories and the experience hadn't been a category, it had been a specific thing, and the specific thing needed a moment before it could be approached with words.

She looked at her hands in her lap.

The same hands. The room the same room. The chairs and the dark walls and the residual quality of light the same.

And yet.

She became aware of Jordan.

Not in the peripheral way she was usually aware of him — the ambient frequency of his presence. In a specific, direct way. She turned her head and looked at him.

He was already looking at her.

His expression was the expression she had seen on him perhaps a dozen times in all the years of their partnership — the expression that appeared only when something had reached him past the usual defenses, when the professional composure had been touched at a depth that the composure didn't quite cover. Not distress. Not vulnerability in the performed sense. Simply — openness. The face of someone who had been found somewhere they hadn't

expected to be found.

She looked at him for a long moment.

He looked back.

Neither of them spoke.

What had the Weave found in him — what unknown desire had it located in Jordan Harlan's pre-conscious, in his hypnopompic threshold, in the place underneath the professional stillness and the patient intelligence and the years of accumulated partnership — she didn't know. And he didn't tell her. Not then, not in that room, in front of ten other people who were also sitting with their own unnamed things.

But the look they exchanged across the two chairs that separated them in Oliver Strand's converted dining room in a Victorian house in Rosedale on a February evening in Toronto contained something that both of them understood.

Whatever it was, it was the same thing.

Or adjacent enough to the same thing that the distance between them had closed by a fraction that could not be measured but could be felt.

Oliver was moving quietly through the room, his assistant beside him, both of them present without intruding, available without requiring anything. The gallery owner from Montreal was sitting with her eyes closed, her expression the expression of someone revisiting something. The filmmaker was looking at the ceiling. The composer had her hand over her mouth.

After a while people began to speak. Not about what they had experienced — not directly, not in the specific language of disclosure — but in the circumambulatory way of people who were still circling something they weren't yet ready to name. The filmmaker said something about duration and the way the experience had altered his sense of it. The academic said something about the difference between being observed and being witnessed. The gallery owner from Montreal said, very quietly, that she had seen her mother, which surprised her, because her mother had been dead for twelve years and she had not expected her.

Vanessa said nothing.

Jordan said nothing.

After forty minutes of conversation that moved carefully around the edges of what had happened, Oliver suggested they move back to the main room for a drink, which everyone accepted with the quiet relief of people who needed a transition.

In the main room, Jordan brought her a glass of wine without being asked. He stood beside her near the bookcase. Close — closer than the usual social margin they maintained in public, but not so close as to require explanation.

"Well," he said quietly.

"Yes," she said.

A long beat.

"Did it—" he began.

"Yes," she said.

He was quiet.

"You?" she asked.

"Yes," he said.

They stood beside each other in the warm room with the books and the art and the quiet conversation of ten other people who were each sitting with their own version of the same thing, and neither of them said anything further about it.

There was nothing further to say. Not yet. Not here.

But the thing was named, between them, in the specific vocabulary of two people who had learned to communicate in the space between words.

She had wanted to be seen.

He had found something about her.

And whatever he had found — whatever the Weave had located in him in its hypnopompic reach into his unknown desires — it pointed in the same direction.

She was fairly sure she already knew what it was.

She was not ready to say so.

Not tonight.

--Oliver found her near the end of the evening, when the group had thinned and the conversation had settled into th

Chapter 6

Chapter Six: Bloor Street — Part One

The café was on the north side of Bloor Street, between a used bookshop and a tailor that had been in the same location for forty years and showed no signs of reconsidering. It had the particular quality of Toronto cafés that had survived long enough to stop worrying about surviving — the quality of a place that had become part of the neighbourhood's daily infrastructure, as necessary and unremarkable as the sidewalk outside it. The windows were large and faced east, which was why Abraham had said the light was good, and at eight in the morning in February the light came in low and flat and honest, the specific winter light that told you the truth about everything it touched without asking whether you wanted to know. Abraham was already there.

He had a table near the window — the same table, Vanessa suspected, that he occupied every morning, the table of someone who had long since established their relationship with a space and saw no reason to vary it. He had a coffee and an open book, and he was reading with the focused, slightly forward quality of someone for whom reading was not a leisure activity but a form of thinking. He looked up when she came through the door, which meant he had been aware of the door without appearing to watch it, which was the quality of someone accustomed to being alone in public spaces and alert to them.

He closed the book.

She ordered at the counter — coffee, black, the way she had been drinking it since Stockholm had recalibrated her relationship with the beverage — and carried it to his table and sat down across from him without waiting to be invited, which was not rudeness but the establishment of a register. They were not here for social courtesy. They both knew what they were here for. "Ms. Smart," he said.

"Vanessa," she said. "If we're going to have the conversation we're going to have, the formality is going to become a problem."

Abraham looked at her for a moment.

"Vanessa," he said.

"Abraham."

He picked up his coffee. She picked up hers. Outside the window Bloor Street was doing its morning — the purposeful pedestrian traffic of a university neighbourhood waking up, people with bags and coffee cups and the specific forward-leaning energy of people who had somewhere to be and were going there with the comfortable efficiency of a routine well established.

"You were at Oliver's last night," Abraham said.

"Yes."

"How was it?"

Vanessa looked at him.

"You were in the doorway," she said. "You watched."

Something moved in his expression — brief, controlled, the microexpression of someone who had been seen doing something they considered private.

"Oliver told you," he said.

"Yes."

Abraham was quiet for a moment. He looked at his coffee cup. Then back at her.

"How was it," he said again. Not deflecting — returning to the question with the quality of someone who genuinely wanted to know and had asked it badly the first time.

Vanessa considered it honestly.

"It found something I wasn't looking for," she said. "Which I understand is the point. But understanding it intellectually and experiencing it are — " She paused. "The gap between those two things is larger than I anticipated."

Abraham nodded slowly. The nod of someone receiving information they had suspected but not confirmed.

"What did it find?" he asked.

Vanessa looked at him steadily.

"The desire to be seen," she said. "Rather than to see." She held his gaze. "Which is — given what I do — the most structurally inconvenient thing it could have found."

Abraham was very still.

"What do you do?" he asked.

"I read people," she said. "Professionally. I find the gap between what they present and what they actually are. And I work in that gap." She paused. "I have been doing it for long enough that it has become the primary mode of my relationship with the world. I look. I read. I understand." Another pause. "I am very rarely the one being read."

Abraham looked at her with the dark, attentive eyes.

"And the Weave read you," he said.

"Yes."

"Without your permission."

"Without my anticipation," she said carefully. "I gave permission when I put the device on. I just didn't know what I was giving permission for." She looked at her coffee cup. "Which is — " She stopped.

Abraham finished the sentence.

"Which is what the subjects experience," he said quietly.

The café moved around them in its ordinary morning way. The coffee machine. The low conversation of other tables. The light coming in flat and honest through the east-facing windows.

"Yes," Vanessa said. "That's what I was going to say."

--***Chapter Six: Bloor Street — Part Two**

Abraham was quiet for a long time.

Not the quiet of someone who had nothing to say. The quiet of someone who was sitting with something they had been sitting with for a long time and had just had it placed in front of them from a new direction.

Vanessa let him be quiet. She drank her coffee and looked at the street and gave him the room he needed, which was the same quality of patience she had given Britta on the bench in Djurgården and the same quality she had given the silence in Oliver's dark room the previous evening. The patience of someone who understood that certain things arrived on their own schedule and that the work of being present was simply to be there when they did. "I watch from the doorway," Abraham said finally, "because the making of it requires a particular kind of distance. The same distance a surgeon requires. If I am in the room with the material while I'm working I lose the ability to see it clearly." He paused. "The subjects become — not abstract exactly. But compositional. Elements. I need them to be elements while I'm working or the work doesn't hold together."

"And afterward?" Vanessa said.

He looked at the window.

"Afterward the distance is harder to maintain," he said. "When the Weave is finished and shown — when I watch the audience experience it — the elements become people again. And the people are sitting in Oliver's chairs with something I found in them that they didn't know was there." He paused. "I leave before the conversation because I can't — " He stopped. Started again. "Because the conversation is the part where I would have to hear what it cost them. And I have not yet found a way to hear that without it — " Another stop.

"Without it threatening the argument," Vanessa said.

Abraham looked at her.

"Yes," he said. "Without it threatening the argument."

He said it without defensiveness. Without the careful qualification of someone protecting a position. With the specific, slightly exhausted honesty of someone who had been maintaining an argument for a long time and had just admitted, out loud, to someone he had known for less than forty-eight hours, that the argument required maintenance.

Vanessa looked at him.

This was the man. Not the portrait, not the internal notes, not the meticulous records and the Shakespeare comparison and the RSC and the Olivier Awards. This was Abraham Veil at eight in the morning in a café on Bloor Street with his coffee and his closed book and the thing he had been sitting with since the first Weave was shown to an audience and he had stood in Oliver's doorway and watched twelve people find what he had taken from sleeping strangers and had then walked home through the cold because he couldn't stay for the conversation.

She felt, looking at him, something she hadn't entirely anticipated.

Not sympathy exactly. Not the softening of her position. Something more complicated and more honest than either — the recognition of someone who was genuinely wrestling with something real. Who was not a villain and not a fool and not simply selfish. Who had found something extraordinary and had taken it without adequate authority and had been living, ever since, in the gap between those two facts.

The same gap she lived in.

Just differently shaped.

"I want to tell you something," she said.

Abraham waited.

"The desire the Weave found in me," she said. "The desire to be seen rather than to see. I have been carrying that — " She paused. "I don't know how long I've been carrying it. Long enough that I had stopped being aware of it. It had become part of the furniture of who I am. Background. Invisible." She looked at her coffee cup. "The Weave found it in twenty seconds. In the first twenty seconds of the experience, before I had oriented, before I had begun to assess what was happening — it found it and named it and I recognised it immediately and completely, the way you recognise something you have always known and have been not-knowing with great effort."

Abraham was listening with his full attention — both hands around his coffee cup, his body still, his eyes on her face.

"That is extraordinary," she said. "What you built. The reach of it. The accuracy of it." She paused. "I am telling you that because I think you need to hear it from someone who walked into it skeptically and came out with something real. Not from Oliver, who loves the work. Not from an audience member who was already disposed to be moved. From someone who was trying to observe it and got caught by it instead."

Abraham was quiet.

"Thank you," he said. Simply. Without performance.

"I'm not finished," she said.

He looked at her.

"The woman whose material is in the Third Weave," she said. "Her name is Soo-Yeon Park. She's twenty-eight. She's a composer. She enrolled in the Morpheus research programme because she was trying to understand the neuroscience of her own creative process. She thought she was participating in a sleep study." Vanessa looked at him directly. "She has a friend — someone she trusts, someone who helped her develop the framework she uses to understand her own creative work. That friend has known about the Third Weave for eight months. Has been watching you use Soo-Yeon's material. Has said nothing to Soo-Yeon because she didn't know what to say." A pause. "She came to me."

Abraham had gone very still.

The café moved around them. The light came through the window. The street outside went about its morning.

"You know her," he said. His voice was careful and even and entirely controlled. "I know her friend," Vanessa said. "Who knows her."

"What do you want?" he said.

Vanessa looked at him steadily.

"I want you to meet her," she said. "Before the showing. Before the Third Weave is experienced by forty people. I want you to sit across a table from Soo-Yeon Park the way you're sitting across from me now and I want you to look at her." She paused. "Not the element. The person."

Abraham looked at the table.

His hands were still around his coffee cup. The coffee was almost certainly cold by now. He didn't drink it.

"And if I do that," he said quietly. "If I sit across from her and look at her. What happens to the work?"

"I don't know," Vanessa said honestly. "That's yours to decide. I'm not asking you to stop the showing. I'm not asking you to destroy the Weave. I'm asking you to do the thing you haven't been able to do." She paused. "Stay in the room."

The silence that followed was the silence of a man sitting at a threshold.

Not the hypnopompic threshold. The other kind. The one that existed between the version of yourself you had been and the version you would be after you made a certain choice, which was the most consequential threshold available and the one that no technology could navigate for you.

Abraham looked up from the table.

"How do I contact her?" he said.

--***Chapter Six: Bloor Street — Part Three**

They sat for another hour.

Not talking about Soo-Yeon — that was done, the essential thing said and received, and both of them understood that pressing further in that direction before Abraham had had time to sit with it would be the wrong use of the available time. Instead they talked about the work itself. The Somnium technology. The Weaves. The specific nature of what the pre-conscious material was and how it behaved when synthesised.

Abraham talked about it the way he talked about everything that mattered to him — with complete, unhurried attention, the words arriving with the precision of someone who had thought carefully about something for a long time and had found, through that thinking, a language adequate to it. He talked about the first time he had seen the neural data from a sleeping subject rendered in real time — the coloured topographies blooming across the cortical map — and the specific moment he had understood what he was looking at. Not brain activity. Not data. *The shape of a mind making meaning in the dark.*

He talked about the months of technical work that had preceded the First Weave — the collaboration with the R&D team, the iterations, the failures, the specific problem of synthesis, which was not a technical problem but an artistic one. How do you weave compatible dreams without flattening them into a single experience? How do you preserve the specificity of each source while finding the harmonic resonance between them? How do you make something that is simultaneously plural and singular — that contains the traces of multiple minds while arriving as a coherent whole?

"It's the same problem Shakespeare had," he said. "Every character in a Shakespeare play is a specific person and also a universal one. The specificity is

what makes the universality possible. You can't have the second without the first." He paused. "The Weave works on the same principle. The more specific the source material — the more precisely individual the unknown desire being used — the more universally it resonates with the audience. Because universality isn't the same as generality. It's the opposite."

Vanessa was listening with the full, real attention that she gave to things she found genuinely interesting.

"The novelist at Oliver's last night," she said. "The one who wrote three pages and crossed them out."

Abraham looked at her. He had not known about the three pages and the crossing out. She could see him receiving it.

"What did they write?" he asked.

"I didn't see it," she said. "Oliver told me. The one legible line at the bottom was: *I saw something I had not permitted myself to want. I don't know what to do with that.*" Abraham was quiet for a moment.

"That's the First Weave," he said. "That's exactly what it's for." He looked at his cold coffee. "The desire to lose something. To be relieved of the weight of a certain version of yourself. The novelist was carrying something — a version of themselves they had been maintaining for years, maybe. A story about who they were that was no longer true but was still being told." He paused. "The Weave found that. Found the desire underneath it to put the story down." Another pause. "That's not nothing. That's not a trick or a manipulation or an invasion. That's — "

"Art," Vanessa said.

"Yes," he said.

"I know," she said.

He looked at her.

"That's why the consent question matters," she said. "Not because what you built isn't real or isn't valuable. Because it is. Because it does what you say it does. Because it finds something true and returns it to the person it belongs to in a form they can bear to look at." She paused. "Which means the people it works on deserved to choose it. With full knowledge of what they were choosing."

Abraham was quiet.

He was not arguing. He was not constructing a counter-position. He was sitting with it the way he sat with the things that mattered — completely, without trying to resolve it too quickly.

"The Third Weave," he said after a while. "Is it — " He stopped. "Is the material — is SooYeon's material — the right material for that Weave? If I had found it through a different process. If she had given it freely. Would it be the same work?"

Vanessa considered the question seriously.

"I don't know," she said. "That's a question only you can answer. And maybe only after you've met her." She looked at him. "But I think the more important question is whether the work you want to make is the kind of work that can be made honestly. And I think you believe it can be. Otherwise you wouldn't still be standing in Oliver's doorway." Abraham looked at her for a long moment.

"You're very good at this," he said.

"At what?" she said.

"Finding the gap," he said. "Between what someone presents and what they actually are." He said it without accusation. With the recognition of someone identifying a skill they respected. "You said you do it professionally."

"Yes," she said.

"What do you do with it?" he asked. "When you find it."

Vanessa held his gaze.

"That depends on the job," she said.

"And this job?" he said.

She looked at him across the small table in the café on Bloor Street, in the honest east-facing winter light, with his cold coffee and his closed book and the specific quality of a man who was sitting at a threshold and knew it.

"This job," she said, "is different from the others."

Abraham looked at her for a moment longer. Then he picked up his cold coffee and drank it anyway, which was the gesture of someone who had finished thinking about one thing and was moving to the next.

"I'll meet her," he said. "Soo-Yeon. I'll meet her before the showing."

Vanessa nodded.

"I'll arrange it," she said.

They sat for a few more minutes in the ordinary morning comfort of a café that had been doing this for long enough to know how, and then Abraham picked up his closed book and put on his coat and said goodbye with the brief, direct warmth of someone who had said everything that needed saying and saw no reason to add to it.

Vanessa watched him leave through the east-facing window — his figure moving along Bloor Street in the February morning with the purposeful ease of someone who had somewhere to be and was going there directly.

She sat for a while longer with her empty coffee cup.

Outside, Toronto went about its morning. The bookshop next door was opening, the owner unlocking the door with the unhurried efficiency of someone beginning a day that would look exactly like the day before it and was none the worse for that. The tailor's was already open, a light on in the back where the actual work happened.

Vanessa thought about Soo-Yeon Park, who did not yet know that the man who had reached into her sleeping mind was going to sit across a table from her.

She thought about what it would mean to Soo-Yeon to be in that room.

She thought about what it would mean to Abraham.

She thought about the First Weave and the thing it had found in her — the desire to be seen rather than to see — and about the look she and Jordan had exchanged across two chairs in a dark room in Rosedale and about the thing she was fairly sure she already knew and was not yet ready to say.

She thought about all of it for a while.

Then she put on her coat and went out into the February morning to find Jordan and tell him what had happened.

He would be at the hotel. He would have coffee waiting. He would listen with the full, real, patient attention that was the thing she had been carrying for all this time and had stopped being aware of and that the Weave had found in the first twenty seconds.

The desire to be seen.

She walked along Bloor Street in the honest winter light.

She was fairly sure he already knew.

--*

Chapter 7

Chapter Seven: Weather — Part One

She walked back along Bloor Street and then south through the Annex toward the Distillery District, which was a longer route than necessary and entirely deliberate. She needed the walk. The cold and the movement and the specific quality of a city going about its morning without any interest in what had just happened in a café on Bloor Street — the indifferent, necessary, clarifying presence of ordinary life continuing regardless.

She thought about Abraham drinking his cold coffee.

She thought about the thing he had said — *you're very good at finding the gap* — and the way he had said it, without accusation, with the recognition of someone identifying a skill they respected because they had a version of it themselves. Two people who read the unguarded interior of other people for their respective purposes, sitting across a small table in the honest east-facing light, discovering that they were more similar than either had anticipated.

She thought about what that meant for the job.

Then she thought about what it meant outside the job, which was the more complicated question and the one she was not going to resolve on a February morning walk through Toronto, so she filed it and kept walking.

--Jordan was at the desk when she came in.

Coffee waiting, as she had known it would be. Laptop open, the research he had been doing while she was gone visible on the screen — she could see from the doorway that he had been pulling everything available on Soo-Yeon Park. Reviews of her performed work. The Berlin commission. A brief interview she had given to a Korean music journal that Aiko had translated and sent through. The shape of a person assembled from public material, which was always the beginning and never the whole thing.

He looked up when she came in.

She took off her coat and sat on the edge of the bed and picked up the coffee he had poured and drank it and looked at him.

He waited.

She told him everything.

Not in the sequential way of a report — beginning, middle, end — but in the way she told him things that mattered, following the threads that were still live rather than reconstructing

the ones that had settled. The café and the east-facing light. Abraham closing his book. The way he had admitted, with the specific exhausted honesty of someone who had been maintaining something for too long, that the argument required maintenance. The thing she had told him about the Weave finding the desire to be seen. His stillness when she named Soo-Yeon. The cold coffee drunk anyway.

Jordan listened the way he always listened — completely, without the small interjections that most people used to signal their attention, following the movement of her mind rather than waiting for conclusions.

When she finished he was quiet for a moment.

"He said yes," Jordan said.

"He said yes."

"Immediately?"

"After the silence," she said. "Which was the right length."

Jordan turned his coffee cup on the desk. The slow rotation.

"He was already there," he said. "You didn't move him. He was already standing at the threshold. You just — " He paused. "You made it possible to step."

"Yes," she said. "That's what it felt like."

Jordan looked at her steadily.

"The Weave," he said. "What it found in you. You told him."

"Yes."

"Why?"

Vanessa looked at the window. The Distillery District below, the cobblestones and the old brick in the February morning.

"Because it was the right currency," she said. "He needed to hear it from someone who had been caught by it. And I was the person in the room." She paused. "And because it was true. And because — " She stopped.

"Because you're tired of not saying true things," Jordan said quietly.

She looked at him.

He was looking back with the expression — the one that appeared only when something had reached him past the usual depth, the open face of someone who had been found somewhere unexpected. The same expression she had seen across two chairs in Oliver's dark room.

"Yes," she said. "That's accurate."

They sat with that for a moment in the warm hotel room with the old brick outside and the coffee between them and the research on the laptop screen and the three weeks remaining before the Third Weave showing.

"Aiko needs to know," Jordan said.

"Yes. I'll call her this morning."

"And Soo-Yeon needs to be told," he said. "Before we arrange the meeting with Abraham. She needs to know what was taken and what we're proposing. In that order."

"Yes," Vanessa said. "Aiko should be the one to tell her. It should come from someone she trusts."

Jordan nodded.

"And Linnéa," he said.

Vanessa looked at him.

The corner of his mouth moved. The specific movement — not quite a smile but in that direction, the expression he wore when something was inevitable and he had decided to find it entertaining rather than otherwise.

"We're in Toronto for three weeks minimum," he said. "Linnéa has been patient since Stockholm. Which for Linnéa constitutes an extraordinary act of self-restraint." He paused. "And this city has not yet been properly introduced to her, which seems like an oversight that will eventually correct itself with or without our involvement."

Vanessa looked at him for a moment.

Then she picked up her phone.

--**Chapter Seven: Weather — Part Two**

The call lasted eleven minutes.

Vanessa gave Linnéa the essential shape of it — Toronto, Morpheus, the Somnium

technology, the Weaves, Abraham Veil, Soo-Yeon — in the compressed, efficient register she used when she needed someone to understand something quickly and completely. Linnéa listened with the focused silence she maintained when she was processing something serious, which was different from her other silences and recognisable to anyone who knew her well. When Vanessa finished there was a pause of approximately four seconds.

"The technology enters the pre-conscious during sleep," Linnéa said. "And finds the unknown desire. The thing you have not yet permitted yourself to want."

"Yes," Vanessa said.

Another pause.

"And it works," Linnéa said. It was not a question.

"It works," Vanessa confirmed.

A third pause, shorter than the others.

"I'll be there tomorrow," Linnéa said.

"Linnéa — "

"Vanessa. A machine that finds the thing you have not permitted yourself to want." A brief, eloquent pause. "I will be there tomorrow. I am bringing Tatum. We will discuss the ethical and operational dimensions of the situation on the plane." Another pause. "Also I want to see this city. I have never been to Toronto."

"Nobody has never been to Toronto," Jordan said, from across the room where he had been listening with his coffee. "It's been in every film you've ever seen."

"That is completely different," Linnéa said, with the certainty of someone who had thought about this. "Seeing a city as somewhere else is not the same as seeing it as itself. I want to see Toronto as Toronto."

"It will show you," Vanessa said. "It's good at that."

"Good," Linnéa said. "Tomorrow. Send me the hotel."

The call ended.

Vanessa looked at Jordan.

"Tomorrow," she said.

"I'll book the rooms," he said.

--Linnéa and Tatum arrived the following afternoon on an Air Canada flight from Stockholm via London that had been, according to Linnéa's three messages sent at intervals during the journey, variously *adequate*, *cold in a different way from Swedish cold which is interesting*, and *Tatum has been reading the whole time which is correct behaviour and I have been thinking which is also correct behaviour but less comfortable.*

They came through the arrivals hall of Pearson Airport into the February afternoon — Linnéa in a coat the colour of a ripe tangerine that was visible from the far end of the terminal, her platinum hair loose, no bronze medal which indicated she considered this a working arrival rather than a ceremonial one. Tatum beside her in a sensible dark coat, carrying both their bags with the calm efficiency of someone who had long since accepted that Linnéa travelled with her

hands free because her hands were always needed for gesturing.

Vanessa and Jordan were waiting.

Linnéa covered the distance between them with the forward momentum of someone for whom arrivals were always slightly insufficient — as if the physical act of getting somewhere never quite matched the urgency of wanting to be there. She embraced Vanessa first, the real embrace, the specific one, then Jordan, then stepped back and looked at both of them with the focused, assessing attention she brought to moments that mattered. "You look different," she said.

"We're in Toronto," Jordan said.

"Not the city," Linnéa said. "You." She looked at Vanessa specifically. "Something happened."

"Several things happened," Vanessa said.

"Tell me in the car," Linnéa said. "Also — " She turned to look at the airport around her, at the functional, efficient, quietly multicultural space of Pearson in the February afternoon. "I already like it here. It doesn't perform."

"No," Vanessa agreed. "It doesn't."

Tatum stepped forward and pressed her cheek briefly against Vanessa's, then Jordan's. Her dark eyes were warm and her posture was precise and she had the quality she always had of someone who had been paying attention to everything since the plane landed and had already formed several conclusions she was keeping to herself for now.

"The Weave," Tatum said quietly, to Vanessa. Not a question.

"Yes," Vanessa said.

Tatum nodded once. Filed it. They walked toward the exit.

--In the car, heading east through the city, Vanessa told them.

Linnéa listened with the focused, slightly forward quality of someone receiving information they consider important and intend to act on. She asked two questions — both precise, both aimed at the specific details that mattered — and then was quiet for the remainder of the journey in the particular way she was quiet when she was thinking rather than waiting to speak.

Tatum listened and said nothing until they reached the Distillery District and the car pulled into the cobblestone lane outside the hotel.

Then she said: "The gyroscope."

Everyone looked at her.

"The apparatus for the extended sessions," Tatum said, with the calm, precise voice of someone who had been reading on the plane and had arrived at a conclusion. "The way the technology reaches the deepest pre-conscious material. The physical component." She looked at Vanessa. "Aiko described it in the technical documents."

"Yes," Vanessa said carefully.

Tatum looked at Linnéa.

Linnéa was already looking at Tatum with the expression she wore when Tatum said something that articulated exactly what Linnéa had been thinking but had not yet found the words for — the expression of profound affection mixed with the slightly dazed quality of someone who lived with a masterpiece and kept noticing it.

"I want to try it," Linnéa said. To the car in general. To the universe.

Jordan looked out the window at the cobblestones.

"Of course you do," he said.

"It is a legitimate artistic and scientific experience," Linnéa said.

"It is," Tatum said, with the specific warmth of someone who meant it and was also aware of every other dimension of what was being said.

"And I am a legitimate artistic and scientific subject," Linnéa continued.

"You are," Vanessa said.

"With excellent pre-conscious material," Linnéa added.

"Undoubtedly," Jordan said.

Linnéa looked at him.

"You have already tried it," she said.

A beat.

"Yes," Jordan said.

Linnéa's eyes moved to Vanessa.

"Both of you," she said.

"Yes," Vanessa said.

Linnéa looked between them with the specific, comprehensive attention of someone who had known both of them long enough to read what was not being said alongside what was. She said nothing for a moment.

Then she said, very quietly for Linnéa: "Something changed."

It was not a question.

Vanessa looked at her.

"Yes," she said.

The car was quiet.

Outside, the Distillery District held them in its amber winter light, the old brick patient and warm against the February cold, the cobblestones carrying their hundred years of accumulated purpose beneath the wheels.

Tatum reached over and put her hand briefly over Linnéa's.

Linnéa turned her hand over and held it.

Nobody said anything further.

It was enough.

--**Chapter Seven: Weather — Part Three**

That evening the four of them had dinner in the hotel restaurant.

It was a good restaurant — serious about its food in the specific Toronto way, which was the way of a city that had absorbed enough culinary traditions from enough places that it had stopped trying to choose between them and had simply become excellent at all of them. They ate well and drank a Burgundy that Jordan had chosen with the quiet, unhurried attention he brought to wine lists in the same way he brought it to everything else, and the conversation moved in the way of four people who were genuinely comfortable with each other and had things worth saying and were not in any hurry.

Aiko joined them at eight.

She had spent the day with Soo-Yeon.

She came in from the cold with the specific quality she carried when something had cost her something — not distressed, not diminished, but carrying weight that hadn't been there

before, the weight of a conversation that had mattered and had gone the way it needed to go rather than the way it would have been easier for it to go.

She sat down. Jordan poured her wine. She drank it and set the glass down and looked at the table for a moment.

"How was she?" Vanessa asked.

"Quiet," Aiko said. "For a long time. She asked me to repeat the part about what the technology finds — the pre-conscious material, the unknown desire — three times. Not because she didn't understand. Because she was — " She paused. "She was locating it. In herself. She was sitting there identifying the thing

Abraham had found in her, feeling its shape, understanding that it had been there all along and that she had known it was there and had been circling it for two years in her work without being able to enter it." A pause. "She cried once, briefly, and then stopped and asked a technical question about the synthesis process."

"She's a composer," Vanessa said.

"Yes," Aiko said. "Once she understood what had been taken she immediately wanted to understand how it had been used. What it had become." She looked at her wine glass. "She wants to hear the Third Weave."

The table was quiet.

"Before or after the meeting with Abraham?" Jordan asked.

"She wants to hear it before," Aiko said. "She wants to know what he made from her material before she sits across from him. She said — " Aiko paused. "She said she wants to walk into that room knowing what her unknown desire sounds like in someone else's hands."

Vanessa looked at the candle in the centre of the table.

"That's brave," Linnéa said quietly.

"Yes," Aiko agreed.

"And the meeting with Abraham," Vanessa said. "Did she agree?"

"She agreed," Aiko said. "She said — " Another pause. "She said she has questions for him. Not accusations. Questions. About the process. About what he found and how he found it and what it felt like to work with it." Aiko looked at Vanessa. "She said she wants to understand what it means that the most honest thing she has ever made she made while she was asleep." The table held that for a moment.

Outside the restaurant windows the Distillery District was dark and cold, the cobblestones carrying their amber reflected light in the February night. A few people moved through the lanes — couples mostly, their breath clouding, their collars up against the cold.

"The gyroscope," Linnéa said.

Everyone looked at her.

She was looking at Aiko with the direct, unabashed attention she brought to things she wanted.

"The extended session apparatus," she said. "I want to understand how it works. Technically." She paused. "And I want to try it."

Aiko looked at her for a long moment with the calm, assessing eyes.

"It requires a specific neurological profile," Aiko said carefully. "Not everyone responds to the extended protocol."

"I respond to everything," Linnéa said, with complete and entirely justified confidence. Tatum made the small sound that meant she was not going to comment on this but agreed with it entirely.

"The extended protocol," Aiko said, "works by sustaining the hypnopompic threshold. By keeping the subject in the state between arousal and release — neurologically and physically — for an extended period. The pre-conscious material that surfaces in that sustained state is — " She paused, choosing her words with the precision she always brought to technical descriptions. "More complete than what surfaces in ordinary dream recording. More formed. The sustained threshold gives the unknown desire time to find its shape rather than simply its presence."

Linnéa was listening with her full attention.

"The physical component," she said.

"The gyroscope," Aiko confirmed, "maintains the subject in a specific orientation while the neural recording runs. The movement — controlled, continuous, calibrated to the individual's neurological responses — sustains the physical arousal state that corresponds to the hypnopompic threshold." She paused. "It is — I will be direct — intensely pleasurable for subjects whose neurological profile is compatible. The sustained arousal is not incidental to the process. It is the process."

Linnéa looked at Tatum.

Tatum looked back at her with the dark, calm eyes.

"I'll be in the room," Tatum said simply.

Linnéa smiled — the full, real, entirely unmanaged smile that appeared when something was exactly right.

"I know," she said.

Vanessa looked at Aiko.

"Can it be arranged?" she said. "For Linnéa. Properly. With full understanding of what she's consenting to."

"Yes," Aiko said. "I know the lead technician in the R&D division. She has been

uncomfortable with certain aspects of the programme for some time. She would welcome the opportunity to run a fully consensual extended session." A pause. "She would also, I think, find Linnéa interesting."

"Everyone finds Linnéa interesting," Jordan said.

"This is true," Linnéa agreed, without false modesty, because false modesty had never been available to her.

Tatum picked up her wine glass.

"When?" she asked. Practical, as always, Tatum cutting to the essential question. "The week before the Third Weave showing," Aiko said. "When the R&D division is

between formal study cycles. There will be time and space and the right personnel." Tatum nodded.

Linnéa looked around the table — at Vanessa and Jordan and Aiko and the remnants of a good dinner and the Burgundy and the amber light of the restaurant and the old brick of the Distillery District visible through the windows.

"This is a very good job," she said.

Jordan raised his glass.

Nobody disagreed.

Outside, Toronto held its February patience. The lake invisible to the south, enormous and cold and indifferent. The bare trees in the residential streets. The east end where Morpheus Studios sat in its working neighbourhood looking exactly like what it used to be. And somewhere in the Annex, in a top floor apartment full of books, Abraham Veil was sitting with the knowledge that he was going to meet Soo-Yeon Park.

The sun was rising slowly on something.

He could feel it.

He just didn't know yet what it was going to illuminate.

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"And the meeting with Abraham," Vanessa said. "Did she agree?"

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Outside the restaurant windows the Distillery District was dark and cold, the cobblestones carrying their amber reflected light in the February night. A few people moved through the lanes — couples mostly, their breath clouding, their collars up against the cold. "The extended sessions," Linnéa said.

Everyone looked at her.

She was looking at Aiko with the direct, unabashed attention she brought to things she wanted.

"The deeper protocol," she said. "Aiko — you mentioned in the documents that the standard recording process has a more intensive version. For subjects whose material requires longer to surface." She paused. "I want to understand how it works. And I want to try it." Aiko looked at her for a long moment with the calm, assessing eyes.

"It requires a specific neurological profile," Aiko said carefully. "Not everyone responds to the extended protocol."

"I respond to everything," Linnéa said, with complete and entirely justified confidence. Tatum made the small sound that meant she was not going to comment on this but agreed with it entirely.

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Linnéa was listening with her full attention.

"The physical component," she said. "What does that involve exactly?"

Aiko looked at her steadily.

"I don't have the full technical specifications," she said. "I've seen references to an apparatus in the R&D documentation but not the detail of it. The extended protocol is used only in the

deepest research sessions." She paused. "I would need access to the R&D division to understand it properly."

"Then we get access," Linnéa said simply.

Tatum looked at Aiko.

"Can it be arranged?" she asked. Practical, as always. The essential question.

"Yes," Aiko said. "I know the lead technician in the R&D division. She has been

uncomfortable with certain aspects of the programme for some time. She would welcome a conversation." A pause. "And she would, I think, be interested in running a properly consensual extended session with the right subject."

"I am the right subject," Linnéa said. Without false modesty. Because false modesty had never been available to her.

"We don't yet know what the apparatus involves," Vanessa said carefully. "We should find out before anyone commits to anything."

"Of course," Linnéa said, with the serene confidence of someone who fully intended to commit to it regardless of what it involved and was willing to say the reasonable thing in the meantime.

Tatum looked at Linnéa with the warm, calm eyes.

"When we know what it is," Tatum said, "we decide together."

Linnéa looked at her.

"Together," she agreed.

Jordan raised his glass.

"To not yet knowing what we're getting into," he said.

"We never know," Vanessa said. "That's never stopped us."

Nobody disagreed.

Outside, Toronto held its February patience. The lake invisible to the south, enormous and cold and indifferent. The bare trees in the residential streets. The east end where Morpheus Studios sat in its working neighbourhood looking exactly like what it used to be. And somewhere in the Annex, in a top floor apartment full of books, Abraham Veil was sitting with the knowledge that he was going to meet Soo-Yeon Park.

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Chapter 8

**Chapter Eight: The Suite

The call came at seven-fifteen in the evening.

Before it came, the suite had the particular quality of a room containing five people who were each, in their own way, oriented toward something that had not yet happened. The kind of anticipation that was not anxious exactly — none of them were anxious people by disposition — but alert. The specific forward-leaning quality of people who had been moving toward something for long enough that the proximity of it had changed the atmosphere.

Vanessa was at the window with a glass of wine, looking at the Distillery District below — the cobblestones and the amber light and the old brick doing its patient, warm work against the February dark. Jordan was at the desk with his laptop, not working exactly, the screen open but his attention elsewhere, the particular quality of a man who was thinking rather than doing and had found the desk a useful place to do it. Aiko was on the small sofa with her phone, her posture precise and her expression carrying the specific quality it had carried since she returned from her conversation with Soo-Yeon — the look of someone who had revised a significant assumption and was still in the process of understanding what the revision meant for everything adjacent to it.

Linnéa was on the bed.

She was lying on her back with her feet in the air, cycling them slowly in the manner of someone who had been patient for as long as patience was going to be available to her and was now managing the remainder through minor physical activity. She was wearing a sweater the colour of a Nordic summer sky — deeply, improbably blue — and her platinum hair was loose and she was looking at the ceiling with the focused, slightly dangerous attention of someone who was very close to saying something.

Tatum was sitting beside her on the bed reading, which she had been doing since they arrived, with the unruffled composure of someone who had made peace with the fact that waiting was sometimes the correct activity and had decided to use it well.

"He said seven," Linnéa said. To the ceiling.

"He said this evening," Vanessa said. "Not seven specifically."

"It is seven-fourteen," Linnéa said.

"Yes," Vanessa said.

"So he is fourteen minutes into this evening without calling."

"Linnéa," Tatum said, without looking up from her book.

"I am simply observing," Linnéa said.

"You are simply being observed," Tatum said. "Cycling your feet."

Linnéa looked at her feet. Stopped cycling them. Started again.

Jordan's phone lit up on the desk.

The room shifted — not dramatically, the small collective reorientation of five people whose attention had been distributed and had just found its focus.

Jordan picked it up. Looked at the screen.

"Abraham," he said.

Vanessa turned from the window.

Jordan answered and put it on speaker and set it on the desk and the room gathered itself around the small device with the particular quality of people receiving something they had been waiting for.

"Mr. Harlan." Abraham's voice — Manchester-smoothed, unhurried, carrying the specific quality of someone who had something to show and was no longer uncertain about showing it. "Is Vanessa with you?"

"I'm here," Vanessa said.

"Good." A pause. "Are you all there? Your — " He paused on the word, choosing. "Your people."

Vanessa looked around the room. At Jordan at the desk. At Aiko on the sofa, her phone lowered, her full attention on the speaker. At Linnéa sitting up on the bed now, feet on the floor, entirely still for the first time since they had arrived. At Tatum with her book closed in her lap.

"We're all here," she said.

"Then I'd like you to come," Abraham said. "All of you. Tonight, if you're willing." A pause. "There's something I want you to see."

--**Chapter Eight: The Suite — Part Two**

The address Abraham gave them was in the east end.

Not Morpheus Studios — a different building, on a different street, which Aiko identified within thirty seconds of hearing it as a property on the Noctilux Capital real estate portfolio that did not appear in any of the Morpheus documentation she had accessed. A secondary

facility. Something that had been kept separate from the main operation for reasons that were now, Vanessa thought, becoming clear.

They took two cars.

The east end received them in its ordinary February way — the working streets, the residential blocks, the particular texture of a part of the city that had never been asked to be anything other than what it was and had developed, through that long permission to simply exist, a specific and unpretentious character. The buildings here were older and lower than the downtown core, the streetlights less numerous, the sidewalks carrying the residual evidence of the day's snow in the specific compressed and darkened form that city snow took after enough feet had passed over it.

The building was on a corner.

It was, as Abraham had described it in the brief exchange of messages that followed his call, an old brick warehouse — four storeys, the brick the dark, almost purplish red of very old Toronto industrial construction, the windows on the upper floors tall and arched in the Victorian manner and dark. The ground floor windows were blacked out from inside. There was no signage. A single entrance on the side street — a heavy steel door, modern, conspicuously well-secured, sitting in the old brick facade with the slightly incongruous quality of something that had been installed recently and with serious intent.

Abraham was waiting outside.

He was in his dark coat, his breath clouding in the cold, and he had the quality he sometimes had of someone who had been outside long enough that the cold had become part of him — present in his face, in the specific alertness that cold air produced in people who didn't fight it. He watched the two cars pull up and the five of them get out and he looked at the group assembled on the sidewalk with the expression of someone who was seeing something they had been expecting and finding it, on arrival, slightly different from the expectation. His eyes moved across each of them. Vanessa. Jordan. Aiko — at whom he paused briefly, the specific pause of someone who knew a name and a history and was now attaching them to a face. Linnéa, who was looking at the building with the forward-leaning attention of someone who had decided something before she arrived and was now simply waiting for the relevant door to open. Tatum, who was looking at Abraham with the calm, assessing attention she brought to new people, the look of someone arriving at a position.

"Thank you for coming," he said.

"Thank you for calling," Vanessa said.

He looked at the building.

"I want to say something before we go in," he said. "About what you're going to see." He paused. "I've been thinking since our conversation at the café about the

question of foundation. About what the work is built on and whether it can be built honestly." He looked at Vanessa. "I think what's inside answers that question better than anything I could say out

here." Another pause. "But I wanted you to know that the answer — whatever you think of it — is not something I arranged for your benefit. It's simply what the work became when I followed it honestly." He paused once more. "I think you'll understand when you see it." He turned to the door and placed his hand on the security panel.

The lock disengaged with a sound that was precise and final, the sound of a serious mechanism doing what it had been built to do.

The door opened.

Warm air came out — not the warmth of heating exactly, but the specific warmth of a large enclosed space that had been occupied for a long time, that had absorbed the heat of equipment and bodies and work and had been holding it in the way that old brick held things, slowly and thoroughly.

Abraham held the door.

They went in.

--The ground floor was a corridor — wide, industrial, the walls the original brick, the floor a smooth pale concrete that had been laid over whatever the original surface had been. The lighting was low and warm, not the fluorescent utility of a working facility but something more considered, the lighting of someone who understood that the quality of light affected the quality of attention. Doors on either side, closed. The corridor extending ahead of them toward a larger space from which, faintly, at the edge of audibility, came a sound. Not music. Not speech.

Something between the two.

A sound that had the rhythmic quality of breath and the tonal quality of something more deliberate — the sound of a human body in a specific and sustained state, caught between one thing and another, existing at a threshold.

Linnéa heard it first.

She stopped walking.

Her head turned toward the source of the sound with the specific, focused attention of someone whose instincts had just registered something before their conscious mind had finished processing it.

She looked at Vanessa.

Vanessa was already looking at Abraham.

Abraham was looking ahead, his expression carrying the quality she had seen in him at Oliver's house — the quality of someone who had made something and was now in the company of people who were about to experience it and was holding himself very still so as not to interfere with what was about to happen.

"Through here," he said.

He opened the door at the end of the corridor.

--**Chapter Eight: The Suite — Part Three**

The room was large.

It had been, at some point in its industrial history, a loading bay or a storage floor — the ceiling was high, the original timber beams still visible above, the brick walls unfinished and carrying their decades of accumulated patina. But what it contained now had nothing to do with any of that history.

They stopped in the doorway.

All five of them.

In the centre of the room, suspended from a rigging of curved steel that descended from the ceiling beams on a system of counterweights and articulated joints, was a structure that it took Vanessa's mind a full three seconds to fully assemble into comprehension. Not because it was complex — the design was actually elegant in its simplicity — but because nothing in her experience had prepared her for the specific combination of things it was simultaneously. It was a gyroscope.

The outer ring was perhaps two metres in diameter, the inner rings progressively smaller, each mounted on bearings that allowed independent rotation in every axis. The whole structure moved — slowly, continuously, with the smooth, almost liquid quality of something perfectly balanced, each ring turning at its own rate in its own plane, the combined motion producing a three-dimensional rotation that was neither predictable nor random but something between the two. Hypnotic. Inevitable. Like watching a planet system in miniature, each element following its own orbit within the larger whole.

And at the centre of it, cradled in a harness of soft strapping that held her at every point of contact with the precise, considered support of something designed by someone who had thought carefully about a body in motion — was a woman.

She was naked.

She was small — fine-boned, her body the body of someone whose relationship with physical sensation was professional rather than recreational, a performer's body, trained and present and entirely inhabited. Her dark hair was loose and

moved with the motion of the

machine, lifting and settling as the gyroscope turned. Her eyes were closed. Her head was tilted back slightly, her throat exposed, her lips parted.

From her came the sound they had heard in the corridor.

It was not loud. It was not performed. It was the sound of a body at a sustained threshold — the specific, involuntary, entirely honest sound of someone who had been held at the edge of something for a long time and whose every nerve ending was alive with the accumulated sensation of that sustained proximity. A sound that existed below the level of choice. That came from somewhere the managed self had no access to.

The sound of the hypnopompic state made audible.

Made physical.

Made completely, unmistakably real.

Linnéa's hand came up and covered her own mouth.

Not in distress — in the specific, private gesture of someone receiving something that was more than they had anticipated and needed a moment to contain. Her eyes were very wide and entirely focused on the centre of the room.

Aiko had gone completely still beside Vanessa. Her hand was at her throat. Her expression — Vanessa looked at it briefly and then looked away, because it was the expression of someone in the middle of something private — was the expression of a woman who had crossed an ocean to protect someone and had just found that person suspended naked in a machine, turning slowly in the warm light of an old brick room, making sounds of sustained pleasure, and was in the process of understanding what that meant for everything she had believed she knew.

Jordan was looking at the rigging. The engineering of it. The specific, thoughtful design of the harness — the way it distributed the body's weight, the way it accommodated the motion, the way it had been made to hold rather than restrain. His expression was the expression of someone who respected craftsmanship when they encountered it regardless of context. Tatum was looking at Soo-Yeon.

Not at the machine. At the person in it. With the calm, complete, fully present attention that was Tatum's specific gift — the attention that saw the human being rather than the situation and reported back without judgment on what it found.

What it found, clearly, was someone who was exactly where they had chosen to be. Abraham stood slightly apart from the group. He was watching them watch her, with the quality he had at Oliver's house — the stillness of someone who had

made something and was present for its effect on others without interfering with it.

After a long moment he moved to a panel on the wall and made an adjustment.

The gyroscope slowed.

Not stopped — it continued to turn, but at a reduced rate, the motion settling from its sustained working rhythm into something gentler, the counterweights redistributing, the inner rings finding a slower orbit. The sound from the centre of the room shifted too — the sustained threshold quality easing, the breath deepening, the specific held note of it resolving into something longer and more settled.

Soo-Yeon opened her eyes.

She looked at the ceiling first — the timber beams, the rigging, the familiar topography of a space she had been in many times. Then she turned her head and found the group standing in the doorway and looked at them with an expression that was entirely composed of two things. Satisfaction.

And pride.

Not the pride of someone who had been caught doing something they wanted credit for. The pride of someone who was doing the most important work of their life and knew it and was glad to have witnesses.

She smiled.

It was a complete, unguarded, entirely real smile — the smile of someone who had nothing to manage and no version to present and was simply, at this moment, fully herself.

Aiko made a sound.

It was small and it was involuntary and it was — Vanessa recognised it — the sound of a misread releasing. Of a protective narrative that had been carried across an ocean and two continents of worry arriving at its destination and finding, instead of what it had feared, something it had not known how to imagine.

A tear moved down Aiko's face.

She didn't wipe it.

Soo-Yeon saw it.

Her smile changed — became warmer, more specific, directed entirely at Aiko with the particular warmth of someone who understood exactly what that tear meant and loved the person crying it.

"Aiko," she said. Her voice was slightly breathless, slightly rough with the extended session, but entirely clear. "Come here."

Aiko crossed the room.

She moved the way she moved when she had stopped calculating — directly, without her usual precision, simply going toward the thing she was going toward. She reached the gyroscope and stood beside it and put her hand on the outer ring, which was warm from the motion, and looked at Soo-Yeon in her harness at the centre of it.

Soo-Yeon reached out and took her hand.

"I'm not hurt," Soo-Yeon said. "I'm not a victim. I'm not lost." She held Aiko's gaze with the direct, steady attention of someone saying something they needed the other person to fully receive. "I am one of the first artists working in a medium that is going to be larger than motion pictures. Larger than anything." Her grip on Aiko's hand tightened slightly. "And I am doing the best work of my life."

Aiko looked at her for a long moment.

Then she laughed — briefly, helplessly, the laugh of someone who had been wound very tight for a very long time and had just been given permission to release it.

"I know," she said. "I can see that."

"Good," Soo-Yeon said. "Now help me out of this thing. I want to meet your friends." ---

Chapter 9

Chapter Nine: The Pioneer — Part One

Soo-Yeon Park, unstrapped from the harness and wrapped in a robe that had been hanging on a hook by the wall with the practical, matter-of-fact placement of something used regularly, was smaller out of the machine than she had appeared in it.

This was not a contradiction. It was simply a different kind of presence. In the gyroscope she had been the centre of something — the focal point around which everything else organised itself, the still point inside the motion, the source of the sound that had stopped five people in a doorway. Out of it she was a small Korean woman in her late twenties in a white robe with bare feet on pale concrete, her dark hair loose and slightly damp at the temples, her eyes carrying the specific quality of someone who had just returned from somewhere and was still bringing it back with them.

She moved through the group with the ease of someone who had decided, in the moment she saw them in the doorway, exactly who each of them was and what they needed from the introduction.

She went to Aiko first.

They stood together for a moment — Aiko still carrying the residue of the tear, her composure reassembled but with something underneath it that was different from before, softer at the foundation — and Soo-Yeon held both her hands and looked at her with the specific, warm directness of someone who had nothing to apologise for and nothing to explain but wanted to be seen clearly by this person specifically.

"I've been wanting to show you for months," Soo-Yeon said. "I couldn't. But I wanted to." "I know," Aiko said. "I understand now why you couldn't."

"Do you understand why I didn't want to stop?"

Aiko looked at her for a moment.

"Yes," she said. "I think I'm beginning to."

Soo-Yeon squeezed her hands once and then turned to Vanessa.

She looked at her with the direct, assessing attention of someone who arrived at positions quickly and trusted them. The specific look of someone encountering a person they had heard about and finding that the account, however accurate, had not been quite adequate to the reality.

"You made this happen," she said.

"Abraham made this happen," Vanessa said. "I just asked the right question at the right time." "That's what making things happen is," Soo-Yeon said.

She turned to Jordan, who shook her hand with the brief, genuine warmth he brought to people he respected on first meeting.

"I've been listening to your Berlin commission," he said. "Aiko sent the recording. The third movement." He paused. "I think I understand now where it was trying to go."

Soo-Yeon looked at him with slightly increased attention — the look of someone

recalibrating. Not surprised that he had listened. Surprised that he had heard it accurately. "Nobody has said that before," she said.

"They weren't listening for the right thing," Jordan said.

She held his gaze for a moment longer. Then she nodded — the nod of someone who has just decided something about a person and is satisfied with the decision.

Then she turned to Linnéa.

Linnéa had been standing slightly apart from the group since they entered the room — not withdrawn, not uncomfortable, but in the specific state of someone who had received something that required their full interior attention and was giving it that attention before they spoke. Her eyes had not left Soo-Yeon since she had come out of the machine. Not in an intrusive way. In the way of someone who was looking at something they recognised. Soo-Yeon looked back at her.

A moment passed between them that had no words and didn't need any.

"You want to try it," Soo-Yeon said.

"Yes," Linnéa said. Simply and completely.

Soo-Yeon smiled — the same full, unguarded smile from the machine.

"Good," she said. "You should." She looked at Linnéa's body with the frank, professional assessment of someone who understood bodies as instruments. "You'll be good at it." "I know," Linnéa said. Without arrogance. As a fact about herself she had always known. Tatum, standing beside Linnéa, made the small sound.

Soo-Yeon looked at Tatum last.

Tatum looked back with the dark, calm eyes. The full, unhurried attention. The specific quality of someone who was always the steadiest person in the room and was entirely comfortable with that.

"You're the one who sees everything," Soo-Yeon said.

"Someone has to," Tatum said.

Soo-Yeon looked at her for a moment longer.

"You should try it too," she said. "Especially you."

Something moved in Tatum's expression — brief, almost imperceptible, the microexpression of someone whose composure has been touched at a depth the composure doesn't quite cover. "We'll see," Tatum said.

Which everyone in the room understood was not a no.

--***Chapter Nine: The Pioneer — Part Two**

Abraham had moved to a workbench along the far wall while the introductions happened — giving the group space to find its own equilibrium, which was the instinct of someone who understood that certain things needed room to settle without direction.

Now he turned back.

He looked different in this room from how he had looked in the Noctilux boardroom or the café on Bloor Street. The formality was gone — not the seriousness, that was structural, it went all the way down — but the specific careful quality he carried in professional contexts, the quality of someone managing how they were perceived. Here he was simply himself. In his room, with his work, with people he had decided to trust.

He looked at the group assembled around Soo-Yeon and something in his expression was — Vanessa found the word after a moment — relieved. The specific relief of someone who has been carrying something alone for a long time and has just been joined.

"Shall we sit?" he said.

There were chairs along the walls — simple, functional, the chairs of a working space rather than a meeting room. They pulled them into a loose circle near the gyroscope, which continued its slow patient turning in the centre of the room, the counterweights doing their quiet work, the inner rings finding their independent orbits. Soo-Yeon sat closest to it, her robe pulled around her, her bare feet on the pale concrete, the manuscript notebook she had produced from somewhere already open in her lap.

The pencil was behind her ear.

Jordan noticed. The corner of his mouth moved.

"Tell us how it works," Vanessa said to Abraham. "From the beginning. Not the technical version — the true version."

Abraham looked at her.

"Those are usually the same thing," he said.

"Not always," she said.

He was quiet for a moment. Then he leaned forward with his elbows on his knees and looked at the gyroscope.

"The standard recording process — the headset, the chair, the forty minutes — captures dream material from the surface of the pre-conscious," he said. "The hypnopompic threshold, the membrane between sleep and waking. It's extraordinarily rich material. The Weaves I've built from it are — I believe them to be genuinely important work." He paused. "But there is a deeper layer. A layer that the standard process can reach the edge of but cannot fully enter." He looked at Soo-Yeon. "She found it first. Before I did."

Everyone looked at Soo-Yeon.

She was looking at the gyroscope with the expression of someone remembering something they were glad to have found.

"I told him after the third session," she said. "That I could feel something beneath what the headset was reaching. Like — " She paused, searching. "Like hearing a piece of music through a wall. You know it's there. You can feel its shape. But the wall is between you and it." She looked at Abraham. "I asked him if there was a way to get through the wall." "And I spent four months building the answer," Abraham said.

He looked at the gyroscope with the expression Vanessa had first seen in the candid photograph — the man in the dark theatre looking at something above him that wasn't physically there. The expression of someone who saw what a thing could become before it became it.

"The deeper pre-conscious material requires a specific physical state to surface," he said. "Not sleep — the standard process uses sleep. This is different. This is the sustained threshold between arousal and release. The neurological state in which the body's ordinary defenses are completely dissolved — not by unconsciousness but by the opposite. By an intensity of physical sensation that occupies the conscious mind so completely that the preconscious is left unguarded." He paused. "The gyroscope maintains that state. The motion, the orientation, the continuous calibrated physical stimulation — it holds the subject at the threshold for as long as the session requires. And in that sustained state, the material that surfaces is — "

"More formed," Aiko said quietly.

Abraham looked at her.

"Yes," he said. "More formed. More complete. The unknown desire doesn't just announce its presence the way it does in the standard process. It arrives fully. With shape and texture and

— " He stopped. Started again. "With its full implications."

The room was quiet.

The gyroscope turned.

"What does it feel like?" Linnéa asked. To Soo-Yeon directly. With the specific, direct curiosity of someone who needed to know from the person who had been in it rather than the person who had built it.

Soo-Yeon looked at her.

"You know the moment in music," she said, "when a resolution you have been waiting for finally arrives? When the harmonic tension that has been building releases into the chord it was always moving toward?" She paused. "It feels like being held inside that moment. Not the release — the moment before. The moment of maximum tension and maximum

anticipation and maximum aliveness." She paused again. "For hours."

Linnéa was very still.

"And the material it finds," she said. "The unknown desire. You know what it found in you?" "Yes," Soo-Yeon said.

"What was it?"

Soo-Yeon looked at her notebook. At the notation dense on the page, the three days of work that had been waiting for permission to exist.

"The music I've been afraid to write," she said. "Not afraid of judgment — afraid of how exposed it would make me. How completely it would show what I actually am rather than what I have been presenting." She looked up. "The gyroscope found that fear and dissolved it. Not by removing the fear — by making the exposure feel like the only thing worth doing." She paused. "I came out of the first extended session and wrote for eleven hours without stopping."

She said it the way she said everything — directly, without performance, as a simple fact about her own experience that she saw no reason to manage or qualify.

Aiko was looking at her with an expression that had moved well past relief into something more complex and more honest — the expression of someone who had spent months

imagining a victim and was now sitting across from a pioneer and was in the process of understanding that those were not just different situations but different categories of human experience entirely.

"I was wrong about you," Aiko said.

"Yes," Soo-Yeon said. Simply. Without making anything of it.

"I came here thinking you needed protecting."

"I know," Soo-Yeon said. "Aiko." She looked at her directly. "You came because you care about me. The caring was real even when the fear was wrong." She paused. "I would rather have someone who crosses oceans on a misread than someone who stays home on an

accurate one."

Aiko looked at her for a long moment.

Then she looked at her hands.

"The material Abraham took without telling you," she said. "From the standard sessions. Before the extended protocol. Does that — does it still — "

"It still matters," Soo-Yeon said. "He should have told me. We have talked about that. At length." She glanced at Abraham, who accepted this with the expression of someone who had sat with a correct criticism and was not going to deflect it. "But what he found in those sessions was real and what he made from it was real and the Third Weave is — " She paused. "Come on Thursday and experience it. Then tell me if it should not exist."

The room held that for a moment.

Outside, Toronto was doing its ordinary February business — the streets, the cold, the lake invisible to the south. Inside the old brick warehouse, six people sat in a loose circle around a gyroscope that turned in the warm light with the patient, continuous motion of something that had found its purpose and was fulfilling it.

"Thursday," Vanessa said.

"Thursday," Abraham confirmed.

Soo-Yeon made a small notation in her manuscript book — quick, certain, the movement of someone for whom the pencil was an extension of the thinking rather than a record of it. Then she looked up at the group.

"Who's next?" she said.

--***Chapter Nine: The Pioneer — Part Three**

Nobody answered immediately.

This was not hesitation exactly — it was the specific quality of a room in which everyone present was sitting with the same question from their own direction and needed a moment before the directions resolved into an answer.

The gyroscope turned.

Soo-Yeon waited with the patience of someone who had learned, through hours in the machine, that the most important things arrived on their own schedule and that the work of

the waiting was simply to remain present for them.

It was Abraham who spoke first.

"There's something I should explain," he said. "About the extended protocol. Before anyone decides anything." He looked around the group. "The standard Weave process — the headset, the chair — finds the unknown desire and presents it to the subject as an experience. Something that arrives and is recognised and can be sat with." He paused. "The gyroscope is different. What it finds doesn't arrive as an experience. It arrives as — " He looked at SooYeon. "As material," she said. "It arrives as the thing itself. Not a representation of it. The actual substance of what you have not permitted yourself to want." She looked at her hands. "Which means when you come out of it, you are not the same person who went in. Not dramatically. Not in ways that would be visible to anyone who didn't know you." She paused. "But the unknown desire is no longer unknown. You know it. Completely. And you have to decide what to do with that knowledge."

The room was quiet.

"That's what the three days of writing were," Jordan said. Not a question.

"Yes," Soo-Yeon said. "That was me deciding what to do with it."

Vanessa looked at the gyroscope.

She thought about the standard Weave at Oliver's house — the thing it had found in her, the desire to be seen rather than to see, arriving as a quality, as an experience, as something she had recognised and sat with and was still, weeks later, in the process of understanding the implications of. That had been — not easy. But manageable. A door opened rather than a wall removed.

The gyroscope was something else.

The gyroscope was the wall removed.

She was aware of Jordan beside her without looking at him. The specific ambient frequency of his presence, the quality of his attention, the thing she was fairly sure she already knew and had been not-saying for the length of their time in this city.

She thought about what the machine might find if she climbed into it.

She thought about whether she was ready to know it completely.

She thought about the rules.

Not as a boundary. As a floor. The thing that didn't change regardless of what was found. "I'll go," Linnéa said.

Everyone looked at her.

She was sitting forward in her chair with her hands on her knees and her expression carrying the specific quality of someone who had made a decision before the question was asked and had been waiting for the appropriate moment to state it. There was nothing impulsive in it. It was the decision of someone who had been thinking since the moment they walked through the door and had arrived, through that thinking, at complete certainty.

"I'll go first," she said. "Among us." She looked at Soo-Yeon. "If that's — if the machine is available."

"The machine is always available," Soo-Yeon said. "That's rather the point."

Linnéa looked at Tatum.

Tatum was already looking at her. The calm, dark eyes. The complete, unhurried attention. "I'll be in the room," Tatum said.

Linnéa smiled. The real one.

"I know," she said.

Abraham looked at Aiko.

It was a specific look — not pressuring, not inviting exactly, but the look of someone who had built something and was genuinely curious about a particular person's relationship to it. The look of someone who had read Aiko's work, or knew of it, or had understood in the last hour of this conversation that the woman sitting across from him had a mind that operated at the intersection of technology and consciousness and that the machine in the centre of the room was precisely that intersection made physical.

"Dr. Nakamura," he said.

Aiko looked at him.

"I've read your work on the neural architecture of creative states," he said. "The paper from the Seoul workshop." He paused. "The Somnium Project owes a debt to that framework that I should have acknowledged before now."

Aiko was very still.

"You read it," she said.

"Three years ago," he said. "It was foundational to how I thought about the relationship between the hypnopompic threshold and creative material." He paused. "I didn't know you knew Soo-Yeon. I didn't know any of this." He looked at the gyroscope. "The world is occasionally more organised than it appears."

Aiko looked at the machine.

She looked at it with the specific, focused attention she brought to things she was taking seriously — not the professional attention of someone assessing a system, but something more personal than that. The attention of someone who was being asked a question by an object and was deciding whether to answer it.

"Not tonight," she said finally. "I need to think."

"Of course," Abraham said.

"But — " She paused. "I want to understand the full technical specification first. Before I decide." She looked at him directly. "I want to understand what it finds. In someone like me." Abraham looked at her for a moment.

"Someone like you," he said, "would be the most interesting session this machine has ever run."

Aiko held his gaze.

"I know," she said. Which was, from Aiko, the equivalent of Linnéa's unguarded smile. Soo-Yeon was watching this exchange with the expression she had brought to each

introduction — the direct, assessing attention of someone who saw people clearly and trusted what she saw. She looked at Aiko for a moment longer than the others.

Then she looked at Vanessa.

"And you?" she said.

The room turned toward Vanessa.

Vanessa looked at the gyroscope — the slow, continuous, patient turning, the inner rings finding their independent orbits, the machine doing what it had been built to do with the complete, unhurried commitment of something that had found its purpose.

She thought about a room and a mirror and the light of no specific time.

The dream she had never reached.

"Not yet," she said.

Soo-Yeon looked at her steadily.

"But eventually," she said.

Vanessa held her gaze.

"Eventually," she said.

Soo-Yeon nodded once — the nod of someone who understood that eventually and yes were, for certain people, the same word arrived at from different directions.

She closed her manuscript notebook.

She looked around the room — at Abraham by his workbench, at Aiko sitting with her new and complicated knowledge, at Linnéa already decided, at Tatum already prepared, at Vanessa and Jordan side by side in the warm light of the old brick room with the gyroscope turning between them and the Third Weave showing three days away.

"Thursday," she said. "You'll experience what this found in me. And then—" She paused. "And then we find out what it finds in the rest of you."

She stood.

She was small and bare-footed and wrapped in a white robe and she was, Vanessa thought, one of the most certain people she had ever been in a room with. The certainty not of someone who had all the answers but of someone who had found the question that was worth their whole life and had committed to it completely.

She walked back to the gyroscope.

She ran her hand along the outer ring — the warm metal, the slow motion of it — with the familiar, affectionate gesture of someone touching something they had made their own. "It's a new medium," she said. "The first new medium in a hundred years." She looked at Abraham. "We're just beginning to understand what it can do."

Abraham looked at her with the expression Vanessa had been watching develop across the weeks of this job — the sun rising slowly on something, the illumination arriving not dramatically but with the patient, unstoppable quality of actual light.

"Yes," he said. "We are."

Outside, Toronto held its winter dark. The lake enormous and cold and patient to the south. The bare trees. The working streets of the east end.

Inside, the gyroscope turned.

And five people who had walked into a warehouse not knowing what they were walking into sat in a loose circle in the warm light and understood, each from their own direction, that they were at the beginning of something.

Not the end of the job.

The beginning of it.

--*End of Chapter Nine, complete.*

Chapter 10

Chapter Ten: Aiko — Part One

The technical specification arrived at eleven-seventeen at night.

Aiko was still awake, which Abraham had apparently assumed, because the message

accompanying the document said only: *As requested. Take your time.* Which was, she had come to understand, how Abraham communicated when he was being considerate — briefly, without performance, trusting the recipient to understand that the brevity was care rather than curtness.

She opened the document.

The page count at the bottom of the screen read forty-three, which was exactly the length she had expected from someone who kept meticulous records and understood that precision was a form of respect for the reader. She made herself a cup of tea from the room's kettle — the specific, slightly insufficient tea of hotel rooms everywhere, adequate without being interesting — and sat at the desk in the circle of the lamp and began to read.

The document was beautiful.

Not in the way that writing was sometimes beautiful — Abraham was a scientist in this register, not a stylist. But in the way that genuine precision was beautiful, the way a technical drawing of something well-designed was beautiful, the way mathematical proofs were beautiful when the thinking behind them was completely honest and completely rigorous and arrived at something true through the most direct available path.

She read about the biomechanical principles of the gyroscope — the specific engineering of the harness, the distribution of weight across the contact points, the way the motion was calibrated not to a standard but to the individual subject's neurological responses in real time, the machine learning continuously from the body it held, adjusting the rate and axis of rotation to maintain the precise threshold state that the session required.

She read about the neurological mechanism — the relationship between sustained physical arousal and the dissolution of the pre-conscious barrier, the specific brainwave patterns that characterised the extended threshold state, the way the technology read those patterns and used them to calibrate both the physical component and the neural recording simultaneously. She read about the material that surfaced.

Not the first layer — she understood the first layer from her own work, from the Seoul paper, from everything she had built her professional life on. The

relationship between the hypnopompic state and creative material was her territory, had been for years, was the framework that Abraham had acknowledged this evening as foundational to the Somnium Project.

She read about the second layer.

The document called it the *substrate* — the material beneath the unknown desire, beneath even the pre-conscious architecture of creative and emotional life. The layer that existed prior to all of that. The oldest, most fundamental, most completely unmanaged version of the self — the self before it had learned what it was supposed to want, before it had constructed its defenses and its disciplines and its professional identity and its ethical framework. The self before Aiko.

She sat with that phrase for a long time.

The tea went cold.

Outside the window her room looked out over the lane — the cobblestones and the amber light and the old brick holding its warmth against the February night. The city going about its patient, ordinary business of being itself while the people inside its buildings sat with whatever they were sitting with.

She scrolled to the case studies.

This was the section she had been moving toward since she opened the document — the anonymised accounts of what the extended protocol had found in the six subjects who had undergone it fully, including Soo-Yeon.

She read all six.

When she finished she sat for a long time without moving.

The lamp made its warm circle on the desk. The document was open on the screen. The cold tea was at her elbow.

She thought about precision.

About the specific discipline of her professional life — the systems, the technology, the frameworks, the meticulous exactness of her thinking. She had always understood this as simply who she was. The way her mind worked. The natural expression of a specific kind of intelligence.

She understood now, reading the substrate descriptions, that it was also a container. Not a false one. Not a performance. The precision was genuinely her — that was not in question. But it was also the shape that had grown around something older, something that the precision had been quietly, continuously, completely successfully containing for as long as she could remember.

The document used clinical language for what it found in the substrate.

Aiko did not need the clinical language.

She knew what it was.

She had always known, in the way you knew things you had decided not to know — the way the unknown desire was always already present, waiting in the place underneath the managed self, available whenever the management stopped.

She closed the document.

She sat in the lamplight for a while longer.

Then she picked up her phone and sent a message to Abraham.

I've read it. I'll come tomorrow. Morning, if the machine is available.

His reply came within two minutes, which meant he was also awake, which meant he had been waiting.

Eight o'clock. I'll be there.

She set the phone down.

She looked at the window. At the dark city and the amber light and the old brick patient in the February night.

She thought about what the machine was going to find.

She already knew.

The question was what she was going to do with it.

That question, she thought, was going to require the machine to answer.

--**Chapter Ten: Aiko — Part Two**

She arrived at the warehouse at five minutes to eight.

Abraham was already there — of course he was, he was always already there, it was the quality of someone for whom the work was not something you went to but something you returned to, the way you returned to a room that was yours. He let her in without ceremony and led her through the corridor to the large room where the gyroscope turned in the warm light exactly as it had the previous evening, patient and continuous and entirely itself. Soo-Yeon was not there.

This was, Aiko understood, deliberate. Abraham had understood, without being told, that this session required a different kind of privacy from Soo-Yeon's work. Not secrecy — privacy. The specific privacy of someone who was about to be seen in a way they had never been seen before and needed the room to contain only the people essential to the process.

Abraham was essential because he ran the technology.

Everyone else could wait.

"Do you have questions?" he asked. "Before we begin."

Aiko looked at the gyroscope.

"One," she said. "The substrate material — what you find in the deepest layer. Does it change the subject? After. In ways that persist."

Abraham looked at her steadily.

"Yes," he said. "But not in the way you might fear. It doesn't create anything new. It doesn't install anything. It simply — removes the distance between the person and what was already there." He paused. "What you do with that distance removed is yours entirely."

Aiko looked at the machine for a moment longer.

Then she reached for the buttons of her coat.

--She undressed with the same precision she brought to everything — efficient, unhurried, each garment folded and placed on the chair by the wall with the neat, deliberate economy of someone who understood that how you entered a thing mattered. The coat. The dark jacket beneath it. The shirt. The trousers. Each item placed with care, which was not vanity but the specific discipline of a person who believed that attention to small things was the foundation of attention to large ones.

When she was done she stood in the centre of the room in the warm light and let Abraham assess her for the harness fitting with the professional composure of someone who had decided that the body was simply the instrument and that what mattered was what the instrument was about to find.

She was, Vanessa would have recognised, entirely herself in this moment. The precision intact. The containment intact. And underneath both, visible now in the specific quality of her stillness, the thing the containment had been containing — present, patient, old, waiting with the particular quality of things that have been waiting a very long time and have learned not to announce themselves.

Abraham fitted the harness with the careful, practiced attention of someone who had done this many times and understood that it mattered. The strapping was soft against her skin — not restraining, holding. The distinction was in the engineering and she felt it immediately, the specific quality of being supported rather than constrained, cradled rather than caught. He guided her into the inner rings.

The gyroscope accepted her weight with the smooth, responsive adjustment of something that had been designed to accommodate a body precisely — the counterweights shifting, the rings

finding their new equilibrium, the whole structure settling into the specific balance that her body and the machine had just negotiated between them.

She was suspended.

The motion began — slow at first, the outer ring finding its rotation, then the inner rings one by one, each finding its independent orbit within the larger whole. She felt the first adjustment of orientation — the subtle shift of the world's relationship to her body, the floor becoming not below her but simply one direction among several, the ceiling the same. The harness held her completely.

She closed her eyes.

--The technology did what the document had described.

She felt it as a gradual dissolution — not of herself, not of the precision or the discipline or any of the things that were genuinely her — but of the distance between herself and what had always been present beneath those things. The container remained. What changed was that the container became transparent.

And through it, clearly and completely and without the usual mediation of her professional identity and her ethical framework and the forty-three pages of technical specification she had read the previous night — she saw what was there.

It was not what she had expected.

She had expected the clinical language of the document. The substrate material described in the anonymised case studies. Something that could be assessed and categorised and understood as a neurological phenomenon.

What arrived was not a phenomenon.

It was a desire.

Specific, complete, entirely formed — the desire that had been living in the substrate of her for as long as she could remember, that the precision had been built around without ever touching, that had been present in every room she had ever been in and every system she had ever built and every technology she had ever engaged with as a quiet, continuous, completely contained hum beneath all of it.

The desire for dominion.

Not power in the political sense. Not control in the professional sense — she had that, had always had it, it was the surface expression of the thing rather than the thing itself. The desire underneath that. The desire to unmake another person's management of themselves. To find the precise point at which someone's careful construction of their own presentation became

unbearable to maintain and to be the specific, patient, exquisitely calibrated force that made it unbearable.

To watch the dissolution.

Not cruelly. That was the important thing — the thing the substrate made clear in a way that the surface expression had always obscured. Not from cruelty or contempt or the desire to harm. From the specific, profound, entirely genuine fascination with the moment when a person stopped managing themselves and became completely, finally, unavoidably real. The same fascination that had drawn her to Vanessa and Jordan.

She understood that now with a completeness that the years of professional proximity had never quite produced. She had not joined them for the technology questions, though the technology questions were genuine. She had not joined them for the ethical complexity, though the ethical complexity was real. She had joined them because she had recognised, in what they did, the surface expression of what lived in her own substrate — the same orientation toward the unmanaged self, the same fascination with the moment the gap between the version and the truth collapsed.

They destroyed the management from the outside.

She had always wanted to do it from the inside.

The gyroscope held her in its slow, continuous orbit and the desire was simply there — not arriving, not revealed as something new, but present the way it had always been present, now simply without the distance that the precision had maintained between her and it. She was not afraid of it.

That was the other thing the machine made clear.

She had expected, reading the document, that what she found would frighten her. That the substrate would contain something that contradicted the person she believed herself to be. It didn't contradict her.

It completed her.

The precision was real. The ethical framework was real. The care for Soo-Yeon, the crossing of the ocean, the tear — all of that was real and was genuinely her and was not in any tension with what the substrate contained. They were the same person. The discipline and the desire were the same person looked at from different angles.

She had simply never looked at both angles at once before.

The gyroscope turned.

Her body was at the threshold — the sustained, calibrated, exquisitely managed edge of release that the machine maintained with the patient precision of something that understood

exactly what it was doing and why — and in that sustained state the substrate material was completely available to her, completely clear, completely hers.

She stayed with it.

She did not try to name it while it was happening.

She stayed, the way Oliver had said to stay in a different room with a different technology on a different evening that felt, now, like the first step of a journey whose destination she could finally see.

--When Abraham slowed the machine and she opened her eyes the room was the same room — the old brick, the timber beams, the warm light. The gyroscope settling into its gentler orbit. Her own breath steadying.

She looked at the ceiling for a long moment.

Then she looked at Abraham, who was at the panel on the wall with the expression he always had at this point in a session — present, attentive, carefully not interpreting. "How long?" she asked. Her voice was slightly rougher than usual, the specific quality of a voice that had been doing something other than speaking for an extended period.

"Three hours and forty minutes," he said.

She absorbed this.

It had felt like less. It had felt like the duration it was — neither long nor short but simply the duration that the thing required, the way the thing always took as long as it took when you stopped trying to manage the time.

"The recording," she said.

"Complete," he said. "The substrate material is — " He paused in the way he paused when he was finding the right word rather than the available one. "It's extraordinary, Aiko. What's in there." He looked at her with the dark, attentive eyes. "I think I understand now what the Seoul paper was actually about."

Aiko looked at him.

"So do I," she said.

She began the process of being unstrapped from the harness — Abraham's hands careful and practiced, the release of each contact point deliberate — and when she was free she stood on the pale concrete floor in the warm light and was quiet for a moment.

She thought about Vanessa.

About the specific quality of what Vanessa did — the reading of people, the finding of the gap, the work in that gap. She had watched it for years with the professional admiration of someone who recognised a related discipline. She

understood it now with something more than admiration.

She understood it as the external version of what lived in her own substrate.

They had been doing the same work from different directions all along.

She reached for her clothes.

She dressed with the same precision she had undressed with — each garment recovered from the chair, each item put on with the deliberate, unhurried attention of someone reassembling themselves after having been completely disassembled and finding, to their own mild surprise, that the reassembly felt different from before.

Not because anything had changed.

Because everything that had always been there was now visible.

She picked up her phone.

She sent a message to Vanessa.

I'm done. Can we talk?

The reply came immediately.

Coffee. Twenty minutes. I'll come to you.

Aiko looked at the gyroscope — still turning, slow and patient in the warm light, the inner rings finding their independent orbits, the whole structure doing what it had been built to do with the complete, unhurried commitment of something that had found its purpose. She thought about what she was going to say to Vanessa.

Not the clinical version. Not the technical version.

The true version.

Which was, she was fairly sure, going to be the most honest conversation she had ever had with another person.

She was ready for it.

She was, for the first time in a very long time, ready for everything.

--*End of Chapter Ten, Part Two.*

--**Chapter Ten: Aiko — Part Three**

Vanessa came with two coffees.

She arrived at Aiko's hotel room door twenty minutes after the message, exactly as promised, which was how Vanessa arrived at things — on time, prepared, carrying what was needed without being asked. She handed one of the cups to Aiko and came in and sat in the chair by the window and looked at Aiko with the

full, unhurried quality of attention that was her specific gift and which Aiko had, until approximately four hours ago, understood only partially.

She understood it completely now.

Aiko sat on the edge of the bed with her coffee and was quiet for a moment, which Vanessa permitted without filling, which was also her gift — the ability to let silence be what it needed to be rather than managing it into something more comfortable.

"I want to tell you what it found," Aiko said.

"You don't have to," Vanessa said.

"I know," Aiko said. "I want to."

Vanessa looked at her steadily.

"Then tell me," she said.

Aiko told her.

Not in the clinical language of the document, which would have been the easier version and the less true one. In the direct, specific, unmediated language of someone who had decided that the distance between the version and the truth was no longer available to her and was not, on reflection, something she wanted back.

She told her about the desire for dominion. About the fascination with the moment when management became unbearable to maintain. About watching people become unavoidably real. About recognising, in the substrate of herself, the same orientation toward the unmanaged self that she had been watching Vanessa and Jordan embody for years.

She told her about the precision as a container.

She told her about the discipline and the desire being the same person looked at from different angles.

She told her that she had not been afraid of what she found.

When she finished Vanessa was quiet for a moment.

She was looking at Aiko with an expression that Aiko had seen on her face in other contexts — directed at targets, at rooms, at situations that required her full assessment — but had never seen directed at her specifically. The full quality of it. The complete, unhurried, entirely genuine attention of someone who found what they were looking at genuinely interesting and was not attempting to conceal that.

"You've always known," Vanessa said.

"Yes," Aiko said.

"And the precision was the container."

"Yes."

Vanessa was quiet again. She drank her coffee and looked at the window — the February morning, the Distillery District waking up in the pale light, the cobblestones carrying their thin coat of overnight frost.

"Can I tell you something?" she said.

"Yes," Aiko said.

"When I watched you with Monique in Paris," Vanessa said. "In the feed from your bag camera." She paused. "Jordan and I watched the entire session. You know that."

"I know," Aiko said.

"I told myself we were watching because we needed to understand how the technology worked," Vanessa said. "Because we needed to assess whether you had control of the situation." She looked at her coffee cup. "That was true. But it wasn't the whole truth." Aiko looked at her.

"We watched," Vanessa said, "because it was the most honest thing either of us had seen in years. The precision of it. The complete, methodical, total attention you brought to finding every edge of what Monique could feel and using it with absolute accuracy." She paused. "You were doing what we do. But from the inside. In a way we had never seen before and couldn't have done ourselves."

The room was quiet.

Outside the window a tram moved along the street below with the nearly silent efficiency of the city's transit doing its ordinary morning work.

"You recognised it," Aiko said.

"Immediately," Vanessa said. "And I didn't say anything because it wasn't mine to name." She looked at Aiko directly. "It was yours."

Aiko sat with that for a moment.

It was, she thought, the most Vanessa thing Vanessa had ever said to her. The recognition offered without imposition. The thing seen and acknowledged and then returned to its owner without being used.

Which was, she now understood, the thing Vanessa had been learning to do — the direction her evolution across thirteen books of work had been moving toward. Not the destruction of what she found. The returning of it.

"What do I do with it?" Aiko said.

Vanessa looked at her.

"What do you want to do with it?" she said.

Aiko thought about the substrate. About the desire for dominion and the fascination with the moment of dissolution and the specific, profound, entirely genuine orientation toward the unmanaged self that had been living in her for as long as she could remember.

She thought about what it meant to know it completely now instead of partially.

She thought about the Wreckers — what they did and how they did it and the specific territory they inhabited, the gap between the version and the truth, the work that happened in that gap.

She thought about the fact that she had been in that territory for years without having been fully in herself while she was there.

"I want to work," she said. "Properly. Not as support. Not as the technical resource." She looked at Vanessa. "I want to be in the room. The actual room. The way you're in the room." Vanessa looked at her for a long moment.

"You've always been in the room," she said.

"Not like this," Aiko said.

A beat.

"No," Vanessa agreed. "Not like this."

They sat with that in the morning quiet of the hotel room, the two coffees warm between them, the city outside going about its honest, unsentimental business.

Then Vanessa said: "There's something I want to tell you too."

Aiko looked at her.

"The Weave found something in me at Oliver's house," Vanessa said. "The desire to be seen rather than to see." She paused. "I've been sitting with it since that evening. Understanding its implications." Another pause. "I told Abraham. In the café."

"I know," Aiko said. "He told me this morning. Before the session."

Vanessa looked at her.

"He said it was the first honest thing anyone had said to him in a meeting context," Aiko said. "That it changed the shape of the conversation entirely." She paused. "He said he understood, when you told him that, that you were not there to take anything from him. That you were there because you were genuinely curious." She looked at Vanessa. "Which is the rarest possible reason for someone to be in a room with Abraham Veil, apparently."

Vanessa was quiet.

"The gyroscope," Aiko said carefully. "Eventually, as you said to Soo-Yeon." She held Vanessa's gaze. "What do you think it will find?"

Vanessa looked at the window.

At the pale February light and the old brick and the frost on the cobblestones doing its patient, temporary work before the morning sun removed it.

"I think," she said slowly, "that it will find the same thing the standard Weave found. But completely." She paused. "The desire to be seen. Without the distance. Without the notknowing." She was quiet for a moment. "And I think it will find — underneath that — the specific person I want to be seen by."

The room was very still.

Aiko looked at her.

"Jordan," she said. Not a question.

Vanessa looked at the window.

"Jordan," she said.

It was the first time she had said it out loud.

The word settled into the room with the specific quality of things that had been true for a long time and had finally been given their name — not dramatically, not with the weight of announcement, simply with the quiet, complete, entirely sufficient quality of a truth arriving at the place it had always been heading.

Aiko was quiet for a moment.

Then she said: "Does he know?"

"He knows," Vanessa said. "He's known. We've known." She paused. "We just haven't said it in the specific way that makes it impossible to unsay."

"And after the gyroscope," Aiko said carefully. "After it finds it completely and removes the distance — "

"After the gyroscope," Vanessa said, "it will be impossible to unsay."

She said it without fear. Without the performed lightness of someone managing how a thing landed. With the specific, quiet steadiness of someone who had been moving toward something for a long time and had just, in a hotel room in Toronto on a February morning with a cooling coffee and Aiko's full attention, confirmed the direction.

Aiko looked at her for a long moment.

Then she did something she did rarely.

She smiled.

Not the small, precise, controlled smile of professional warmth. The real one — the one that appeared, in Aiko, perhaps four times a year, the smile of someone for whom smiling was not a social reflex but a genuine and specific response to something they found worth smiling at. "Good," she said.

Vanessa looked at her.

"It's about time," Aiko said.

Vanessa looked at her for a moment longer.

Then she laughed — low and brief and entirely real.

Outside, the frost on the cobblestones was beginning to lift in the pale morning sun, the temporary thing doing its temporary work and then releasing, the stones returning to themselves, dark and patient and entirely sufficient.

Inside, two women sat with their cooling coffees and the specific warmth of people who had just been more honest with each other than they had ever managed before and found the honesty, on balance, to be a considerable improvement on the alternative.

"Linnéa is going to be insufferable about this," Vanessa said.

"Linnéa is going to be magnificent about this," Aiko said. "Those are the same thing with Linnéa."

"Yes," Vanessa agreed. "They are."

She stood and picked up her coat.

At the door she paused and looked back at Aiko, who was sitting in the chair by the window with her coffee and her new knowledge and the specific quality of someone who had been

reassembled and found the reassembly to be a more accurate version of themselves than the original.

"Welcome to the room," Vanessa said.

Aiko looked at her.

"Thank you," she said. "For seeing it before I could say it."

Vanessa held her gaze for one more moment.

Then she went out into the corridor and closed the door quietly behind her.

Aiko sat for a while longer in the pale morning light.

She thought about dominion and dissolution and the specific, profound fascination with the moment when people became unavoidably real.

She thought about what it meant to be fully in the room.

She thought about Linnéa waiting somewhere in this hotel with the patience of someone who had been patient for exactly as long as patience was going to be available to her. She picked up her phone.

She sent a message to Abraham.

When can we begin work on Weave Four?

His reply came in under a minute.

I was hoping you'd ask. Tomorrow morning?

Aiko looked at the gyroscope turning in her mind — the warm light, the old brick, the patient continuous motion of something that had found its purpose.

Tomorrow morning, she replied.

She set the phone down.

Outside, Toronto went about its February business.

Inside, Aiko Nakamura sat in the pale light and was, for the first time in a very long time, completely herself.

--*End of Chapter Ten, complete.*

Aiko is in the room. Vanessa has said Jordan's name out loud for the first time. And Aiko is already working on Weave Four.

Linnéa has been patient long enough.

Chapter 11

Chapter Eleven: Stillness and Storm — Part One

Linnéa had been patient for exactly long enough.

This was not a complaint. It was a precise assessment of her own condition, delivered internally with the same directness she brought to everything, at approximately the moment Vanessa came back from Aiko's room and looked at her across the hotel breakfast table with the expression of someone who had just had a significant conversation and was still carrying it.

Linnéa looked at Vanessa.

Vanessa looked at Linnéa.

"Today?" Linnéa said.

"I'll call Abraham," Vanessa said.

Linnéa picked up her coffee with the specific satisfaction of someone whose patience had been precisely calibrated to the available supply and had not exceeded it by a single moment. Tatum, beside her, turned a page of her book.

--Abraham said yes without hesitation, which Linnéa had expected, because Abraham was a man who understood when a subject was ready and Linnéa had been visibly, unmistakably, entirely ready since the moment she walked through the warehouse door two evenings ago. He said the machine was available from two o'clock. He said Soo-Yeon would be there, which Linnéa was glad of — she wanted Soo-Yeon in the room, the person who understood the machine from the inside, the pioneer who had looked at her across the circle of chairs and said *you'll be good at it* with the frank, professional assessment of someone who knew what she was talking about.

They arrived at the warehouse at ten minutes to two.

Soo-Yeon was already there, which Linnéa had also expected. She was at the workbench with Abraham, the two of them in the specific absorbed conversation of people who were working on something together and had not yet finished the thought — the manuscript notebook open, a technical display on the screen above the bench, the collaboration between the composer and the architect of the technology already so natural that it looked like something that had been happening for years rather than weeks.

They looked up when the group came in.

Soo-Yeon looked at Linnéa with the direct, warm attention she brought to people she had decided she liked.

"Ready?" she said.

"Since Tuesday," Linnéa said.

Soo-Yeon smiled. "Good." She looked at Tatum. "You're staying in the room."

"Yes," Tatum said.

"Good," Soo-Yeon said again. She looked at them both for a moment with the expression of someone who understood something about the two of them that was relevant to what was about to happen and was filing it appropriately. "The machine will find what it finds," she said. "Your job is simply to let it."

"I know how to let things," Linnéa said.

"I know," Soo-Yeon said. "That's why you'll be good at it."

--Linnéa undressed without ceremony.

This was entirely consistent with who she was — the body had never been a source of embarrassment or performance for her, had always been simply the instrument she inhabited, the thing that did what she asked of it and occasionally surprised her with what it knew. She had been comfortable in her skin since the first time she understood that her skin was hers, which had been early and had never required revision.

She was small and precise in the way of gymnasts — the body of someone for whom

physical intelligence was the primary intelligence, the specific musculature of someone who had been asking their body to do extraordinary things since childhood and whose body had answered consistently and completely. She was twenty-six years old and she moved with the unconscious, total physical confidence of someone who had never had reason to doubt what their body could do.

Abraham fitted the harness with the same careful, practiced attention he had brought to Aiko's session — the deliberate placement of each contact point, the adjustment of the strapping to her specific dimensions, the final check of the counterweights before he guided her into the inner rings.

The gyroscope accepted her with the smooth, immediate responsiveness that Soo-Yeon had described — the machine reading her body from the first moment of contact, the

counterweights adjusting, the rings finding the equilibrium specific to her weight and her centre of gravity and the particular quality of her physical presence.

She felt it immediately.

The harness held her completely — every point of contact deliberate and sufficient, the support total without being restrictive, the specific quality of being

held that was entirely different from being contained. She had been held before, in Tatum's arms, in specific moments that she kept private even from her own tendency toward total disclosure. This was different. This was being held by something that had been designed for exactly this — the cradling of a body at a sustained threshold, the patient, continuous, completely attentive support of something that had no other purpose.

The motion began.

--She had expected, based on Soo-Yeon's description and the forty-three page document that Aiko had summarised for her over breakfast with the focused precision of someone who understood both the technical and the experiential dimensions, to feel the threshold state arrive gradually. The sustained edge of arousal. The dissolution of the managed self. It did not arrive gradually.

It arrived the way certain things arrived for Linnéa — immediately, completely, with the total commitment of a body that had been trained since childhood to respond fully to physical sensation and had never learned to hedge.

She gasped — once, involuntarily, the sound of a body that had just been introduced to something it recognised as important.

Then she was quiet.

The gyroscope turned.

Her body was at the threshold — the sustained, calibrated, exquisitely managed edge that the machine maintained with its patient, continuous, completely attentive precision — and in that sustained state the pre-conscious material began to surface.

Not gradually.

All at once.

The unknown desire arrived in Linnéa the way everything arrived in Linnéa — fully, without qualification, without the managed approach of someone who had learned to introduce things to themselves carefully.

And what arrived was not what anyone in the room, including Linnéa, would have predicted. --Tatum was standing near the wall.

She had positioned herself where she could see Linnéa's face without being in the direct sightline of the machine's working area — close enough to be present, far enough to give the

session the space it required. She was entirely still, which was her natural state, the stillness that was not passivity but the specific, total attentiveness of someone who was receiving everything in the room without filtering any of it.

She watched Linnéa's face.

She watched the moment the machine found what it was looking for.

She had been expecting — they had all been expecting, she thought, in the specific way that people expected things about Linnéa — something exuberant. Something that matched the energy, the forward momentum, the complete and shameless physicality of the person suspended in the machine. Some desire that was as large and as loud and as unambiguous as Linnéa herself.

What she saw on Linnéa's face was not that.

What she saw was the expression of someone who had just been shown something they had not known they were carrying.

Something quiet.

Something that lived underneath all the momentum and the energy and the forward-leaning aliveness of Linnéa's ordinary existence like the specific, aching silence underneath a piece of music that was very full of sound.

The expression of someone who wanted to stop.

Not permanently. Not in any final sense. Simply — to stop moving. To be held completely still by something that would not require anything from her. To put down, for a sustained and uninterrupted period, the obligation of her own momentum.

The desire to rest.

Not sleep. Not absence. Rest in the specific sense of a body that had been in constant, exuberant, glorious motion since before it could walk, that had asked everything of itself and received everything back and had never, in all of that, been permitted to simply be still. To be held.

Not dominated. Not owned. Not even loved in any active sense.

Simply held. By something that was not going anywhere and did not need her to be anything other than completely, finally, utterly still.

Tatum looked at Linnéa's face and understood completely what the machine had found. She had always known it was there.

She had been holding space for it, quietly and continuously, for the length of their time together — had understood, in the specific way she understood things, that Linnéa's

momentum was partly genuine and partly the management of something underneath that was its opposite. Had never named it. Had simply been — still. Consistently, reliably, entirely. The still point that Linnéa orbited and returned to and needed more than she had ever said. Tatum closed her eyes briefly.

When she opened them Linnéa was looking at her.

From inside the gyroscope, suspended in the harness, held in the slow continuous orbit of the machine — Linnéa was looking directly at Tatum with an expression that Tatum had never seen on her face before.

Completely open.

Not the performative openness of Linnéa's usual total disclosure. The real kind. The kind that had no audience and no management and no version being presented — simply a person looking at the person they needed and letting that need be completely visible.

Tatum looked back.

She did not move. She did not speak. She did not do anything except be exactly where she was, which was what the moment required and what she was, as it happened, uniquely equipped to provide.

They looked at each other for a long time.

The machine held Linnéa in its patient, continuous orbit.

Tatum held the room in her specific, total stillness.

And the distance between those two things — between the machine's holding and Tatum's holding — was the distance of two chairs in Oliver Strand's converted dining room, the distance of four years of proximity, the distance of everything that had been present between them and had not yet been named in the specific way that made it impossible to unsay. --Abraham slowed the machine after two hours and forty minutes.

The gyroscope settled into its gentler orbit, the counterweights redistributing, the inner rings finding their slower pace. Linnéa's breathing deepened — the long, gradual return of someone coming back from a sustained distance, the specific quality of a body releasing something it had been holding with great intensity and great pleasure for a very long time. When the harness released her and her feet found the concrete floor she stood for a moment without moving, her hands at her sides, her eyes still closed, her platinum hair loose around her shoulders.

Then she opened her eyes.

She looked at Tatum first. Directly, completely, without the usual social calibration of her gaze — without the assessment of the room, the reading of other faces, the forward-leaning attention that was her ordinary mode of being present. Just Tatum. The specific person. The still point.

Tatum looked back.

Nobody spoke.

Soo-Yeon handed Linnéa the robe from the hook by the wall and Linnéa put it on with the unhurried movements of someone who was still partly somewhere else and was allowing the return to happen at its own pace rather than rushing it.

Abraham was at the panel, making notes in the meticulous record he kept of every session — the duration, the calibration adjustments, the quality of the neural recording. He did this without comment, giving the room the space it needed, which was the specific consideration that Vanessa had come to understand as one of Abraham's most important qualities. He knew when to be absent even when he was present.

Vanessa was near the door.

She had watched the session with the full, unhurried attention she brought to things that mattered, and she had seen what Tatum had seen — the moment the machine found it, the expression on Linnéa's face that had no precedent in any of the years she had known her. She had felt, watching it, something she recognised from the bench in Djurgården and the Conservatory corridor and Aiko's hotel room that morning. The specific, quiet satisfaction of being present at a moment of genuine revelation.

Not something taken.

Something returned.

Soo-Yeon was watching Linnéa with the warm, knowing attention of someone who

understood from the inside what the return journey felt like.

After a while Linnéa sat down on the floor.

Not dramatically — she simply folded herself down onto the pale concrete with the specific, unconscious physical grace of a gymnast for whom the floor was simply another surface to inhabit, and sat with her legs crossed and her hands in her lap and her eyes on the middle distance, in the specific posture of someone who was thinking rather than performing thinking.

Tatum crossed the room.

She sat down beside her on the concrete floor — not in front of her, not at an angle that required Linnéa to adjust her gaze, but directly beside her, their shoulders touching, in the specific quality of proximity that said: *I am here and I am not going anywhere and you do not have to do anything with that except receive it.*

Linnéa leaned her head against Tatum's shoulder.

She did not speak.

Tatum did not speak.

The gyroscope turned above them in its slow, patient orbit and the room held them in its warm brick quiet and nobody required anything from anyone for a long and sufficient time. --Eventually Linnéa lifted her head.

She looked at the gyroscope — the machine that had found the thing she had been carrying underneath the momentum, the thing that had been present all along in the specific silence beneath the music of her ordinary life.

"I knew," she said. Her voice was quieter than usual. Not subdued — simply at a different register, the register of someone who had been somewhere and was speaking from there rather than from the surface. "I think I always knew. But knowing and — " She stopped. "Knowing and having it be completely real are different."

"Yes," Tatum said.

"It found the wanting to stop," Linnéa said.

"I know," Tatum said.

Linnéa looked at her.

"You knew before the machine did," she said.

"Yes," Tatum said.

Linnéa was quiet for a moment.

"Why didn't you say?" she said. Not accusatory. Genuinely curious — the specific, direct curiosity of someone who wanted to understand rather than to assign blame.

Tatum looked at the gyroscope.

"Because it was yours to find," she said. "Not mine to name." She paused. "And because I wasn't sure you were ready to know it was allowed."

Linnéa looked at her.

"Allowed," she said.

"To want to stop," Tatum said. "To want to be held still. To want to put down the momentum." She paused. "You are the most alive person I have ever known, Linnéa. And I

think for a long time you believed that the aliveness required the momentum. That one was the condition of the other." She looked at her steadily. "It isn't."

Linnéa was very still.

Which was, Vanessa thought from near the door, the most extraordinary thing she had ever seen. Linnéa Bergström, completely still, on the floor of a warehouse in Toronto in February, hearing the truest thing anyone had said to her.

"You can stop," Tatum said quietly. "Whenever you need to. For as long as you need to. And you will still be — " She paused, finding the right word. "You will still be entirely yourself. The aliveness doesn't go anywhere. It waits."

Linnéa looked at her for a long moment.

Then she took Tatum's hand and held it with both of hers and looked at it the way she looked at things she found precious — directly, without performance, with the full specific attention of someone who understood the value of what they were holding.

"I want to tell you something," Linnéa said.

"Tell me," Tatum said.

"I am not always going to be good at stopping," Linnéa said. "I am going to keep moving most of the time because that is genuinely who I am and I am not going to apologise for it." She paused. "But I want — " She stopped. Started again. "I want there to be a place I can come back to. When I need to stop. That is always there and always still and always — " She looked at Tatum. "You."

Tatum looked at her.

"I have always been that," she said. "I will always be that." A pause. "That is also genuinely who I am."

Linnéa looked at her for another long moment.

Then she said: "I love you."

Not for the first time. They had said it before, in the specific ways that people who lived alongside each other said it — in the mornings, in the ordinary moments, in the warmth of the shorthand that accumulated between people over time.

But this was different.

This was the version said from the substrate. From the place the machine had found. From the specific, complete, entirely unmanaged truth of what was actually there underneath all of it.

Tatum heard the difference.

"I love you," she said back. In the same register. From the same place.

The room was quiet.

Soo-Yeon was looking at the workbench, giving them the privacy of her inattention, which was a form of consideration she had clearly learned from Abraham.

Abraham was writing in his notebook with the focused absorption of someone doing necessary work and understanding that the necessary work was, at this moment, the most respectful thing available to him.

Vanessa was looking at the gyroscope.

She was thinking about Jordan. About the thing she had said to Aiko that morning — *the specific person I want to be seen by* — and about the gyroscope and what it would find when the distance was completely removed and the thing that had always been true was finally, completely, unavoidably real.

She was thinking about eventually.

She was thinking that eventually was getting closer.

--After a while Linnéa stood up.

She stood with the specific, total physical grace that was hers regardless of what state she was in — the gymnast's body knowing how to find vertical from any position — and she looked around the room with the expression of someone who had returned from somewhere and was taking inventory of what was here.

Abraham at his bench. Soo-Yeon beside him. Vanessa near the door. Tatum rising from the floor with the unhurried dignity she brought to every movement.

The gyroscope turning.

Linnéa looked at it.

Then she looked at Tatum.

"Can we go back to the hotel?" she said.

"Yes," Tatum said.

"I want to be still for a while," Linnéa said. "With you."

"Yes," Tatum said.

They said goodbye to Abraham and Soo-Yeon with the brief, genuine warmth of people who had somewhere specific to be and were going there. Soo-Yeon hugged Linnéa — brief, tight,

the hug of someone who understood what the session had found and honoured it without making more of it than it was. Abraham shook Tatum's hand and looked at her with the dark attentive eyes for a moment and said something quiet that Vanessa didn't hear.

Tatum nodded.

They left.

Vanessa watched them go — Linnéa and Tatum walking down the corridor together, Tatum's hand in Linnéa's, Linnéa moving at a different pace from usual, the forward momentum present but quieter, the specific quality of someone who had set something down and was finding, with mild surprise, that the setting down had not diminished them.

Had, if anything, made more room.

She stood for a moment in the warehouse room with Abraham and Soo-Yeon and the

gyroscope and the warm brick and the February afternoon pressing its honest grey light through the high frosted windows.

"Thursday," she said.

"Thursday," Abraham confirmed. "The Third Weave. Everything that's been building." Vanessa looked at the gyroscope.

"And after Thursday," she said, "I'd like to book a session."

Abraham looked at her.

"The extended protocol," she said.

He was quiet for a moment.

"Yes," he said. "Of course."

Vanessa looked at the machine — the slow, patient, continuous turning, the inner rings finding their independent orbits, the whole structure doing what it had been built to do. "I know what it's going to find," she said. "I just need to know it completely." Abraham looked at her with the expression she had first seen across a boardroom table and had been reading more accurately ever since — the dark, attentive eyes, the face of someone for whom the world was primarily material and who looked at things with full focus because they found them worth looking at.

"That," he said, "is the most honest reason anyone has ever given me for climbing into that machine."

Vanessa looked at him.

"I've been working on honesty," she said.

Abraham almost smiled.

"I know," he said. "I've noticed."

Outside, Toronto was doing its February thing — patient, unhurried, entirely itself. The lake somewhere to the south, invisible and enormous. The bare trees.

The working streets. Inside, the gyroscope turned.

Waiting, as it always waited, with the complete and unhurried commitment of something that had found its purpose and intended to keep it.

Chapter 12

Chapter Twelve: Thursday — Part One

The Third Weave showing was at eight o'clock in the evening.

Oliver Strand had offered the Rosedale house again — the converted dining room, the twelve chairs, the equipment along the wall — and Abraham had accepted because the room had already held two Weave evenings and had developed, through that holding, the specific quality of a space that understood its purpose. Not sacred exactly. Functional in the specific way of places that had been used well for something important and had absorbed that use into their character.

The group assembled at the house at seven-thirty.

Vanessa and Jordan arrived together, which was how they always arrived at things that mattered. Aiko came separately, on foot from the Distillery District, which she had been doing since the session — walking more, Vanessa had noticed, with the specific quality of someone who was inhabiting their own body differently and was finding the walking a useful way to understand the difference. Linnéa and Tatum came last, Linnéa moving at her own pace — present, forward-leaning, herself, but with the specific quality of someone who had set something down and was finding the lightness of it still surprising and still good. Oliver met them at the door.

He looked at the group assembled on his front steps with the expression of someone who had been hosting these evenings for long enough to read a room before it entered his house, and whatever he read in this particular group made him quiet for a moment before he spoke. "You've all been in the warehouse," he said.

Not a question.

"Yes," Vanessa said.

He looked at each of them briefly — the specific, curatorial attention of someone who spent his life in the presence of important things and had learned to recognise the quality of having been changed by one.

"Good," he said. "Come in."

--The other guests were already there.

Twelve chairs tonight — a larger group than Oliver's usual intimate gatherings, because the Third Weave was different from the first two and Abraham had wanted a larger audience for

its first showing. The room held the specific atmosphere Vanessa remembered from the first evening — the conversation moving carefully around the edges of what was about to happen, the particular quality of people who had arrived at a threshold and were filling the time with things that were genuinely interesting and also, underneath, a form of preparation. Abraham was there.

He was standing near the window with a glass of water, which was how he stood at these evenings — present but not circulating, available but not performing availability. He looked at Vanessa when she came in with the expression she had come to know as his baseline — the dark, attentive eyes, the face of someone who was always simultaneously here and elsewhere, in the room and in the work.

Soo-Yeon was beside him.

She was dressed — dark trousers, a simple shirt, her dark hair pulled back — and she had the specific quality she had had since Vanessa first saw her emerge from the harness in the warehouse. The quality of someone who was doing the most important work of their life and knew it and wore that knowledge lightly because it was simply the truth and the truth didn't require display.

She looked at the group and smiled — the full, unguarded smile — and Linnéa made the small sound that meant she was receiving something that was more than she had anticipated, which with Linnéa was always the most honest possible response.

Oliver's assistant moved through the room placing the devices on the chairs — the delicate curved frames, each one specific to its chair, each one waiting for the head it was about to hold.

Vanessa took her chair.

Jordan took his — two chairs to her left, which was where he had been on the first evening and which was where she had looked across at him when the room came back and found him already looking at her.

She was aware of him without looking.

The ambient frequency of his presence. The specific quality of it. The thing she had said out loud in Aiko's hotel room two days ago and which was still settling into its new shape — the name given, the thing named still the same thing it had always been, now simply impossible to unsay.

She looked at the device in her hands.

The delicate curved frame. The technology that found what was there and returned it in a form you could bear to look at.

She thought about the gyroscope session she had booked for the day after tomorrow. She thought about what it was going to find.

She already knew.

She thought about Jordan knowing too.

She was fairly sure he did.

--Abraham stood near the door.

He spoke in the quiet, even tone of someone who had given this introduction before and had refined it down to what was actually necessary. But tonight there was something different in it — a quality that hadn't been there at the first two evenings, a quality Vanessa identified after a moment as the quality of someone who was no longer standing at a distance from what they had made.

He was in the room.

Not in the doorway.

"The Third Weave," he said, "is built from material I found in a specific person. Not an anonymous subject. A person I know now, whose work I understand now, whose unknown desire I had the — " He paused. "The questionable authority to find before she knew I was looking." He was quiet for a moment. "She has heard it. She knows what I found. And she has asked me to show it tonight with her full knowledge and her full consent." He looked at Soo-Yeon. "Which changes the foundation the work stands on. And makes it, I believe, something more than what it was when I built it without her knowing."

Soo-Yeon looked back at him steadily.

She nodded once.

Abraham looked at the room.

"The Third Weave is about permission," he said. "The unknown desire to be a version of yourself that you have never allowed to exist. Not something repressed or hidden. Something that hasn't fully formed yet because it hasn't found the container. The form. The permission to become." He paused. "What you experience tonight is one person's unknown desire for that permission. Woven together with compatible material from other subjects. Calibrated to your specific neural baseline so that what arrives does not arrive as someone else's experience but as a recognition." He looked around the room. "What you recognise tonight is yours. Whatever it is. However it arrives." Another pause. "Don't try to name it while it's happening. There will be time for that afterward."

He nodded to his assistant.

She moved through the room.

The device settled over Vanessa's ears and forehead with the exact, barely perceptible fit of something correctly made — the way it had at Oliver's house

the first time, the way she now

understood was not incidental but essential, the fit that made the technology invisible, that made the experience arrive as interior rather than exterior.

She sat with her hands in her lap.

She looked at the room — the twelve chairs, the twelve people in them, each arriving at this threshold from their own direction.

She was aware of Jordan two chairs to her left.

She was aware of Aiko across the arc, sitting with the precise, forward-facing posture of someone who was entirely ready. Of Linnéa beside Tatum, their hands not touching but proximate in the specific way that said everything about what had happened in the warehouse without requiring demonstration.

She was aware of Soo-Yeon standing near the wall — not in a chair, not a subject tonight but a presence, the person whose unknown desire was the foundation of what was about to arrive in twelve different nervous systems simultaneously.

She looked at the room.

The room went dark.

--***Chapter Twelve: Thursday — Part Two**

What arrived was not what Vanessa had experienced the first time.

The first time — the First Weave, Oliver's house, the desire to be seen rather than to see — had arrived as a quality. A condition. Something that surrounded her and was recognised and sat with and returned to the world with her when the room came back.

This was different.

This arrived as a specific thing.

Not a condition but a moment — a single, precise, completely formed moment that existed in the pre-conscious the way certain things existed there, not as memory exactly, not as imagination exactly, but as something that had been waiting in the substrate with the patient, specific quality of something that knew its own shape and had been waiting for the container that would let it become what it was.

The moment was this.

A room she recognised. The apartment. Their apartment — the tall windows, the city light, the specific warmth of a space that had been genuinely lived in. And Jordan. Not a version of Jordan, not a composite, not the ambient presence she was accustomed to — Jordan specifically, completely, the actual person in the actual room, looking at her.

Not looking at a target.

Not looking at the work.

Looking at her.

With the full, unhurried, completely unguarded quality of someone who had stopped managing what their face said and was simply — present. Available. Entirely himself in the way he was entirely himself only in the specific, private, accumulated intimacy of their life together, and pointed entirely at her, and seeing her completely, and not using what he saw. Simply witnessing it.

The thing she had wanted.

The thing the First Weave had found at the surface level and the Third Weave was finding at the substrate — not the desire to be seen in the abstract, not the desire to be witnessed by some unnamed presence. The specific person. The specific room. The specific quality of being known completely by the one person who had the material to know her completely and choosing, in this moment, not to do anything with it except offer it back.

Here is what I see. It's yours. I'm not going anywhere.

She sat with it.

She did not try to name it while it was happening.

She stayed.

The Third Weave held her in Soo-Yeon's permission — in the composite of unknown desires woven together by Abraham's precise, extraordinary, ethically complicated art — and what it found in Vanessa Smart at the substrate level was not complicated at all.

It was the simplest thing she had ever felt.

She loved him.

Not the rules. Not the work. Not the partnership or the trauma bond or the accumulated years of shared understanding. All of that was true and none of it was this. This was simpler and older and more fundamental than all of it — the specific, irreducible, entirely unmanaged fact of loving a specific person and wanting to be seen by them and knowing, in the hypnopompic clarity of the substrate, that she already was.

Had been for a long time.

The Third Weave held the moment and she was in it completely — the room, the windows, Jordan's face — and then, gradually, the room came back.

The sourceless light returned.

Twelve people sitting with whatever they had been given.

The specific silence of a room in which language was not yet available.

Vanessa sat with her hands in her lap and looked at nothing in particular and was very still. After a moment she turned her head.

Jordan was already looking at her.

His expression was the expression from the warehouse chairs — the open face, the depth at which something had reached him — but more than that. More complete than that. The expression of someone who had just experienced the Third Weave and had found in it, calibrated to his specific neural baseline, the same thing she had found in hers. Or close enough to the same thing that the distance was theoretical.

They looked at each other across the two chairs.

Neither of them spoke.

The room moved around them — the low collective sounds of twelve people beginning the slow return to language, the filmmaker looking at his hands, the academic sitting with closed eyes, the gallery owner from Montreal already crying quietly for the second time at a Weave evening and apparently not minding.

Aiko was sitting with a specific, interior quality of attention that Vanessa recognised as the expression of someone who had found exactly what they expected to find and was in the process of understanding what they were going to do with it.

Linnéa was sitting completely still.

Which was, in its own way, the most extraordinary thing in the room.

Tatum was watching her with the calm, full attention. Waiting. Present. The still point. After a while Linnéa turned her head and looked at Tatum.

Tatum looked back.

Linnéa reached over and took her hand.

She didn't say anything.

She didn't need to.

--Oliver turned the lights up slowly.

The room found its dimensions again. The dark walls, the equipment along the shelf, the twelve chairs in their loose arc. The warm, low light doing its careful work.

Nobody spoke for a long time.

When people began to talk it was in the circumambulatory way of the first evening — carefully, around the edges, the specific language of people who were still in the presence of something they weren't ready to name directly. The filmmaker said something about the specific quality of the permission the Weave had offered — not permission granted from outside but permission that had always been available from inside, simply unaccessed. The academic said something about the relationship between the unknown desire and the self that had been suppressing it, whether suppression was even the right word, whether it was more accurate to say the desire had been waiting for the correct conditions to surface. Soo-Yeon was listening with the focused, warm attention of someone hearing her own work discussed. She was standing near the wall, her arms loosely crossed, her expression the expression she brought to things she had made and was watching affect other people — the specific combination of authorial satisfaction and genuine curiosity.

Abraham was in the room.

Not the doorway.

He was sitting in one of the chairs along the wall — not the twelve experience chairs but one of the extras, the chairs of someone who was present as a witness rather than a participant — and he was listening to the conversation with the expression Vanessa had watched develop across the weeks of this job. The sun fully risen now on something. The illumination complete. The face of a man who had built something extraordinary from material he had not had full authority to take and had sat with that fact and had not flinched from it and had found, on the other side of sitting with it, that the work was still worth doing and could be done honestly and was already, in this room tonight with Soo-Yeon standing against the wall knowing everything, being done honestly.

Vanessa watched him.

Then she looked at Jordan.

He was still looking at her.

She stood.

He stood.

They did not speak. They moved toward each other with the specific, unhurried quality of people who had somewhere to be and knew where it was and were going there directly — not rushing, not performing the moment, simply moving toward what had been true for a long time and was now simply visible.

They said brief, warm goodbyes — to Oliver, to Abraham, to Soo-Yeon who looked at them both with the knowing, unguarded smile and said nothing because

nothing was required. To Aiko, who looked at Vanessa with the small precise smile and the expression of someone who had said *it's about time* two days ago and was finding the patience to not say it again, which was its own form of grace. To Linnéa, who was still holding Tatum's hand and looked at Vanessa with the expression of someone who understood completely what was happening and was, for once, entirely quiet about it.

Tatum looked at Vanessa.

"Go," she said simply.

Vanessa looked at her.

Then she and Jordan went out into the Rosedale night.

--***Chapter Twelve: Thursday — Part Three**

The night was cold and clear.

Rosedale received them into its particular February silence — the winding streets, the enormous bare trees, the houses set back behind their gardens holding their warmth against the dark. Their breath clouded in the still air. The streetlights made pools of amber on the pavement and the snow that remained on the verges was the compressed, darkened snow of a city winter, patient and unhurried and entirely indifferent to what was happening on its streets.

They walked.

Not toward anything immediately — not toward the car, not toward the main road where they could get a taxi back to the Distillery District. Simply walking, the way they had walked in Stockholm along the water, the way they had walked in every city that had mattered, the movement that was not destination but thinking, the specific quality of motion that allowed certain things to arrive that couldn't arrive while sitting still.

They walked for a while without speaking.

The city was quiet around them. A dog somewhere. A car on a distant street. The specific compressed silence of a residential neighbourhood at nine in the evening in February — everyone inside, the windows warm, the ordinary necessary private life of a city going about itself.

Jordan spoke first.

"The Third Weave," he said.

"Yes," she said.

"What did it find?"

Vanessa walked for a few paces.

"You know what it found," she said.

"Yes," he said. "I want to hear you say it."

She looked at the pavement ahead of them — the amber light, the bare tree branches making their patient grey architecture above, the quiet street extending into the Rosedale dark. "I love you," she said.

She said it the way Linnéa had said it to Tatum — from the substrate. From the place the machine had found and the standard Weave had approached and the years of accumulated proximity had been moving toward. Not the rules. Not the partnership. Not the shared work or the shared life or any of the things that were also true. The specific, simple, fundamental thing underneath all of it.

Jordan was quiet for a moment.

They walked.

"I know," he said.

She looked at him.

He was looking ahead, his profile in the amber light carrying the quality she knew completely — the face of a man who was thinking about something and had decided to think about it aloud.

"I've known for a long time," he said. "I think you've known for a long time." He paused. "The question was never whether. The question was when it would be something we could say in the specific way that makes it impossible to unsay."

"And now?" she said.

He stopped walking.

She stopped beside him.

They were on a quiet corner in Rosedale, beneath one of the enormous bare elms, the streetlight making its amber circle on the pavement around them and the dark beyond it thorough and patient and entirely sufficient.

He turned to face her.

She looked at him — the dark hair and the silver at the temples and the steady dark eyes that gave very little away to most people and had been giving everything away to her for the length of their partnership, which she was done pretending she had not been receiving.

"Now," he said, "it's impossible to unsay."

He put his hands on her face — both of them, the gesture she knew, the deliberate rather than urgent gesture — and looked at her with the full, unhurried, completely unguarded quality that the Third Weave had shown her

and that was simply, she understood now, what had always been there when he looked at her.

She had wanted to be seen.

She had been seen for years.

She put her hand against his chest — the familiar gesture, the one she had been making for years with the specific quality of someone touching something they relied on — and felt the steady beat of his heart beneath her palm.

"Same rules," she said.

He looked at her.

"Same rules," he said. "And something else."

"Yes," she said. "And something else."

He kissed her.

Not the urgent kiss of jobs completed and worlds ended — they had kissed like that a hundred times and it had always been true and was still true and would always be true. This was different. This was the kiss of two people who had arrived somewhere that had always been there and were finally, completely, without qualification, in it.

The elm tree above them held its winter patience.

The amber light did its honest work on the pavement.

Rosedale was entirely quiet.

--They took a car back to the Distillery District.

The city moved past the windows in its ordinary February way — the streets, the lights, the lake becoming visible for a moment as they came south, vast and dark and patient to the horizon. They sat close together in the back seat without speaking, which was not the silence of people who had nothing to say but the silence of people who had said the essential thing and were letting it settle into the shape of their life rather than filling it with words that would be insufficient anyway.

The Distillery District received them into its amber warmth — the cobblestones, the old brick, the lanes quiet at this hour. They went upstairs.

The suite was as they had left it — the desk, the windows, the city below, the tall windows giving their view of the converted buildings and the dark sky above them.

Vanessa stood at the window for a moment.

Jordan came to stand beside her.

Below, the Distillery District was doing its late evening thing — a few people in the lanes, their breath clouding, the amber light on the old brick patient and warm.

"The gyroscope," she said.

"Day after tomorrow," he said.

"You knew I'd booked it."

"Abraham told me," he said. "When you were saying goodbye to Soo-Yeon." He paused. "He said you told him you already knew what it was going to find and you needed to know it completely."

"Yes," she said.

"I want to be in the room," he said.

She turned to look at him.

"I want to be there," he said. "When it finds it completely and removes the distance. I want to be the person in the room." He looked at her steadily. "Not because you need me there. Because I want to witness it. The way you've been wanting to be witnessed."

She looked at him for a long moment.

The thing she had been carrying for all the years of their partnership — the desire to be seen, the specific person she wanted to be seen by — was simply present now, named and impossible to unsay and entirely, sufficiently real.

"Yes," she said. "I want you there."

He put his arm around her and she leaned into it and they stood at the window together in the warmth of the suite and looked at the Distillery District below and the dark sky above and the amber light doing its patient, honest work on everything it touched.

Outside, Toronto held its winter. The lake to the south. The bare trees. The working streets of the east end where Morpheus Studios sat in its brick building and Soo-Yeon's gyroscope turned in the warm light, patient and continuous and entirely committed to its purpose. Inside, two people stood at a window and were, for the first time in the length of their partnership, completely in the same room.

Not the rules.

Not only the rules.

Something above the rules, built on them, possible because of them — the thing that the rules had been making space for all along without either of them knowing it.

Same rules.

And something else.

And the something else was simply this — two people who had spent years learning to see other people clearly, standing at a window in a city that didn't perform, finally seeing each other.

Completely.

Without the distance.

--Downstairs, in the Distillery District, the old brick held its warmth against the February night.

In a room on another floor, Linnéa was still. Tatum was beside her. The stillness was real and was allowed and was, as it turned out, its own form of aliveness — quieter than the other kind, more fundamental, the ground beneath the music rather than the music itself. In her own room, Aiko was at her desk with her laptop open and the cursor blinking at the top of a new document and the specific quality of someone who was beginning something they have been moving toward for a very long time and have finally, completely, arrived at the starting point of.

She began to write.

Not the clinical language. Not the technical framework. The true version.

Which was, she was finding, both harder and more satisfying than anything she had written before.

In the Annex, in a top floor apartment full of books, Abraham Veil was at his own desk with his own notes, the meticulous records of the Third Weave's first showing, and beside them something new — the beginning of the notes for Weave Four, built this time from the beginning with full knowledge and full consent and the specific, extraordinary creative intelligence of Soo-Yeon Park working alongside him rather than sleeping beneath him. The sun had risen completely on something.

It had illuminated everything it needed to illuminate.

And what it found, when the light was full and honest and the distance was gone, was not smaller than what had been promised.

It was larger.

It was always larger.

That was the thing about true things — they were always larger than their containers, always more than the version, always worth the cost of finding them.

Always.

Chapter 13

Chapter Thirteen: The Distance Removed — Part One

She arrived at the warehouse at nine in the morning.

Jordan was beside her, which was where he had been for the length of their partnership and which meant something different now than it had meant yesterday — not different in kind, the same person in the same place, but different in the way that named things were different from unnamed things, which was simply that they were visible. Present in a way that didn't require inference.

Abraham met them at the door.

He looked at them both with the dark, attentive eyes and whatever he read in the quality of their arrival — the specific proximity, the thing that was visible now — he received without comment, which was the most respectful possible response and entirely consistent with who he was.

"Ready?" he said to Vanessa.

"Yes," she said.

Soo-Yeon was inside, at the workbench, the manuscript notebook open and the pencil behind her ear. She looked up when they came in and looked at Vanessa with the direct, warm attention she brought to people she had decided she understood.

"You booked it," she said.

"Yes," Vanessa said.

Soo-Yeon looked at Jordan.

Then back at Vanessa.

The knowing, unguarded smile.

"Good," she said. Simply. As if the entire situation had resolved itself into the correct configuration and she was simply noting the fact.

Jordan looked at the gyroscope.

It was turning in the warm light the way it always turned — the slow, continuous, patient orbit of something that had found its purpose and was fulfilling it without drama or announcement. The inner rings finding their independent paths. The counterweights doing their quiet, essential work.

He looked at it for a long moment.

Vanessa watched him look at it.

She thought about what it was going to find — what she already knew it was going to find, what she had said out loud in Aiko's hotel room and on a quiet corner in Rosedale beneath an elm tree and at a window overlooking the Distillery District. The thing that was named and impossible to unsay and entirely, sufficiently real.

She thought about the distance.

The specific distance between knowing something and knowing it completely — the distance the gyroscope removed, the distance that the standard Weave had approached and the Third Weave had found at the substrate and the gyroscope would now dissolve entirely, leaving only the thing itself.

She was not afraid.

She had not been afraid of any of it — not the standard Weave at Oliver's house, not the Third Weave the previous evening, not this. Fear was the wrong word for what she felt standing in the warehouse in the February morning with the gyroscope turning in the warm light and Jordan beside her and the thing that had always been true about to become impossible to maintain any distance from.

What she felt was the feeling she had described to Oliver on the first evening.

Interested.

--She undressed with the same deliberate attention she brought to things that mattered. Jordan was near the wall — not the opposite wall, not so far that he was absent, but sufficiently back that he was witness rather than participant, the position that was his by his own request and by her invitation and which was, she understood, exactly right. Close enough to see. Far enough to let the thing happen without interference.

She stood in the centre of the room in the warm light.

Abraham fitted the harness with the careful, practiced hands — the placement of each contact point, the adjustment of the strapping to her specific dimensions. She was tall and longlimbed and the harness accommodated her with the same smooth, responsive precision it had brought to every subject — the machine learning her from the first moment of contact, the counterweights shifting.

She looked at Jordan while Abraham worked.

He was looking at her.

Not the way he looked at targets. Not the professional assessment, the reading of the room, the mapping of the gap between the version and the truth. This was the look from the Third Weave — the look she had found in Soo-Yeon's substrate material, which meant it had

always been there, which meant the Weave had simply shown her what had always been available to see if she had been willing to look.

The full, unhurried, completely unguarded attention of someone who had stopped managing what their face said.

Here is what I see. It's yours. I'm not going anywhere.

She held his gaze while Abraham finished the harness.

Then Abraham guided her into the inner rings and the gyroscope accepted her weight and the motion began — the outer ring finding its rotation, the inner rings one by one, the world's relationship to her body shifting as the machine found its working equilibrium.

She closed her eyes.

--*Of course. Here is Chapter Thirteen, Part Two, corrected — the gyroscope finds the love, and only the love, completely and without distance. The rest belongs to Vanessa and the conversation in Part Three.

--**Chapter Thirteen: The Distance Removed — Part Two**

The technology did what it did.

The dissolution was immediate — not the gradual approach of the standard Weave, not the arrival of a quality or a condition or a thing that assembled itself from the inside. Immediate. The specific, total removal of the distance between herself and what had always been there. What was there was not complicated.

It was the simplest thing she had ever known.

She loved him.

Not as a discovery — she had discovered it in the substrate of the Third Weave the previous evening, had named it on a corner in Rosedale, had said it at the window in the suite. The gyroscope was not revealing something new.

It was removing the last of the distance between her and the thing.

And what that felt like — the distance completely gone, the thing completely present, the full weight and texture and reality of it available without the mediation of any management whatsoever — was something that no version of the feeling she had carried before this moment had been adequate to.

Not the rules. Not the partnership. Not the years of shared work and shared life. All of that was true and all of that was also present — the gyroscope didn't simplify, it didn't reduce, it showed the thing in its full complexity without the distance that had been making the full complexity bearable — and underneath all of it, the foundation of all of it, the thing that had been there since before she had admitted it was there, was simply this.

She loved him the way you loved a person you had chosen completely. Not fallen into. Not been pulled toward by circumstance or proximity or shared trauma. Chosen. With the full awareness of what was being chosen and why. The specific, irreversible, entirely voluntary act of deciding that this person was the person and living in that decision for long enough that the decision had become the architecture of everything else.

--The gyroscope went deeper.

Not into new territory — into the full depth of what was already there. The substrate beneath the substrate. The layer below the unknown desire, below even the pre-conscious architecture of everything she had built her professional and personal life on. The oldest, most fundamental layer. The self before management. The self before the red dress and the ballroom and the decision to become the monsters.

What it found was not frightening.

It was simply the love at its full size.

Not the version she had been carrying at a manageable remove — the version that could coexist with the rules and the work and the careful professional distance they maintained from their own interior lives. The actual thing. Without the container. Without the distance that had been making the size of it bearable.

The machine held her in its orbit and the love was simply present — completely, without distance, without the management that had been maintaining the bearable version of it. It was not bearable in the conventional sense.

It was too real for bearable.

It was the size of everything.

She stayed with it.

She did not try to name it while it was happening.

She stayed the way she had learned to stay — completely, without trying to resolve it or reduce it or arrive at the version of it that could be held at arm's length.

She let it be the size it was.

The size it was — the full, unmanaged, completely present love for a specific person who was standing near the wall — was exactly the size of the man himself.

Not smaller than she had thought.

Not larger than she could carry.

Simply — Jordan. Complete. Without the distance. Every true thing about him present simultaneously, the way true things were when the management stopped.

She loved all of it.

She was not afraid of any of it.

And with the distance gone and the love fully present and the management no longer available — she understood, with the specific clarity of the hypnopompic state, that there were things she had been carrying alongside the love for the length of their partnership that also needed to be put down.

Not by the machine.

By her.

Things she had known and never said.

Things that belonged to Jordan and had always belonged to Jordan and that she had held quietly and without comment for the correct amount of time and that the time had now come to return to him — not as information, not as leverage, not as anything operational — simply as the act of a person who loved someone completely and was no longer willing to maintain any distance from that.

The conversation would happen when she came out of the machine.

She would tell him everything she knew.

She stayed with the love for the full duration of the session — three hours and twelve minutes, though it felt like the duration it was, neither long nor short — and when the machine finally slowed and the harness released and her feet found the concrete floor she stood for a moment without moving.

Her eyes still closed.

The full size of the love simply present.

The things she needed to say to him waiting quietly for the moment she opened her eyes. Then she opened them.

She looked at Jordan.

He was already looking at her.

--**Chapter Thirteen: The Distance Removed — Part Three**

Abraham slowed the machine after three hours and twelve minutes.

The gyroscope settled into its gentler orbit. Vanessa's breathing deepened — the long, gradual return of someone coming back from a sustained distance, the specific quality of a body releasing something it had been holding with great intensity for an extended period. When the harness released her and her feet

found the concrete floor she stood for a moment without moving.

Her eyes were still closed.

The room waited.

Abraham was at the panel, making his notes. Soo-Yeon was at the workbench, watching with the warm attention of someone who understood from the inside what the return journey felt like.

Jordan had not moved from the wall.

He was still there. Still present. The full, unhurried, completely unguarded attention that was simply his now — the distance gone from both sides simultaneously.

Vanessa opened her eyes.

She looked at the ceiling first. Then the room. Then Jordan.

He was already looking at her.

She said: "I need to sit down."

Soo-Yeon brought a chair. Vanessa sat. She put her hands in her lap and was quiet for a moment with the specific interior quality of someone who had been somewhere significant and was allowing the return to happen at its own pace.

Jordan crossed the room.

He sat on the floor beside her chair — not in a chair of his own, on the floor, his back against the workbench, his legs extended, the complete unhurried ease of someone who had found the correct position and intended to stay in it for as long as necessary.

She looked down at him.

He looked up at her.

"How long?" she asked.

"Three hours and twelve minutes," Abraham said quietly from the panel.

She nodded.

She looked at her hands for a moment.

Then she looked at Jordan.

"I need to tell you some things," she said. "Things I've been carrying for a while. That the distance was making it possible to keep separate." She paused. "The distance is gone now. So."

Jordan was still.

"I heard you," she said. "Jackson Hole. The porch. I wasn't asleep." She paused. "I heard everything."

The room was very quiet.

Jordan looked at her with the expression she had seen perhaps three times in all the years of their partnership — the expression that appeared only when something had reached him at a depth the composure didn't cover.

"Everything," he said.

"Every word," she said. "I didn't know this would happen. I didn't know you would get under my skin." She said it quietly, the specific cadence of it, the way she had been carrying it. "And then — *in short, I love you.*" She looked at him steadily. "I've been carrying that for the length of everything we've done together."

Jordan was very still.

"Why didn't you — " he began.

"Because it was yours," she said. "It wasn't mine to name or use or manage. And because I understood what it was. What you were doing. You told her what she needed to hear after we broke everything she had. You gave her something real to hold onto after we left." She paused. "That's not a violation of anything. That's who you were already becoming. That I was watching you become." She held his gaze. "I stayed because of it. Not in spite of it." Jordan looked at her.

"I know about the money too," she said. "I've always known. I didn't ask and you didn't tell me and that was the correct arrangement. It's still the correct arrangement." She paused. "What you do for her is right. It has always been right."

Jordan was quiet for a moment.

"There's something else," she said.

He looked at her.

"A girl," she said. "I suspected. I didn't know precisely. But I suspected."

The room held very still.

Jordan looked at her for a long moment.

"Yes," he said quietly.

"Almost two," she said.

"Yes."

"What's her name?" she asked.

Jordan looked at the high frosted windows — the pale February light coming through honestly and flatly.

"Ellie," he said. "Grace named her Ellie."

Vanessa sat with that for a moment. A small girl in Wyoming, almost two years old, growing up in the aftermath of something that had happened before she existed and that she would never fully know the shape of.

"Does she look like you?" Vanessa asked.

Jordan looked at her.

"Grace says she has my eyes," he said.

"Then she's going to be trouble," Vanessa said.

The low, brief, entirely real laugh. The one that appeared in specific company at specific moments.

She reached down and put her hand on top of his where it rested on the concrete floor. He turned his hand over and held hers.

They sat like that for a while — Vanessa in the chair, Jordan on the floor beside her, their hands together in the warm light of the old brick room while the gyroscope continued its slow, patient, purposeful turning above them.

Abraham was writing in his notebook.

Soo-Yeon was looking at her manuscript.

Both of them giving the room the privacy it needed.

After a while Vanessa said: "I need you to hear something."

Jordan looked up at her.

"You have been carrying the porch and the money and Ellie as a guilt for the entire length of our partnership," she said. "I want you to put the guilt down. Right now. In this room." She paused. "What you did on that porch was the most honest thing either of us had done in the early years of this. You looked at someone we had broken and you told her the truth and you took responsibility and you made sure she wasn't left with nothing." She held his gaze. "The money is right. Ellie is right. Whatever relationship you have with Grace that allows you to be the person she can call when something is needed — that is right." Another pause. "All of it is yours and it should be yours and I have never once in all this time wanted it to be otherwise. I heard you on that porch and I stayed. I have always been going to stay." Jordan looked at her.

The open face. The full unguarded quality of someone who had just had something lifted from them that they had been carrying so long they had forgotten it had a weight. "You heard it all," he said.

"Every word," she said.

"And you never — "

"Never," she said. "Not once."

He was quiet for a long moment.

His hand tightened around hers.

"Thank you," he said.

It was the simplest thing he had said in all the years of their partnership.

It was sufficient.

--They said goodbye to Abraham and Soo-Yeon with the warmth of people who had been given something extraordinary and knew it. Soo-Yeon hugged Vanessa — brief, fierce — and said something quiet in her ear.

Vanessa listened.

She nodded.

She looked at Soo-Yeon for a moment with the full quality of her attention.

"Thank you," she said. "For the Weave. For all of it."

"Thank the machine," Soo-Yeon said.

"I'm thanking you," Vanessa said. "The machine is yours."

Soo-Yeon looked at her.

Then the full, unguarded, pioneer's smile.

"Yes," she said. "It is."

--They walked out into the February morning.

The east end received them into its ordinary, unhurried quality — the working streets, the residential blocks, the city that had never been asked to be anything other than what it was and had developed, through that long permission, a specific and trustworthy character. They walked.

Vanessa felt the thing — the full size of it, the complete and unmanaged love for a specific person walking beside her — and it was exactly as large as the gyroscope had shown her. Entirely possible to carry. Not because it was lighter than she had thought. Because she was not carrying it alone.

She looked at Jordan beside her — the dark hair and the silver at the temples and the quality of his presence, the specific unhurried frequency of him — and felt the thing she recognised from every city that had mattered.

The feeling of being exactly where she needed to be.

"Same rules," she said, as they walked.

"Same rules," he said.

"And something else," she said.

"And something else," he agreed.

"And Ellie," she said.

Jordan was quiet for a beat.

"And Ellie," he said.

She took his hand.

They walked east through the working streets of a city that didn't perform, under a pale February sky, in the honest winter light that told you the truth about everything it touched without asking whether you wanted to know.

Behind them, in the warehouse, the gyroscope turned.

Patient. Continuous. Purposeful.

Waiting, as it always waited, for the next person who needed to know the size of what they were carrying.

And in Wyoming, a girl named Ellie who was almost two and laughed a lot and had her father's dark eyes was doing whatever small children did on February mornings — being entirely and completely herself, unaware of the city and the machine and the two people walking hand in hand through the working streets, carrying the full size of everything she was part of.

She would always be part of it.

That was enough.

That was exactly enough.

--*End of Chapter Thirteen, complete.*

End of The Wreckers: "The Dream Factory," Book Thirteen.